
CANADA-KOREA ELECTRONIC INFORMATION SERVICE
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Dear friends,

We have a special treat for you in this issue. If you have never heard of the police detective mystery "A Corpse in the Koryo", we are quite confident that once you read this issue of CanKor, you will wish to head for the nearest library or bookstore to get a copy. As all the reviewers in this issue can attest, it is well worth a careful read. Besides, it is also great entertainment!

And don't forget who brought this to your inbox. CanKor is a reader-supported e-publication and website. We believe that an informed public will draw its own conclusions about what needs to be done to bring peace and security to the Korean Peninsula, and that decision-makers will benefit from the debates and analyses of experts made accessible through the CanKor Report.

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With best wishes,
The CanKor team

A rather unique publishing event occurred last November, when a mystery novel by a mysterious author arrived in bookstores. "A Corpse in the Koryo" is written by James Church, the pseudonym of a former "Western intelligence officer", as the book's jacket announces. In this CanKor SPECIAL EDITION we collect some of the reviews that have been written by a variety of people, beginning with a conversation between CanKor editor Erich Weingartner and World Vision International DPRK country director Victor Hsu, and ending with a mini sequel written by James Church himself.

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1. DISSECTING A CORPSE IN THE KORYO

Erich Weingartner and Victor Hsu in conversation, 7 May 2007

[Erich Weingartner is Editor of the CanKor Report. Victor Hsu is DPRK Country Director for World Vision International. All opinions expressed in this conversation are strictly personal and should not be construed as representative of official positions of World Vision or of sponsors of the CanKor Report.]

WEINGARTNER: So you really liked "A Corpse in the Koryo", did you?

HSU: Absolutely. It's a great yarn, and it's the first novel I have ever read that is actually set in a DPRK context and tried to understand the North Korean mindset. I was persuaded to read it by a colleague who said the novel avoids what he called "the all too often maddeningly facile stereotype descriptions of the country and its people."

WEINGARTNER: Yes, that's the neat thing about it. This is a standard police detective fiction, somewhat akin to the old "film noir", a disgruntled gumshoe, disparate pieces of evidence that don't seem to make sense, false premises that lead to dead ends -- but as we follow the fictional clues, the author is teaching us about actual reality.

HSU: And as we all know by now, the name of the author is fiction too. As the book jacket tells it, James Church is, "the pseudonym of a former Western intelligence office with decades of experience in Asia."

WEINGARTNER: What nationality do you think he is?

HSU: Oh, I have no doubt he is American.

WEINGARTNER: Any idea who it might be?

HSU: I can think of a couple of people that would fit that description, but neither of them writes that well. This book is so beautifully written, it's hard to believe this is a first novel, as is claimed.

WEINGARTNER: The book jacket also claims that the author "has wandered through Korea for years." You think an American would have that type of access in the DPRK?

HSU: Well, it doesn't specify NORTH Korea, does it? There is a lot you can learn about North Korea in South Korea.

WEINGARTNER: Quite true. Beginning with thousands of North Korean refugees and defectors who now reside in the ROK. On the other hand, there is really no substitute to being in the North, its there? A lot of reviews have praised the book for its depth of understanding of North Korean society, but none of the reviewers has actually spent any appreciable amount of time there.

HSU: Isn't it interesting how people of all political stripes -- from Peter Hayes to Don Oberdorfer to Newt Gingrich -- praise the book as authentic?

WEINGARTNER: Newt even recommends this book as a "must-read for anyone who would understand how precarious the dictatorship is." Makes you wonder if he missed the point altogether!

HSU: Well Church seems to have taken care not to get involved in political debate or in making political judgements about "the system". I found it fascinating that a story written in the first person from the perspective the main character, the North Korean police inspector O, in a country where images of the "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung and the "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il are ever-present, never once mentions either of them. Whenever reference is made, it is only to "the center". The story is very much character-driven. So it will hold up no matter what your political convictions are.

WEINGARTNER: That is very true. This is not a blatant propaganda piece, which it could easily have been, considering how North Korea has become the favourite villain in much of popular culture.

HSU: You mean like James Bond's "Die Another Day"?

WEINGARTNER: For example.

HSU: I love the way he opens each chapter with a verse of historical poetry, some dating back to the 12th century, none younger than the 18th century...

WEINGARTNER: ... and yet each of them completely relevant to the modern-day story.

HSU: It links current history with the fate of Korea a long, long time before division or the rise of Communism. They speak of the Korean soul, the sense of longing and melancholy, a people that have been wronged and continue to be wronged.

