



Changing Frontiers and Invisible Politics in Northeast Asia: A Conversation with Tessa Morris-Suzuki

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In conversation with Ivan Franceschini, The Australian National University,
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This is an edited and updated transcript of a November 2016 interview that was part of the Tianxia Podcast Series (<http://www.chinoiresie.info/tessa-morris-suzuki-podcast-diamond-mountains/>). The conversation transcribed here focuses on a discussion of Tessa Morris-Suzuki's *To the Diamond Mountains: A Hundred-Year Journey through China and Korea* (2010), a travelogue based on a trip she took in 2009 to Northeast China, North Korea, and South Korea with the purpose of retracing the 1910 journey of the English adventurer and artist Emily Georgiana Kemp. We discuss the book in relation to the momentous transformations that have occurred over the long twentieth century in the areas visited by Kemp, and to the ways in which grassroots movements and new forms of survival politics are remaking Northeast Asia today.

Conceptualizing Northeast Asia

Ivan: Throughout your career, your research has focused on Northeast Asia, which is a relatively unfamiliar geographical concept to many. What exactly is Northeast Asia? And what conceptual value do you find in focusing on this region?

Tessa: It's interesting how we talk about Southeast Asia very naturally. The term has become part of our everyday vocabulary, but *Northeast Asia* is a bit less familiar. *Southeast Asia* is a term that has been in common usage since about the 1930s and became even more widely used during and after the Asia-Pacific War. So, as a concept, it derived from a specific historical moment. I have found that *Northeast Asia* means slightly different things to different people, but the way that I use it in my research is in reference to Japan, the two Koreas, Taiwan, China, Mongolia, and the eastern fringes of Russia as well. This regional conception of Northeast Asia is relatively new but has become more commonly used in recent years—particularly in Japan and Korea—reflecting the fact that the region, which was so divided during the Cold War, has become much more connected over the last twenty-five

years or so. This has prompted people to start thinking about it as a region in a way that was not happening a few decades ago.

Nicholas: So why do you think it is important that we pay attention to what is going on in this part of the world today?

Tessa: Well, I am probably biased, but I think it is almost impossible to downplay the global significance of what is happening in Northeast Asia today, or the ways in which the history of the region has shaped our current global realities. There is obviously the economic aspect, with the region now being the powerhouse of the world economy, and with the countries of Northeast Asia becoming increasingly economically interconnected. In a political sense, these countries have a long history of important cultural connections—and this is a place where empires have collided.

And yet, in their modern history, the countries of the region have gone in very different directions. Japan started down a cautious path to democracy, followed by militarism, and then a return to democratization. China went through its revolution and has now become a hybrid communist-capitalist giant, and South Korea and Taiwan went through a phase essentially of military dictatorship, followed by democratization. Mongolia has more recently experienced rapid democratization and opening and is seeking to position itself as a peacemaking “Switzerland of East Asia.” And, North Korea, which for so long seemed trapped in an eternal Cold War, may be on the brink of profound change. So we are now at a point where it feels as though the region has come out of the Cold War and become much more integrated, but in another sense it is still the one part of the world where the Cold War has never really ended. This is most evident with the continuing division of the Korean peninsula. At times one fears that we are sliding back toward a second Cold War in the region, with increasing tensions, particularly between China and the United States, and China and Japan. But if the division of the Korean peninsula can begin to be resolved, that would open up an entirely new chapter of regional history with global ramifications.

Time Traveling to the Diamond Mountains

Nicholas: In *To the Diamond Mountains*, you describe your wanderings in Northeast China and the Koreas following the trail of Emily Kemp, a long-forgotten English writer who

visited these lands a century ago. Can you tell us who Emily Kemp was, and why you selected her as your traveling companion?

Tessa: Looking back, I suppose there were two impetuses for this volume. First, I was interested in the idea of writing a book that would have the potential to reach out to a bit of a broader audience than a standard academic monograph would. I wanted to try to convey something about the history and significance of this region in a way that was readable and a little different from standard academic writing. I had that in mind already when I happened to come across a secondhand copy of Emily's book *The Face of Manchuria, Korea and Russian Turkestan* (Kemp 1910) in the wonderful Asia Bookroom, a specialist antiquarian bookshop in Canberra, Australia. I knew nothing about her or the book, but I was intrigued by the idea of an English woman in the early twentieth century traveling through this distant land, and I wanted to learn more about her. I discovered very quickly that Emily was an immensely interesting character, and I became quite attached to her in a way, although I am not sure if I would have gotten along with her personally. I think she was a very admirable person, but she probably did not suffer fools gladly; she may have been a bit of a prickly person.

