

IKS Special Lecture 2015

Wednesday 18:15-19:45



Theater State North Korea: Charismatic Politics and Symbolic Rituals

June 24th 2015



BYUNG-HO CHUNG, a native of South Korea, is the founding director of the Institute for Globalization and Multicultural Studies at Hanyang University. He earned an M.A. and Ph.D. in anthropology from Illinois in 1983 and 1992, respectively. Dr. Chung is being honored for his work on social activism and education reform extending throughout East Asia. The founder or co-founder of six civil society social justice organizations, he has focused particularly on the relationship between North and South Korea, promoting multiculturalism and peace and establishing organizations to care for refugees, many of them children. In 2014, he was awarded the Madhuri and Jagdish N. Sheth International Alumni Award for Exceptional Achievement from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Harsh labor camps and spectacular public executions of political prisoners are the most common images of today's North Korean regime known to the outside world. However, these coercive means make up only a small part of the country's social control mechanism. The authoritarian rule in North Korea is more crucially based on a myriad of disciplinary measures and practices diffused in the population's everyday lives. Notable among them are the daily ritualized performances at school and periodic mass spectacles held in public arenas. As Geertz argues, the symbolic and theatrical dimension of the state power is constitutive and paradigmatic, not merely reflective, of the political order. In this light, this presentation will provide an ethnographic account of North Korean children's routine encounter at school with the state's disciplinary measures. It will also consider selected public festivals and mass parades, focusing on how in these mass performances the participants and the spectators alike come to learn their places in the wider political society and experience their shared identity as vital post-colonial subjects.