WEINGARTNER: What Koreans refer to as "han".

HSU: Yes. It is important to note this shared societal and historical perspective among Koreans. Korea has been a feudalistic society, constantly on the edge of survival at both national and individual levels. For nearly its entire history, Korea has been under constant threat of invasion.

WEINGARTNER: Inspector O certainly carries that melancholy -- maybe even fatalism -- wherever he goes. He's a tragic person who has ceased to believe in anything. Everything he once believed in as a youth has been crushed before his eyes. All he wants now is to survive and get his tea.

HSU: And yet this is not some starving peasant from the countryside. He is a member of the elite. There is tension in all his relationships, most of all with his apparatchik brother.

WEINGARTNER: The author packs a lot of his own sparse, yet poetic language into his descriptions. Take the very first paragraph in the book, for example. In a mere 238 words, he sets the stage of an entire country's experience.

HSU: You mean the description of the highway through the mountainous North Korean countryside?

WEINGARTNER: Yes, and working into it a hint of agricultural difficulties away from the west coast breadbasket. Low yield agriculture in northern highlands, farmed by unskilled amateurs without farming skills, sometimes as a method of punishment.

HSU: ...a highway that is supposed to be straight as an arrow rather than following the contours of the land. Thus illustrating the power of central planning, with the unnamed leader described by Church as the "invisible Hand" that none would challenge. Planning according to ideology rather than practicality.

WEINGARTNER: All major construction work being done by the military, and the naming of such human landmarks with a view to political education. Like calling the Pyongyang-Kaesong thoroughfare "Reunification Highway".

HSU: But having traveled that highway numerous times, you and I know that in fact this isn't a completely straight road after all. Church is saying that even political will can't beat the power of nature.

WEINGARTNER: Furthermore, the information to the people is manipulated according to ideology. And the people are unable to verify the information that is imparted to them.

HSU: In saying that hardly anybody travels the highway, Church is pointing to the low mobility of people.

WEINGARTNER: Which makes it possible to use relocation of people as reward and punishment. Punishment for those unable to execute the impossible plans ordered by "the centre" can mean being moved out of relatively comfortable Pyongyang to the boondocks.

HSU: With the possibility of rehabilitation if you demonstrate your loyalty to the regime -- as long as you have the right skill set needed by the regime, of course.

WEINGARTNER: And finally the redundant use of such skills to create plans that are never implemented. Pretty impressive to be able to pack that much information in one opening paragraph that still reads fluently and poetically!

HSU: Erich, you spent almost three years living and working in Pyongyang, and had the chance to travel pretty well all over North Korea, much of it to places completely closed to other foreigners. How do Church's descriptions stack up to your experience?

WEINGARTNER: Well, you're no stranger to North Korea yourself, Victor. You've made more trips to North Korea than I can count, and continue to travel there numerous times every year. You also have a longer-term experience than most people, going back some twenty years. You even dined with Kim Jong Il's father Kim Il Sung when he was still alive. I'll let you go first.

HSU: I'd say Church has done surprisingly well, considering how closed a society the DPRK still is to all foreigners. Many reviewers compare James Church's Inspector O with Inspector Arkady Renko in Martin Cruz Smith's "Gorky Park" and its sequels. It's an obvious comparison. Smith's work opened the closed world of the former Soviet Union to outside readers in a popular, easily accessible style, as Church is doing with the DPRK. But let's not forget that even in 1970s, the Soviet Union was a far more open society than the DPRK is today.

WEINGARTNER: Quite true. Already back in 1972, we were able to drive a camper from Romania across the Ukraine to Moscow without any accompaniment. At campsites we were able to meet and speak with ordinary Russians. We were invited to their homes and enjoyed conversations that in several cases were quite subversive. Such openness is of course quite impossible in North Korea. Foreigners are completely segregated from local people, and wherever you travel outside of Pyongyang, you are always under tight supervision.

HSU: Certainly Inspector's O's problems with the train schedule are familiar ones for travelers to North Korea. Although this mode of transportation is the sole viable option for out of town travel...

WEINGARTNER: ...unless you want to hitchhike on the back of trucks sitting on top of the freight with dozens of your countrymen!

HSU: It is well known that train service is extremely unreliable due to lack of electricity and poor maintenance of the power lines. Often a daylong journey will turn into two or more due to the constant power outages one experiences in North Korea. The only reliable train service is the daily that runs between the capital Pyongyang and the city of Sinuiju at the Chinese border, across from Dandong, the bustling city that supplies much of the trade with North Korea.