Emily Kemp was one of a group of female English travelers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but one of the less well-known ones. She had private means, as her father had been a textile entrepreneur and became very rich. But she's interesting partly because she was quite a pioneering feminist, and she even used the word *feminist*, which is uncommon in writing from this era. Her mother had been a very remarkable woman, who took over and ran the family business after the father died, despite the fact that she was almost completely deaf. All of Emily's sisters became missionaries, but she did not for reasons that aren't clear. She was very religious, but she seemed to be profoundly independent-minded, and I think her views of Christianity didn't quite match those of the church that she and her sisters belonged to.

Emily's feminism meant that she had a special interest in women, and she sought out women when she was traveling, which I found appealing. She was also quite broad-minded, and genuinely interested in the people that she met, which was refreshing in the context of much travel writing from this era. She was also an artist as well as a writer and illustrated her own books. Admittedly, her work does feature some of the classic late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century prejudicial comments about foreigners, but on the whole she was relatively open-minded. She loved Korea, and, remarkably, loved China, despite the fact that her sister

and nephew had been killed during the Boxer Rebellion. So in many ways she was quite an extraordinary woman (figure 1).



Figure 1. *A Young Woman in Pyongyang*, by Emily Georgiana Kemp. *Source*: Kemp (1910, facing 76).

Ivan: In the book, you reflect on the way transport has been revolutionized during the past century. You write, “Taxis and four-wheel drives have replaced sleighs and pack ponies. Hotels in Shenyang and Seoul can be booked online. Jumbo jets whisk us between continents in a few hours. But politics has made some things much more difficult. In fact, politics makes a precise reenactment of the journey impossible” (10). Actually, I had exactly the same feeling when I was recently traveling in Myanmar, trying to retrace the steps of William Somerset Maugham, who traveled there in the 1920s. Today it is practically impossible, because most of the Shan states in Myanmar are closed to foreigners, so I was stuck and had no way to continue on his trail. So, in a way, attempts at recreating these historical journeys

illuminate the changing nature of frontiers and nations over the past century and have much to tell us about the state of our globalized world (figure 2).

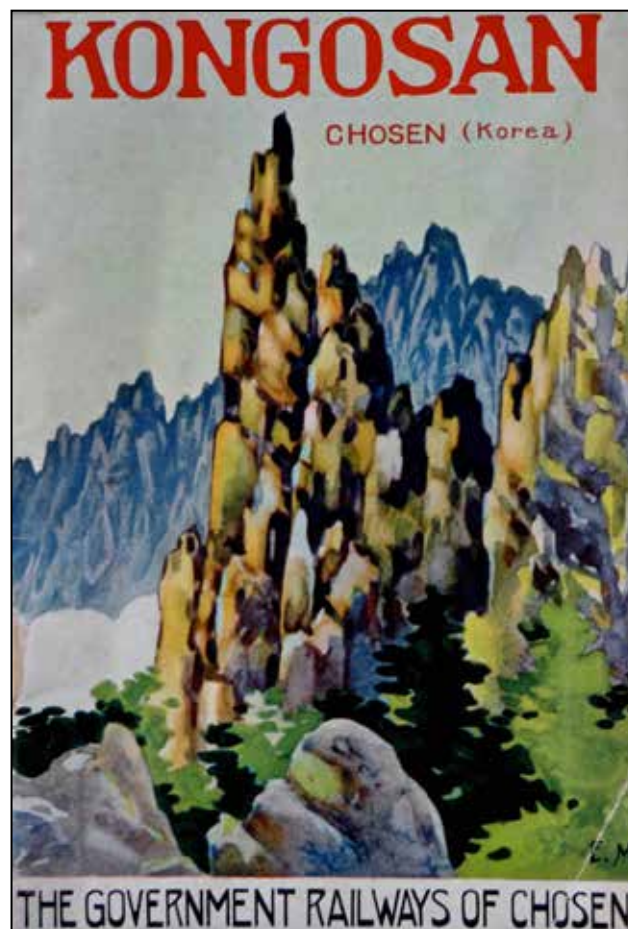


Figure 2. Colonial era pamphlet advertising travel to the Diamond Mountains. *Source:* T. Morris-Suzuki, private collection.

