

Policy Forum 06-106: Inspector O Gets a Thermos

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 06-106: Inspector O Gets a Thermos", NAPSNet Policy Forum, December 19, 2006, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/inspector-o-gets-a-thermos/>

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Policy Forum Online 06-106A: December 19th, 2006
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Article by James Church

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I. Introduction

James Church (a pseudonym) is the author of the detective novel, [A Corpse in the Koryo](#), St. Martin's Press, New York, 2006. In this essay, Church meets Inspector O, the primary fictional character in [A Corpse in the Koryo](#) and discusses the state of play in the DPRK after the October 9th nuclear test.

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II. Article by James Church

- Inspector O Gets a Thermos
by James Church

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, no 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 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."

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
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)

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Nautilus Institute

2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org