WEINGARTNER: Inspector's O's need for a ticket at the Manpo station struck me as somewhat strange. Since he was on duty travel, his roundtrip tickets would have been issued when his boss gave his written authorization.

HSU: In fact, in an emergency, a written authorization would suffice to board any train. On the other hand, Church may be reflecting the period since 2002, when economic reforms were introduced. All government ministries and agencies are now required to raise their own funds and meet their own budgets.

WEINGARTNER: I'm not sure about the time frame of the novel, by the way. If I get it right, the backdrop to this story -- which is never clearly articulated -- has something to do with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang in 2002, when Kim Jong Il admitted and made apology for the fact that North Korean spy agencies had abducted Japanese citizens. To me this

is a story of how decisions at the top affect people within the system right down the line -- a self-cleansing that has obvious repercussions for individuals in the intelligence community.

HSU: The pervasive and intrusive security personnel are a distinctive feature of this deeply security-conscious society. DPRK officials used to explain this as a response to the fact that they are still technically at war with the United States and its South Korean ally, and the DPRK's need to protect itself against infiltration. But why would its own citizens need passes to go from one part of Pyongyang to another? Or why such elaborate procedures to relocate from one village to another? Manpo's Grandma Pak who appears to be extremely well informed and well connected to the security apparatus is not atypical. In each sector of the town there are such grandmas or grandpas. Together they form an essential network of surveillance keeping a watchful eye on the goings on in the locality.

WEINGARTNER: And not just grandmas and grandpas. Every citizen in the DPRK has a responsibility to report suspicious activities, even if they involve friends and relatives.

HSU: One of the few humorous descriptions about Inspector O's private life is the brazen attempt by the women in his apartment block to get him married. This reflects the social norm that a man of means (though he wears shoes that are torn and the same shirts day in and day out) should not remain single. Of course, these kinds of family values are not restricted to the northern part of Korea!

WEINGARTNER: I was struck by the fact that most of the locations Church uses are places pretty much accessible to foreigners: Reunification Highway, Pyongyang, the Mount Myohyang tourist spot with its fancy hotel and ancient Buddhist monasteries. The only exception is the border town of Manpo, where he totally loses himself to his imagination. I haven't been to Manpo myself, but judging from many other smaller cities, there usually aren't any hotels and restaurants. At best you will have guesthouses for government bureaucrats. And these will be very closely guarded.

HSU: Yes, he certainly doesn't seem to have much exposure to the types of scenes we in the humanitarian community see on a regular basis. None of the characters in the novel are what one might call "ordinary" people. On the other hand, you have to admit his descriptions of the places we do know are right on. I love the way he describes the Koryo Hotel, where the dead body is found, down to the white player piano in the corner of the beer hall off the lobby of the hotel.

WEINGARTNER: Yes, including the detail about the acquisition of piano rolls. Those are wonderful touches. They give a very believable sense of how North Koreans express their subdued, yet harmless rebellion against the system. I think the Koryo Hotel should pay the author for the publicity the book is giving them. Since the grander, taller, more modern Yanggak Hotel has opened on the island in the Taedonggang River, the Koryo is no longer the pride of the city.

HSU: Church's portrayal of the role of the state, especially the leading role of the military, and its impact on the elite and all branches of the security apparatus, is dead-on. It brings to mind George Orwell's 1984 and the realities of Chinese society between 1949 and 1970. The DPRK

remains a pervasive police state that lacks rudimentary elements of a functioning civil society. During my travels around the country, the only sense of any social activity that I have observed are the many small private stalls in the streets that sell little items like cigarettes, chewing gum, rice-cakes and firewood.

WEINGARTNER: No doubt the security services have a great deal of power in the DPRK. It also stands to reason that a good number of people in positions of power will tend to abuse their privileges. Whether they do this to survive or to enrich themselves the way Church describes in the novel, I can't really judge from personal experience.

HSU: The paranoia he describes in the higher echelons of the security services is quite typical of a society like the DPRK. In the event of any political change (whether through a coup or peacefully) they have most at stake and will certainly be anxious about maintaining their positions. Inspector O's brother, his superiors and his military suspects were all caught up in the paranoia which robbed them of their humanity and basic decency. I found it to be a minor flaw in the novel that the last three chapters are too condensed to allow for a full exposition of these realities.

WEINGARTNER: Interesting you say that. I was actually quite disappointed at the abrupt way the novel ended, with several threads left dangling. It's as though the publisher couldn't wait for Church to finish his story. It pretty much begs for a sequel, which as it happens the author says has already been written and will be published this fall. But where does all this leave us in terms of understanding DPRK realities?