Tessa: Yes, borders, frontiers, and crossings provide insights into the ways in which our world is organized and the ways in which things have changed or stayed the same. Obviously, during my attempted reenactment, the part that was impossible was the border crossing between North Korea and South Korea. This prompted me to think about the way that borders have changed, and in some senses have become harder to cross than they were. Emily Kemp made her journey in 1910, a significant year because it was when Korea formally became a Japanese colony. But if you think back to that period, it was a time of enormous human movement. Many people were migrating within and out of China, and there were people crossing over the border from Korea into China and migrating into Manchuria. It was a time of great mobility. And, interestingly, Emily Kemp and her traveling companion

needed very little in the way of official documentation for their journey, particularly in comparison with what is needed today. They sometimes got letters from an embassy saying something along the lines of “Please be kind to this traveler,” but these were not official requirements. They just helped to make the journey smoother. People did not even need passports at that time. So, in that sense, travel has actually become much more difficult—not so much for the economically privileged Emily Kemps of the world, but undoubtedly for ordinary everyday working people who very often cannot get visas to move from one place to another. They need mountains of documentation to emigrate legally to other countries, or even in some cases to other cities domestically (figure 3).



Figure 3. Rock formations where the Diamond Mountains meet the sea, 2008. Photo by T. Morris-Suzuki.

The Hermit Kingdom Today

Ivan: You also reflect on other issues related to border crossings in the contemporary world. The Diamond Mountains, referred to in the book’s title, are today situated in North Korea, and an important portion of the text is dedicated to your trip to the “Hermit Kingdom,” as that country is sometimes known. At one point you look back to when you announced your intention to travel to North Korea and how some friends reacted with disapproval, saying it would serve as a propaganda tour and you would be helping to prop up the regime in North Korea. So you asked yourself a rather difficult question: what are the ethical boundaries for

travel that is admittedly for pleasure but also in search of enlightenment? Have you found an answer to this question?

Tessa: No, I am still considering that question, and I do not think there is a simple answer to it. Of course there are ethical boundaries, but deciding where they are is both very difficult and highly contextual. Part of the question is whether it is okay to travel to a country where the government is perpetrating severe human-rights abuses. In the case of North Korea, this is happening today, and it was happening at the time of my journey. That being said, for me it was important to go to North Korea because I think there are a lot of misconceptions about that country. Sometimes they are almost dangerous misconceptions, and it is possible to help to clear them up through direct contact. In particular, I really wanted to convey the sometimes forgotten fact that ordinary North Koreans are just people, like those anywhere else, whose lives are largely caught up in dealing with families and friendships, issues at work, hopes for their children, and so on (figure 4).



Figure 4. Wedding in Pyongyang, 2009. Photo by T. Morris-Suzuki.

At the same time, during a journey like this it is important to be aware of the fact that you are not seeing things—and that there are things that you will never be allowed to see—and to contextualize what you are seeing with what you know to be happening offstage, so to speak,

in the prison camps, and so on. This does raise the question: Are there countries that I wouldn't go to? I think it partly depends on what you do as a traveler, and how much you are forced to become complicit in what the state is doing. I think, for example, that I would not have gone to South Africa under the apartheid regime, because it would have been impossible to be there without actually having to obey the rules of spatial segregation between "whites" and "non-whites." So, in a sense, everything a visitor did became a part of the regime's ideology. On the other hand, I did go to South Korea when it was a military dictatorship with many people locked up in political prisons, and I carried with me the same sorts of doubts and questions that I had when I went, decades later, to North Korea, but still thinking that maybe I could convey something of what was going on there when I came back. It is a very difficult question, and I do not have a simple answer. I think it is a question that we have to continually ask ourselves.

