

Policy Forum 06-105: Inspector O And The Case Of The Missing Tea Thermos

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Inspector O And The Case Of The Missing Tea Thermos

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Article by Peter Hayes

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I. Introduction

Peter Hayes, Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute, contributes this review of [A Corpse in the Koryo](#) by James Church, a detective novel set in North Korea. Peter writes, "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."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Peter Hayes

- Inspector O And The Case Of The Missing Tea Thermos
by Peter Hayes

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???

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development

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