HSU: The picture of the DPRK that emerges from the novel is that it is in dire straights. It lacks basic infrastructure in many localities and where it exists it is crumbling. Even at police headquarters, the lights are not working properly, there is no fuel to boil hot water for tea and the furniture is sparse. Privileges and resources are obtained through barter or by outright robbery.

WEINGARTNER: Yes, the reality of a black market, corruption in high places, bribery, privileged access to foreign currency. But on the other hand, there is also the reality of human decency in the midst of corruption and violence. I'm impressed that Church does not openly apportion blame. All critique of the system is embedded in the interactions of the characters, and Inspector O's descriptions of the setting of each scene. The focus seems to be on how certain individuals cope within this system and somehow maintain their humanity.

HSU: I think you've hit the nail on the head. That is how Church manages to imbue the book with so much authenticity. He focuses on personalities rather than some academic systems critique.

WEINGARTNER: Exactly. This is what a novelist can do. He simply tells the story with as much emotional impact on the reader as he can muster. To do that, he has to find the points of our common humanity. We have to be able to identify with the fictional characters he describes. That's how the writer gets the reader hooked.

HSU: We can identify with even the smallest signs of protest against system, for example the absence of Inspector O's lapel pin that is ever present on all the North Koreans we know; the excuses O uses not to show up for weekly political study sessions; the coping mechanisms that remain hidden from view, like the piece of wood in Inspector O's pocket.

WEINGARTNER: As well as the loyalty of close friends even in a system that encourages snitches and mutual suspicion as a way of life. In a sense, the novelist doesn't have to make a judgement about what is right and what is wrong. The reader has to do that. Reading this book made me think that there are places in the world where truth and reality cannot easily be approached head-on. The DPRK is one of those places. We have so little hard data to gain insight into North Korean behaviour that a mystery novel might be the best vehicle for understanding. A mystery novel moves the narrative along with the slimmest of facts. You discover insights merely by following the behaviour of people. And this we can do because no matter in what environment people live, they will behave as people do everywhere. All of us -- regardless of geographical location, language, culture, system of government, political environment -- are shaped by our genetic heritage, our emotional constitution. All are fated with the "human condition". If we look closely enough, we will recognize ourselves in even the most alien of human strangers. And it is that recognition that makes others transparent, that allows us - - even if momentarily and incompletely -- to touch the reality, or if you will, the "truth" of the other.

HSU: In other words, put yourself into their shoes and you begin to see facts from a new perspective.

WEINGARTNER: Precisely. And our imagination is the vehicle by which we can transport ourselves into persons of an alien culture.

HSU: That's what you tried to do with your fictional "Portrait of a Patriot" in CanKor last summer, isn't it? [See CanKor Report #257] Instead of trying to make a system comprehensible, which most analysts try to do, you tried to make one person comprehensible. Do you think that Church has the same aims?

WEINGARTNER: Oh absolutely. Here is what James Church wrote me in an e-mail message: "The title would lead you to believe that it is a mystery, but actually it is an effort to put the structure of a serious detective story to work in the service of illuminating North Korea for Western readers who have been fed a steady diet of stereotypes about the country and its people." For me, "A Corpse in the Koryo" is actually a very positive peace-building exercise. I don't believe we will ever find any peaceful accommodation on the Korean peninsula if we do not learn to understand the North Koreans more profoundly than we do now. If it takes a murder mystery to do that, Mr. Church, please keep on writing!

2. INSPECTOR O AND THE CASE OF THE MISSING TEA THERMOS

Peter Hayes, NAPSNet, 18 December 2006

[Peter Hayes, Director, The Nautilus Institute for Security & Sustainability (publisher of NAPSNet), and Professor of International Relations, Research and Innovation, Nautilus Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne Australia.]

The exercise of power in North Korea is personal, centralized, and absolute. In contrast, power in the United States is impersonal, divided, and relative. Like two black holes, one massive, the other tiny and in orbit around the giant, the United States and North Korea exist in mutual repulsion, each unable to escape the other by virtue of the force of gravity and proximity. Light and information travels into both black holes. But not much comes out; and it almost never flows between them.

Given these antithetical characteristics, grounded in radical differences of history, culture, and political system, it was remarkable that North Koreans and Americans negotiated the US-DPRK Agreed Framework, let alone set in motion deeper probings of each other's intentions in the 1990s. For a short time, these two black holes moved further apart and the force field generated by their lethal relationship relaxed, although never to a point that could be called safe to live in Seoul.