Nicholas: In *To the Diamond Mountains*, you mention several times that this bubble of poverty (in North Korea) will surely have to be reintegrated at some point. When you traveled to North Korea, Kim Jong-il was still in power. He died in 2011 and was replaced by his son, Kim Jong-un. In light of these changes over the past few years, and particularly the recent diplomatic vacillations, do you still hold this belief? Do you still feel the world is looking at North Korea with sardonic distaste, or has this attitude somehow changed?

Tessa: I am not sure that fundamental perceptions of North Korea have changed very much. I do think that North Korea has changed, though. During the past few years, there has been a kind of economic transformation, with substantial market growth in the country. It is a fascinating process that is occurring in a way that is not quite like events anywhere else. The regime has not actually changed. The official state economy is still pretty much exactly as it was when I traveled there for the book. But from below, from the grassroots level, the market has been growing enormously. And that has meant a lot more consumerism. In a sense, there is more prosperity in some parts of the country, particularly in Pyongyang. There is a growing elite who are quite well off and who are very interested in buying brand-name consumer goods from the West. But obviously this goes hand in hand with growing inequalities between rich and poor, and the poor are still very, very poor (figure 5).



Figure 5. Rural poverty—fishermen in North Korea, 2009. Photo by T. Morris-Suzuki.

Nicholas: Do you see any parallels with what happened in China during the initial reform and opening period of the late 1970s and early 1980s?

Tessa: Yes, there are some parallels, but I think the difference in North Korea is an incredible disjuncture between the state economy, which has continued to survive relatively unchanged on the surface, and the market economy, which has been bubbling up from below for quite some time. In the past few years the market economy has been expanding to the extent that there are now a wide range of essentially private enterprises in a country that is not officially supposed to have private enterprise. There are people who have used official positions to become private entrepreneurs running mines and doing real-estate business and all kinds of things. Yet, in legal terms, this is all supposedly state-owned. So that gap, or disconnect, between the official system and what is actually happening is much bigger in North Korea than it was in China at the start of the Deng Xiaoping era. So how is this gap going to be bridged? Are they going to be able to change the state system so that it matches the reality? How are they going to incorporate whatever system will emerge into the broader Northeast Asian economic system? For me, this is the problem that is still completely unresolved (figure 6).



Figure 6. Urban development, Pyongyang, 2009. Photo by T. Morris-Suzuki.

Nicholas: The internal contradictions within North Korea will be difficult to address, but the external contradictions also pose almost unimaginable challenges. The reintegration of North Korea into the Northeast Asian economy, and ultimately the reunification of the Koreas, is often framed as an inevitable eventuality, but it seems to me that this situation is actually unprecedented in many ways. We are talking about a culture that has been violently divided for such a long period of time. What would this reintegration actually look like?

Tessa: It is such a difficult question. However, the total bisection of the peninsula has got to change—there is no way that this can go on indefinitely. The issue is, as you say, that it has been such a long division, and that it has become such a profound one. We can, of course, compare it with the division of Germany, but the wealth gap between West and East Germany, as big as that was, was very small in comparison to the gap between the Koreas. And obviously the length of the division was shorter, so the extent to which culture had diverged in the two halves of Germany was not nearly as great as it is in the case of Korea.

So the challenges are huge. We need to think of it not as a one-off reintegration, but as a long process. I think maybe twenty years ago there were more people talking about reunification as if it were something that could happen almost in the way that it happened in the case of Germany. Now people are much more cautious about that and talking about a longer process of reunion, beginning with attempts to wind down the hostility and make it easier to travel back and forth between North and South, and to rebuild some of the cultural connections.

Ivan: Is there any book on North Korea that you would particularly recommend as a way of clearing up some of our misconceptions?

Tessa: One book that I found fascinating is Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (2010), which looks at life in North Korea through the stories of North Korean refugees in South Korea and China. Interestingly, this book does not take the usual approach of only telling the stories of their terrible sufferings, but instead it is very successful in illuminating the life stories of people by talking about how the refugees lived when they were in North Korea and discussing some of the things that they remember and miss from North Korea, in addition to their memories of suffering and deprivation. Another is Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung's *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (2012), which provides very illuminating insights into the cultural dynamics of North Korean politics.

Survival Politics and Guerrilla Markets

Nicholas: Let's move on to talk about your new project, "Informal Life Politics in East Asia: From Cold War to Post-Cold War." What do the terms *informal life politics*, *survival politics*, and *guerrilla markets* mean from your point of view? And how do you see them as playing a role in the cultures, societies, and economies of the region?

