

Andre Schmid, North Korea's Mundane Revolution: Socialist Living and the Rise of Kim Il Sung, 1953–1965. University of California Press, 2024. xii + 352 pp. ISBN 9780520392847.

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Andre Schmid's *North Korea's Mundane Revolution: Socialist Living and the Rise of Kim Il Sung* (University of California Press, 2024) explains how the post-war North Korean state consolidated authority not only through mass campaigns but also by regulating daily life. Schmid demonstrates that apparently ordinary practices, such as housing allocation, domestic labor, workplace discipline, and cultural consumption, were embedded with socialist ideals and legitimized the regime. By foregrounding these processes, he contests leader-centered narratives of revolutionary change.

Schmid is already well known for *Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919* (2002), which used close readings of vernacular newspapers and official publications to trace the formation of Korean nationalist discourse under Japanese colonial rule. Once again, he combines close reading of newspapers, magazines, and state directives with a sensitivity to political economy, avoiding teleological assumptions. Rather than deriving history from Kim Il Sung's biography, he reconstructs how diverse actors understood and negotiated the concept of the "New Living".

Schmid organizes the manuscript into an Introduction, four thematic parts, nine substantive chapters, and a conclusion. The Introduction situates the concept of "New Living" within Cold War debates on socialist modernity and insists on analyzing North Korean history without a teleological reliance on Kim Il Sung.

Chapter 1, "The Anxieties of Socialist Transition," lays the groundwork for the volume's core argument

by situating North Korea's postwar reconstruction within the broader context of demographic disruption, labor scarcity, and institutional expansion. Schmid writes, "These anxieties were themselves rooted in the tensions that structured the rebuilding of the political economy and the growing institutional capacity of the [Korean Workers'] Party-state" (p. 22). This chapter functions as a conceptual overview, clarifying the stakes of the everyday as a location of revolutionary action.

Part One, "Cultural Living and the Ever-Striving Socialist Self" (Chs. 2–3) follows with an analysis of how socialist ethics were inculcated through moral exhortation and institutional oversight and management. Drawing on advice literature and the reports of dormitory inspectors, Schmid demonstrates how the Party-state attempted to influence individual behavior through moral suasion and surveillance. These chapters demonstrate how minor transgressions, such as untidy rooms and sluggish greetings, were construed as threats to collective discipline.

Part Two, "The Political Economy of Apartments" (Chs. 4–5), presents housing as a material necessity and an ideological spectacle. Chapter 4, "An Obsession with Efficiency," documents the apartment boom: "Never in the history of the peninsula [...] had there been such a wave of housing construction [...] this was revolution through apartments, complete with electricity and running water" (p. 107). Chapter 5, "The Ideological Pivot," shows how zoning codes and *songbun*, the North Korean system of inherited socio-political classification, redefined citizenship.

Part Three, “Making Happy Family Homes” (Chs. 6–7), turns to the household as a site of ideological investment and social strain. These chapters examine how the state promoted a gendered vision of domestic harmony through advice literature and media campaigns, even as women’s letters and complaints revealed deep ambivalence. By documenting the lived experience of “dual burdens” – that is, waged labor and domestic responsibility – Schmid shows the contradictions at the heart of the Party’s claims to gender equality and family support.

Part Four, “The Ambivalences of Consumption” (Chs. 8–9), interrogates desire and distinction. Chapter 8 tracks savings campaigns and the moral economy of austerity. Chapter 9 dissects how home décor and accessories signaled class despite egalitarian rhetoric; a collage of handbags reminded readers that “purses, however stylish, were just another widget that had no value other than that produced by people” (p. 222).

The book’s conclusion, “Looking Up at Comrade Kim,” (re)introduces Kim Il Sung only after more than two hundred pages of narrative in which he is largely absent. His reappearance is deliberate, not to recenter him as a historical agent, but to show how his image retroactively appropriated the social and ideological groundwork already laid by cadres, editors, planners, and workers. The four parts of the book trace a progression from self-cultivation to urban re-ordering, domestic regulation, and the governance of consumption, demonstrating how socialist transformation advanced unevenly through the routines and constraints of everyday life.

The deferral of the leader figure is not incidental. As Schmid makes known in the introduction, he originally intended to write the book without once mentioning Kim Il Sung: “His absence would be the argument—a North Korean history without the man and his ego” (p. 19). Although he ultimately includes the leader in the final chapter, his narrative resists the gravitational pull of the personality cult. Instead of treating Kim as the origin of policy and ideology, Schmid approaches him as a product of the institutional and discursive field that the preceding chapters reconstruct from below.

This choice stands in stark contrast to more con-

ventional biographical approaches. Consider, by contrast, Fyodor Tertitskiy’s more recently published *Accidental Tyrant: The Life of Kim Il Sung* (2025). Tertitskiy recovers the contingency of Kim’s rise through Soviet records and memoirs, focusing on strategic decision-making and elite conflict. Dae-sook Suh’s *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (1988), a classic in the canon on (North) Korean history, compiles speeches, interviews with defectors, and official publications to chart the evolution of Kim’s authority within Party and state institutions. Both works treat the leader as the primary focus and an agent of historical change. Schmid, by contrast, excavates internal communications, such as administrative directives, factory bulletins, and low-circulation journals, to reconstruct a more diffuse and contested social history. This divergence in method and archive produces fundamentally different accounts of North Korea’s post-war trajectory.

By relocating the revolution to the spaces of domestic life, factory discipline, and consumer regulation, *North Korea’s Mundane Revolution* broadens the way socialist transformation can be studied – and especially the way we approach North Korean history. Yet its sustained attention to the everyday, while laudable in its ambitious attention to detail, occasionally obscures the political and economic stakes that defined the social transformation taking place. At times, the reader risks losing sight of what is being explained, so immersed is the narrative in the granular reproduction of routines. There is no lack of detail in this text, but the accumulation of detail sometimes comes at the expense of argumentative clarity. Less committed readers will struggle to finish the manuscript.

Moreover, Schmid’s expansive definition of revolutions as a gradual and dispersed restructuring of norms and habits invites reflection on whether he is describing revolution at all. For what is revolution without the sudden, violent overthrow of an *ancien régime* or preexisting order? Still, for students and scholars of Korean history, nationalism, developmental states, and postcolonial socialism, the book offers an indispensable reconstruction of how the extraordinary ambitions of a Party-state were embedded in the ordinary life of citizens. The narrative demands pa-

tiences, but its conceptual and archival rewards more than justify the effort.