All that was demolished after 2002, first by the Bush Administration, and then by Kim Jong Il on October 9th. Now the two black holes are drifting closer to the point where they might collide and awesome violence could erupt.

Faced with North Koreans, American policymakers deal with them as if they are an alien species, to be encountered but never understood. Indeed, some say that they are simply incomprehensible. Others ascribe totalitarian characteristics to the regime, and reduce it to Stalinist stereotypes, but are then perplexed as to why the place won't collapse and go away. Many are outraged by North Korean words and actions and refuse to even make the effort to understand what makes North Koreans tick. The result is policy driven by faith-based analysis and ignorance; the outcome is an increased risk of war and nuclear war that would make Iraq today look like a gentle embrace.

In this vast gulf of ignorance and blank incomprehension, one shining light stands out: A Corpse in the Koryo, a detective novel written by the mysterious James Church which, the publishers (Thomas Dunne in New York) tell us, is pseudonym of a former Western intelligence officer who worked in Korea (which one is not stated but it appears to be both given the accurate descriptions of many places in North Korea; I can attest, for example, that description of the Koryo Hotel in Pyongyang and its observation posts are spot on although for some reason, the billiard room and bar don't make it into the narrative).

Inspector O is caught up in a swirling world of clashing intelligence systems, the party control apparatus, and vertically compartmentalized information control, just trying to do his job, which is never specified but appears to be to find a good cup of hot tea, to score a thermos for his office, and to stay alive as agents of the warring agencies knock each off to maintain their clandestine

market operations. He never knows who is friend, who is enemy, until they start shooting at him or die doing him a favor.

Inspector O also seems to have few emotions, or rather, to have put his emotions on ice while he waits for the next ambush in his life. Perhaps this is because he lives in a North Korean panopticon of surveillance and reporting that captures everyone in its net of mutual suspicion.

In fact, for someone at constant risk of being assassinated by virtue of his existence and his social role, whatever he says or does, he is very calm. Perhaps this is the tai chi of survival in North Korea: look busy, do nothing, and be ready to deflect danger or attack with a deft sidestep or the flick of a knife. The alertness needed to neutralize this constant risk of elimination would exhaust any normal human being, but O is up to the challenge. At times he is affronted by the vast waste and utter contemptuous disregard for human life that characterizes such a system. But never losing his cool, he manages to focus this negative energy on where to put his next footstep safely rather than sizing up the system as a whole, an impossible task for any ordinary North Korean such as O.

Grandson of a revolutionary era hero, Inspector O seems to be an honorable North Korean, but is rarely given a chance to show it in the course of his routine work. Only when he is insulted by his opponents and set up for a fall, along with his boss (who dies to save him), his department, and even his Minister, does he counter-attack, using every trick that he has learned from years on the beat around Pyongyang.

The book ends in Prague. Inspector O's fate is interwoven with intrigues of western intelligence agencies as well as those of South Korea in the North. Those who want to really understand what is happening in North Korea should read this book, not only because it is gripping, but because it is the best unclassified account of how North Korea works and why it has survived all these years when the rest of the communist world capitulated to the global market a decade ago. This novel should be required bedtime reading for President Bush and his national security team.

By the way; the book is strewn with many concrete observations and factoids for aficionados of arcane matters North Korean (although one might ask, does it matter how many hats James Church wore when he was in Korea?) And, won't North Korean analysts realize that the offer to put cream in tea (page 221) could only have been written by someone who grew up learning English in the American imperium, whereas anyone who learned the Queen's English in the British Commonwealth would never ever say cream, always milk? Thus, I conclude that the author was American, that the North Koreans have already figured this out, and that they are scratching their head about what to do about this unnerving form of leakage. North Koreans find someone who truly understands them to be dangerous because such knowledge makes them predictable and undermines their entire strategy of keeping big powers guessing about their motivations. The only person they distrust more is someone who doesn't tell them the truth. Thus, I don't expect the Foreign Language Publishing House to publish *A Corpse in the Koryo* anytime soon or James Church to be turning up in Pyongyang to sign copies.

Is the shortage of thermoses in the novel actually a code for missing centrifuges that used all the aluminum tubes in the country? Will the tea-less Inspector O finally score his thermos in the next

volume, reportedly already at the editor (yes, apparently there's more to come). And maybe we will discover more about how North Koreans handle cognitive dissonance as Inspector O learns more about the external world. Is he already in the United States, tracking down the elusive James Church on behalf of his seniors???