Tessa: All of these concepts emerge from the idea that there are groups of people around the world—be they local communities or more dispersed networks—who are seeking to address problems in their lives that are not being solved, or are even made worse, by the official state authorities. Common examples can be found around environmental crises or urban redevelopment projects that destroy communities and livelihoods. In response to these crises, people band together and try to find solutions. These actions involve people doing things that can be considered "transgressive"—things that may not be completely illegal, and may not even be confrontational, but that take people out of their normal comfort zones and make

them assume social roles that they would not have to take on in more “normal” circumstances. Our project starts from the observation that much of the literature about new social movements has not really addressed this sort of activity. New studies on social movements have focused more on the ways civil society groups seek to build new social identities and transform politics at national and sometimes even international levels. *Informal life politics*, on the other hand, is an everyday practice that may not appear to have any clearly articulated ideology and that ignores and evades the state, rather than lobbying or pressuring the government to change its ways. *Survival politics* is a specific subset of broader informal life politics, and refers to actions in which people are really facing threats to their literal physical survival, or the cultural survival of their communities. *Guerrilla markets* are a hallmark of many informal and survival politics contexts. This term refers to situations in which people are developing and using systems of exchange that are different from, and often directly challenging to, the conventional commercial capitalist market system. This could be something like people setting up their own alternative currency system, or their own cooperative system. So not all informal life political actions involve guerrilla markets, but many do.

Ivan: Can you share with us some stories from your research that can help us to understand how survival politics and guerrilla markets play out in the context of Northeast Asia?

Tessa: This project involves a group of colleagues looking at informal life politics in the Koreas, China, Taiwan, Japan, and Mongolia. I focus on Japan. It is probably easiest for me to start off by explaining one of the cases that I have been looking at: a network of communities in Nagano Prefecture in Japan. These communities exist in a rural area in the mountains where there is an *aging population*, meaning that a lot of the villages have declining populations and there are few job opportunities for young people. The unexpected discovery was that informal life politics in this area is not a new thing but rather has quite a long history. Back in the 1910s and 1920s, there were already groups of people in this area involved in alternative education schemes. Rather than following the official state education system, they tried to create their own educational approach to address local social needs better and, in their view, create better people. This was not an easy thing to do in Japan in the 1910s and 1920s, when the state exerted very strong control over education, and it became even more difficult in the 1930s and 1940s, when any action that challenged the authority of the state could attract draconian punishment.

So, many of the movements were suppressed. But some of the people who had been involved in these 1920s and 1930s experiments were still alive and active in the postwar period, and once again they started putting their ideas into practice in local society. They developed alternative education schemes and even alternative medical schemes, such as a very interesting rural health network that linked health care professionals and farmers to other local people so that they could learn from one another. Ultimately these actions developed into a set of schemes for endogenous development. In other words, local people began to design the kinds of development schemes that they wanted, using local resources and local skills to tackle problems such as the aging population and lack of job opportunities. They proposed bottom-up solutions to these problems and tried to put them into effect, rather than accepting the top-down schemes that came from the national or prefectural governments. These top-down schemes were opposed because they generally involved large metropolitan or multinational corporations, which would come in and build often environmentally damaging projects and then take a large share of the profits elsewhere. In the area I have been researching, there are a number of interesting initiatives, including a local currency scheme, organic farming projects, a saké brewery using locally grown organic rice as its raw material, schemes to support the elderly, and so on (figure 7).



Figure 7. Surveying organic rice fields, Mochizuki, Nagano Prefecture, 2013. Photo by T. Morris-Suzuki.

Another member of the project team, Uchralt Otede, is working on citizen science in Inner Mongolia. In particular, he is looking at herders in Inner Mongolia who have faced

serious environmental pollution problems in the grasslands that they use. They have responded to this challenge by working with other people in China—including people living in urban areas who had been sent to rural Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution and had maintained connections with the people there, but also scientists in Japan. The herders are drawing on the knowledge of these scientists to train themselves to undertake their own scientific research projects. They are learning how to do their own testing of well water, monitor the environment, and then implement their own solutions to deal with the environmental problems that they confront.

Ivan: What is the North Korean component of your research?

