



Science Fiction in South and North Korea

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Abstract: Why has science fiction never been popular in South Korea? Why were the global mega-hits *Star Wars* movies and *Star Trek* TV series so poorly received there? According to “All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses,” five out of the seven *Star Wars* movies are ranked in the top 100 in the world, but only one *Star Wars* movie, *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015), is included in the top 200 in similar Korean statistics, where its ranking is 142nd. The *Star Trek* TV shows have an even poorer records than *Star Wars* movies in South Korea: not one of the five series ever had all its episodes aired by any South Korean TV broadcasting companies. Similarly, science fiction novels and short stories have never been either popular among the public or seriously considered by the South Korean literary community.



Surprisingly, North Korea has offered more fertile ground for science fiction. Ever since the mid-1950s, the North Korean regime has supported writers not only to translate Russian science fiction into Korean but also to create its own. Kim Jong Il, for example, actively and openly encouraged North Korean writers and filmmakers to produce more science fiction novels and movies from the early 1960s. Therefore science fiction became firmly rooted in the North Korean literary community and found wider audiences there. This talk aims to analyze how two key ideas—“science and technology” and “the future”—are reflected in South and North Korean science fiction. It will argue that very different social, cultural, and political environments have influenced the development of science fiction in South and North Korea since the mid-twentieth century, and that science fiction can be used as a good indicator to illustrate different popular images of science and technology in the two Koreas.

Bio: Dr. Kim is a historian of science. He received a PhD from Harvard University in 1991, and has taught at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (1994-2005), Johns Hopkins University (1998-99, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2012 and 2016), Harvard University (2013, 2014, and 2015), National University of Singapore (2014 and 2015), and University of Pennsylvania (2016 and 2017). He was also the Dean of the College of Cultural Science at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (2009-2012). Since the fall of 2008, he has been president of the D. Kim Foundation for the History of Science and Technology in East Asia, which provides young scholars with fellowships and grants.

Dr. Kim's major research fields are the history of physics in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the history of science and technology in Korea and Japan. He has published several papers on these subjects, alongside two books, *Leadership and Creativity: A History of the Cavendish Laboratory, 1871-1919* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), and *Yoshio Nishina: Father of Modern Physics in Japan* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2007). He is currently working on the life and work of a semiconductor engineer in South Korea (a paper) and science fiction in South and North Korea (a book project).

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