3. THRILLER PROVIDES RARE GLIMPSE OF CLOSED NATION

Glenn Kessler, Washington Post, 27 December 2006

On the surface, "A Corpse in the Koryo," by James Church, is a crackling good mystery novel, filled with unusual characters involved in a complex plot that keeps you guessing to the end. It has received rave reviews -- as a mystery novel.

But the book has also caused a stir among Asia specialists because it offers an unusually nuanced and detailed portrait of one of the most closed societies on Earth -- North Korea. Much like Martin Cruz Smith's novel "Gorky Park," which depicted life in the Soviet Union in the early 1980s through the eyes of police inspector, "A Corpse on the Koryo" provides a vivid window into a mysterious country through the perspective of its primary character -- Inspector O.

Peter Hayes, a North Korea expert who is executive director of the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development, a research group, described the novel as "the best unclassified account of how North Korea works and why it has survived all these years when the rest of the communist world capitulated to the global market a decade ago," and said, "This novel should be required bedtime reading for President Bush and his national security team."

That was precisely the point of writing the book, according to the author. James Church is a pseudonym for what the book jacket describes as "a former Western intelligence officer with decades of experience in Asia" who "has wandered through Korea for years." In an interview, Church said he was frustrated by the limitations of his intelligence reports. He was often required to frame any information through the moral lens of Western society, which regards North Korea as one of the most repressive regimes in the world. So he decided to see if he could take his intimate knowledge of North Korea and make it accessible to a wider audience by placing it in a thriller.

In the academic or intelligence world, an analyst who wrote about North Korea without the standard "moral bubble" immediately would be accused of being blind to the "awfulness of the place," Church said. "You don't have to do that in a mystery story."

The result is fascinating. Much of Church's writing is quite beautiful -- one wonders what his intelligence reports read like -- with keen observations of even the smallest details. The traditional stereotype of North Korea is that it is a bare, broken place, but the book races across the northern half of the Korean Peninsula providing elaborate descriptions of its virtually unspoiled beaches and mountains. (The book, however, is sadly lacking maps.) Church said it is very difficult to look at any horizon in North Korea without seeing mountains or hills. So he sought to show how important the landscape is to the North Korean people -- and demonstrate their deep psychological attachment to it.

The characters are caught up in a blindingly complex system of cross and double-cross, a world in which every step is watched and reported on by someone else. Inspector O, who is very smart and has a sense of humor, must carefully navigate between friend and foe as he tries to unravel the connection between the death of a mysterious foreigner in a Pyongyang hotel and two rival smuggling schemes run by different government ministries. But Church shows how the North Korean government is unlike the Soviet regimes imposed on Eastern Europe, how it has adapted and in many ways become uniquely Korean.

The characters have their complaints about the strange society -- Inspector O is always in search of sandpaper for his woodworking and a cup of tea -- but also defend it. When Inspector O encounters a Finnish woman and mentions how the river in Pyongyang "sparkles on sunny days," she asks him, "Have you ever been anywhere real?" He lashes out that he has been overseas, but "some things are good, some things aren't, same as here. Nothing is perfect. This godforsaken country, as you call it, is where I live. This is my home."

The plot of the investigation is interwoven with scenes of an interrogation of Inspector O by an Irish intelligence officer who has a stereotypical view of the country, allowing Church to explore how the Western and North Korean realities rub against each other. The conversation at times seems an echo of fruitless conversations between Americans and North Koreans over North Korea's nuclear weapons programs.

But the book does not mention politics, nuclear weapons or even North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, keeping it grounded in the everyday existence of the North Korean people. It has been such a success that a second novel on the travails of Inspector O is in the works.

4. PYONGYANG CONFIDENTIAL

Tim Morrison, Time Magazine, 11 January 2007

The story of contemporary North Korea is almost universally told as the tale of one man: Kim Jong Il, the all-powerful dictator whose idiosyncrasies and erratic behavior overshadow the more mundane lives of his 23 million subjects. So it's a bit of a surprise to realize that Kim's name isn't mentioned at all in the 280 pages of James Church's impressive North Korean thriller, *A Corpse in the Koryo*. The dictator and his father, North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung, are in passing alluded to as "our great Leaders", but to Inspector O, a gruff cop from the Ministry of People's Security, they have all the influence of distant planets.