Tessa: North Korea is really interesting because when we started the project it was essentially a question mark—would we find informal life politics in North Korea and if so, what would that look like? North Korea is different, because clearly there are no domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, or civil society: the whole system is much too politically controlled. Nevertheless, to some extent, we can say there is informal life politics in the country. For example, Soh Eun Jeong, who was working on our project for a couple of years, was looking at the question of how people deal with health care in North Korea. Theoretically there is a “free” state-sponsored health system, but in practice, because of economic problems, it does not function properly, particularly for people who are relatively poor and live in rural areas. Moreover, it is not free anymore, as you actually have to pay bribes to use the official health care system. So people deal with this problem in a variety of ways. One response is that retired doctors or other health care professionals often work with their local communities, and people go to those retired professionals who provide what is essentially private health care. In return, they get paid monetarily or in kind. Sometimes it is an exploitative system, but it is often done with a significant amount of good will and hope for the community. There are also interesting ways in which people are using traditional medicines to deal with their health problems, because modern medicines are too difficult to come by or too expensive to obtain.

Ivan: What are the challenges in doing this type of research in those areas? How can researchers get access to information in North Korea? These issues are also increasingly sensitive in China, so very often it is dangerous to do this kind of research.

Tessa: Yes, it is very difficult. Eun Jeong's research on the health care system in North Korea was done primarily through interviewing refugees and talking to them about the ways that they had dealt with their health problems when they were living in North Korea. As for the Inner Mongolian work, there is still some scope for research in China, because the Chinese authorities are so aware of environmental problems. There seems still to be some latitude for people to take action to deal with environmental problems as long as they do not do it in a way that overtly confronts the official authorities. But recently, state control has been growing tighter and tighter, so it is very difficult, and you need to know your way around and be very careful about what you are doing.

Global and Local Informal Life Politics

Nicholas: An interesting part of looking at grassroots or bottom-up movements is trying to understand how the people who are engaged in them frame their own activities and identities. As researchers, we have a tendency to want to see these movements as being "genuinely local," but are they also often influenced by more global or cosmopolitan movements, such as the cooperative movement or the push for alternative currencies?

Tessa: Yes, that is an important part of the story. Part of what makes informal life politics so interesting but also difficult to study is that it does not fit very easily into the categories we are used to dealing with. So in terms of trying to analyze the backgrounds of the people involved, thinking in terms of class or locality, it becomes quite complicated. Almost all the case studies that we have been looking at involve interesting cooperation between people from a variety of backgrounds. In the case of the groups in Nagano Prefecture that I'm looking at, most of the people involved are locals, and a large proportion of them are local farmers, shopkeepers, and so on, but there are also people from outside who have come into the community as teachers, doctors, and other professions and have played important roles. It is not possible to make simple or clear distinctions between the local and the external, or between people from different class backgrounds. The Inner Mongolian case is the same. It is a collaborative effort among the herders, intellectuals from Beijing, Japanese researchers, and others.

I am also finding the influence of global movements quite fascinating, because, for example, the people I have been working with in Nagano Prefecture are very aware of global environmental movements. They have study groups in which they read books like E. F.

Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* and other more recent works on environmental issues. These international links also go back through history. The activists from the 1910s and 1920s were influenced by Peter Kropotkin, William Morris, and a whole range of internationally famous thinkers. At the same time, however, it would be wrong to think of these groups as just accepting ideas from the outside. Rather, they were and are doing very interesting and creative things with these ideas and developing them within their own distinct contexts.

Nicholas: Earlier we discussed the ways in which the changing nature of the nation-state has created new types of boundaries between geographical areas. Additionally, other powerful forces, such as markets and economic activity, have created other, less obvious boundaries between both individuals and social groups. Do you think that people actually have the ability to contest these powerful faceless forces through bottom-up, grassroots activities?

Tessa: That is another fascinating question, and I do not have a clear and definitive answer. Maybe I can try to put this project into the context of some of ways that people around the world are thinking about, and responding to, global capitalism. There is something very interesting occurring with the decline in influence of Marxism and socialism from the end of the Cold War onward, that has caused people to rethink the development of alternative approaches. This comes from the realization that we are stuck in a global capitalist system that seems to be more dominating and more powerful than ever before and is reaching into more corners of everyday life than ever before. In responding to this situation, many people, while not necessarily entirely rejecting the ideas that came out of Marxism and socialism, are recognizing the fact that the ways in which those ideas were put into practice in the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere led to a lot of disasters. And many of them are going back to ideas that came out of anarchism and utopian socialism. As the project has progressed, I have become increasingly conscious of how much notions that emerged from anarchism and utopianism are coming back into fashion, as shown, for example, by the fascinating work of people like David Graeber (2009), John Holloway (2010), and Davina Cooper (2013).

Increasingly I see our project on informal life politics as fitting into that discourse, but at the same time I think that both the terms *anarchism* and *utopianism*, although useful in some ways, are also quite problematic. They are malleable terms that are interpreted in many ways by different people. In talking about informal life politics, we are certainly taking up aspects of the discourse that emerges from anarchism and utopianism, but we are particularly focusing on the phenomenon of grassroots anarchism, or what Davina Cooper has called

“everyday utopias” (Cooper 2013). Many of the people we work with would not use the term *anarchism* to describe what they are doing. In fact, they tend not to use ideological labels to describe themselves. They generally focus on acting to address specific problems in daily life, and then, on the basis of that action, develop their own philosophies, which may or may not incorporate some aspects of what is normally called “anarchist” or “utopian” thought. Now, is that going to change the world? The groups that we are looking at are very small, and they are not making a huge impact on global capitalism, nor are they setting out to do so. I am sure they are having some effect on the lives of the small numbers of people involved in them. But whether they can become part of a bigger push toward changing the world is really an unanswerable question. I do not see the groups that we are looking at somehow coalescing into some grand movement, and if they did, it would no longer be informal life politics but would transform into formal politics. All I can say is that I do think there is more scope for looking at how these sorts of informal life politics processes are playing out in different parts of the region and the world, and the processes by which they are creating channels for inventive actions, alternative modes of organization, and mutual learning—all of which cross boundaries and make small changes in interesting ways. I think that the larger changes to the global system that many people would like to see can be brought about only through a combination of informal life politics with more formal actions happening at national and international levels.

Ivan: Does your project also include something about the dynamics of labor and working classes?

Tessa: It does in the sense that people involved in some of the informal life politics actions are from working-class backgrounds. But as I mentioned, one of the things that we have discovered is how difficult it is to fit the participants simply into a category of a single class. There are people from working-class backgrounds involved in many of the groups we are looking at, but the strength of these groups often seems to come from networking across the dividing lines between classes. I’d also like to emphasize that there is a lot of informal life politics happening in migrant-worker communities—internal migrants, cross-border migrants, and particularly undocumented migrants—because these are the people who are least able to appeal to the state for help.

Nicholas: To conclude, what implications do the recent developments on the Korean peninsula have for the region, and particularly for ways in which informal life politics may operate in the region in years to come?

Tessa: The Korean peninsula and East Asia as a whole are at a very crucial and highly unpredictable turning point at the moment. Current moves toward the denuclearization of the peninsula could prove to be a breakthrough and lay the basis for the opening of North Korea, but there are still real risks that negotiations might fall apart, plunging the region into a new crisis. This is a one-off chance for a breakthrough, and it is very important that it should be grasped positively, but it's important to remember that even if things move in a positive direction, there are many challenges ahead. If North Korea opens up to the region and the world, this would provide great opportunities for economic development, but would almost certainly also result in large-scale movements of people, both within North Korea and across its borders. At the moment, people cannot move freely from one place to another within the country, but a more open system would probably result in large-scale migration from countryside to cities—particularly to Pyongyang. If it becomes easier to travel, it is likely that even more North Koreans would try to leave for places like China, South Korea, and Japan, where wages are much higher. How would those countries respond?

North Korea also has major issues of economic corruption and environmental damage—deforestation, for example—which will need to be addressed. There is great scope for informal life politics to play a role here, particularly if it becomes possible for grassroots groups in North and South Korea to cooperate and share ideas. South Korea has extensive experience of grassroots action to address environmental problems, as well as numerous self-help groups created by migrant laborers to deal with the challenges that they face. If all goes well, cooperation along these lines could become one step in bringing the two halves of the peninsula together and opening up new political visions for East Asia as a whole.

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