Inspector O has a simple mission: sit on a hill at dawn and photograph a car traveling the long, ruler-straight road connecting Pyongyang with the border to the South. But this is North Korea, where even the easiest task is complicated by penury -- the camera he is given has a dead battery -- and fraught with politics. Returning to the capital, O is unexpectedly grilled by two senior intelligence officials with a keen interest in the car he didn't photograph. Becoming embroiled with the secret services is a dangerous proposition for any North Korean, even a policeman, so O is sent away from the capital by his long-suffering boss, Chief Inspector Pak, until the heat is off. As in all good mysteries, what looks like a reprieve turns out to be even more trouble. While

supposedly lying low, O stumbles across a bloody turf war between two rival intelligence departments over a lawless border town and into the arms of Elena, a Finnish-Chinese femme fatale.

Church -- the nom de plume of a former Western intelligence official who, in an e-mail interview with TIME, says he has been "in, around, and over (but never below) North Korea many times" - has an excellent eye for detail and a flair for the high art of gumshoe deadpan. "I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see who it was," O narrates, before being knocked cold by a security goon. "We'd been trained never to make that mistake; I made it anyway."

As a detective, O is as hard-boiled as they come, a barely subordinate loner with a disdain for the pins of the Leaders that every North Korean is expected to wear and a woodworking hobby that threatens to earn him an "antisocial" note in his file. ("Why the hell can't you just smoke, like everyone else?" the Chief Inspector complains.) But O gets results, and when the body of a Western diplomat is discovered in a room at Pyongyang's biggest hotel -- the stiff in the book's title -- he is quickly called back to the capital to investigate, only to find his life even more imperiled there than at the border.

Inspector O's story is told in a series of vivid flashbacks, related to an Irish intelligence officer during a cat-and-mouse encounter in Prague. Their vignettes make a compelling side narrative to the main tale, but the best feature of the book is how it builds, brick by dirty gray brick, a portrait of North Korean society that feels far more real than any debriefing. Church's Pyongyang is caught in the familiar time warp of the North's long-soured revolution: it's a place of deserted roads, decaying buildings and rusting trains that creak off to the provinces at walking pace.

But what's different is the richly quotidian existence he brings to life. O may be under the thumb of a totalitarian regime, but he meets associates for a beer after work, flirts with telephone operators and fends off the elderly widows in his apartment building who want to hitch him to a suitable bride. Just as Martin Cruz Smith's Arkady Renko detective novels stripped the cold war thriller of much of its ideological baggage, *A Corpse in the Koryo* is, in many ways, a street-level look at life in the Hermit Kingdom with nary a mention of mass games or nuclear weapons.

"Anyone bold enough to try to discuss the North in nonjudgmental terms inevitably has felt the need to first establish a protective bubble of morally clean credentials [by uttering] something like, 'I think that North Korea is the worst regime on earth,'" Church says. "Characters in a mystery don't have to do any such thing."

For all its originality and beguiling observation, *A Corpse in the Koryo* has the air of having been finished in a hurry. Inspector O's measured voice carries the story superbly up to its breathless climax, but in the end, some parts of the puzzle fit too neatly together while others don't fit at all. Major characters also disappear suddenly from the scene and with barely any reason. Church excuses this as art imitating life, explaining: "If you deal with the place, (and more to the point, if you live in the place) you learn to accept a great deal of uncertainty, unresolved problems [and] unfinished thoughts."

Most frustratingly, we never get to hear the story of how O manages to escape his own tale's bullet-riddled climax. That, we can only hope, is fodder for another book. Church says there's a second in the works: in Inspector O, the author has crafted a complex character with rough charm to spare, and in eternally static North Korea, he has a setting that will fascinate readers for sequels to come.

5. INSPECTOR O GETS A THERMOS

James Church, NAPSNet, 19 December 2006

[In response to a request by the Nautilus Institute, the author of "A Corpse in the Koryo" wrote this fictional account of a meeting with Inspector O, the novel's primary character to discuss the state of play in the DPRK after the October 9th nuclear test.]

For many years, James Church has been in contact with a good observer of the North Korean scene—a police detective in Pyongyang with an inquisitive mind and enough contacts to keep himself informed. He calls himself Inspector O, and there is no reason for us to call him anything different. Recently, Inspector O asked to meet Church in an out-of-the-way place. Here is Church's account:

Inspector O and I had not seen each other in awhile, and after we sat on a bench that had a good view of the path in both directions, I remarked on how he seemed never to age.

"Age is a function of time," he said, "and time is relative. Things are beginning to change, my friend." He paused. "That's why I wanted to see you." He was somewhat better dressed than normal, though he'd never been what you could call shabby before. His shoes were new, and he was wearing a tie nicer than my own. Still, I had to admit that his choice of shirts had not improved.

"What is this we hear about a nuclear test?" Developments on the nuclear front, I assumed, was why he'd called our meeting. "Now that you have the bloody things, these foolish toys, what are you going to do with them?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," he said blandly. "You'd be surprised how people in the street are quite pleased to hear that, finally, we can hold our heads up when standing with the big powers. Maybe it will wear off as the winter gets colder, but I'd bet not. We've accomplished something, all the sacrifice was worth it, that's what people think. And the center is doing what it can to encourage them. You've seen pictures of the new slogan boards lauding our becoming a nuclear weapons state? In February, we're to have a national meeting with that as a theme. It means people in from the provinces wandering around on icy sidewalks and gawking at the buildings. For sure they'll slip, and we'll have broken bones," he shook his head.

"Fat lot of nonsense." O and I have learned to be frank with each other, at least most of the time, and up to a point. "Terrible waste of resources, building those weapons."

He snorted. "Tell me about wasting resources on the military, won't you?"

"I thought there had been a decision awhile back to get sensible on the economy. Now that you have this exalted nuclear status, though, I suppose that is all by the boards. We're in for tough talk, posturing and preening, a lot of poking Japan in the chest. Don't take it too far."

"Wait and see." O settled back on the bench and looked at the trees. "Anyway, it doesn't much matter what outsiders think will happen. All they have to do is wait and see."

"Meaning what? Another test?"

"You know I'm not privy to that sort of thing. But if I had to guess, I'd say no, not yet, not for awhile."

"What, then?"

O sighed. "Ah, my friend, after all of these years, you still have much to learn. Now that we've declared to the world that we have nuclear weapons, now that the people feel we are standing tall, now is the time when we can afford to compromise a little. Finally, we have some breathing room, we have room to maneuver. Before, if we gave a millimeter, a single millimeter, it would have been a sign of weakness. Not now."

I shook my head. "You realize there is a flaming contradiction in all a of this. Being a nuclear power allows you room to be flexible, you say, but the only flexibility that the outside world is interested in is your giving up your nuclear program-which you can't do, because then you'll have no space left for flexibility."

O laughed. "Finally, I think maybe you have been paying attention after all. A swarm of contradictions, what a lovely image. You people in the West like to think of truth as straight, simple and pure. For example, you'd probably say that the nuclear test means the end of the economic reform path. Hardliners have won, reformers are in retreat-the light is either on or it is not." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't go for the obvious; don't say what you were going to say."

"Which is?"

"That the lights are mostly off."

"No, never, would I do that?"

"With nuclear weapons, some are arguing in the capital, we can actually do more with reforms. It's a quiet argument, but I've heard it, here and there. We can ease up on defense spending, some say; put more resources into technology and development."

"You don't have any resources."

"Why do you say that? They are right across our borders, north and south. Plenty of resources, they'll begin to flow in."

"Even if they do cross the border, you can't absorb them, they'll be wasted in corruption, inefficiencies."

O regarded me silently. "You are a skeptic," he said finally, "and I don't fault you for that. But your skepticism doesn't matter. We have survived this long, through a lot worse than this. The people sense change, and they think Pyongyang is on the right track. You on the outside may see things different. You see adjustments and think they are reversals. But people see the markets have goods in them, and people find ways to buy them. Most do. Do you know, I finally bought myself a thermos? We didn't make them before, don't ask me why. Well, there was a missile factory that tried to do manufacture them with left over parts a few years ago, but they fell short." He smiled. "Now they come across the border by the truckload. People wear caps with the Nike logo on them, no one blinks an eye. I keep track of the school campuses. Students don't want to join the party, they certainly don't want to join the army. Everyone wants to go into business. They're convinced that's how to get ahead. And who will tell them otherwise?"

"So, I'm supposed to believe that the reforms are about to leap ahead, Deng Xiaoping style? That's not what I'm hearing. I hear that the wheels are moving in reverse."

"You think the Chinese reforms are a success? All you see is the glitter of the coast. Shanghai this, and Shanghai that. Go inland; their security forces are so busy putting down demonstrations they don't have time to think. No, I have a sense we're moving differently. Nothing will leap ahead, I'm just saying the process that began six years ago is not dead. The reformers simply know enough to keep their heads down for awhile."

"Better down than off." We were silent a moment.

Then O smiled again and got up to go. "We'll be in touch," he said. "By the way, a daughter of a friend of mine landed a job in the new Kaesong zone. Homely girl, but she has a line of suitors down the block." He paused. "You want to know why? She has her foot in the door to the future, that's what they think."

"Be good," I called as he walked away, "and if you can't be good..."

"I know," he said over his shoulder, "...be careful."
