

Fear and Loathing on the Pyongyang Trail: North Korea and the United States

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By Bruce Cumings

Jasper Becker, Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 300 pp.

Bradley K. Martin, Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004. 868 pp.

In his brilliant three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky, the late Isaac Deutscher left the indelible impression that Trotsky was the best mind among those who made the Bolshevik Revolution, just as Stalin was the undertaker of that same revolution, turning it toward a brutal dictatorship that squelched whatever progressive and humane impulses existed at the beginning. When the exiled Trotsky turned his own attentions toward Stalin, he began his biography with the observation that the old revolutionist, Leonid Krassin, “was the first, if I am not

mistaken, to call Stalin an ‘Asiatic.’” He proceeded to write about “Asiatic” leaders as cunning and brutal, presiding over static societies with a huge peasant base. Another Bolshevik who ran afoul of Stalin, Nikolai Bukharin, called him “a Genghis Khan.” Meanwhile Deutscher himself, a broadly learned man, wrote that Stalin was “primitive, oriental, but unfailingly shrewd.”

[1]

Cunning and shrewd are standard adjectives in stereotypes of Asians, particularly when they were denied civil rights and penned up in Chinatowns by whites-only housing restrictions, leading to uniform typecasting from afar—peering over a high board fence so to speak. Brutal was another, at least since Genghis Khan, with Pol Pot and Mao reinforcing the image in our time. The broadest distinction, between static or indolent East and dynamic, progressive West, goes all the way back to Herodotus and Aristotle. Trotsky, however, made specific reference to Karl Marx’s theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production, which appraised Asia by reference to what it lacked when set

against the standard-issue European model of development: feudalism, the rise of the bourgeoisie, capitalism. A brutal satrap presided over a semi-arid environment, running armies of bureaucrats and soldiers, regulating the paths of great rivers, and employing vast amounts of slave labor in gigantic public works projects (like China's Great Wall). The despot above and the cringing mass below prevented the emergence of anything resembling a modern middle class.

Karl Wittfogel was the leading ideologue of the German Communist Party in the early 1930s, and the leading proponent of this theory. Stalin purged him for reasons that are not entirely clear, but part of it may have been the unlikely probability that Wittfogel's theory offered much utility for the Soviet role in China, then wracked by bloody conflicts between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and the fledgling Communist movement, to which many Soviet advisors were attached. Wittfogel came to the United States and established himself as a scholar with his major book, *Oriental Despotism*. [2]



Karl August Wittfogel

Marx never really investigated East Asia, but learned enough to know that if China fit

his theory, Japan with its feudalism (and “petite culture”) clearly did not. Wittfogel, however, applied his notions of Oriental despotism to every dynasty with a river running through it—China, Tsarist Russia, Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Incas, even the Hopi Indians of Arizona. By this time he had done a full-fledged, high-wire tenko (Japanese for a political flip-flop), reemerging as an organic reactionary and trying to reproduce himself in, of all places, Seattle—the most thoroughly middle class city in America. Wittfogel wrote for many rightwing extremist publications and played a critical role in the purges of China scholars and Foreign Service officers during the McCarthy period. Hardly any scholars would testify against Owen Lattimore, Senator Joseph McCarthy's prime professorial target, but the University of Washington furnished three: Wittfogel, Nikolas Poppe (a Soviet Mongol expert who had defected to the Nazis in 1943), and George Taylor, a British scholar/journalist who had visited Mao's place of exile in Yanan during World War II. [3]

This early 1950s episode tore apart the American field of East Asian studies. People wouldn't speak to each other for years—or ever, in the case of Lattimore and Taylor. But China was now “Red China,” and the government needed experts. In the late 1950s the Ford Foundation provided funds through the Social Science Research Council for a committee to develop scholarship on contemporary China. John King

Fairbank of Harvard joined George Taylor on this committee, and a few years later the Central Intelligence Agency provided a subvention for the publication of a new scholarly journal, *The China Quarterly* (still the preeminent journal of the field). Its inaugural issue featured a debate about Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism*. Taylor and Wittfogel were back in the fold; out in the cold were the many scholars of Asia who had their careers ruined or their character assassinated in the 1950s (Lattimore taught at the University of Leeds for decades). This new, Cold War-shaped spectrum also greeted young people like myself, when I first enrolled at Columbia University in 1968. Its most notable feature was the open support (or more often the deafening silence) of leading scholars of East Asia regarding the war then tearing both Vietnam and America apart. By and large, they presented themselves as objective and non-partisan, even as some ran off to Washington to tell the CIA how to defeat the Vietcong; it was the opponents of the war and American policy who were naïve and biased.

Around that time Perry Anderson published *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. At the end of this fine book rests an 87-page "Note" on the theory of the Asiatic mode, [4] where Anderson shows that Marx's views on Asia differed little from those of Hegel, Montesquieu, Adam Smith and a host of other worthies; they were all peering through the wrong end of a telescope, or in a mirror, weighing a smattering of knowledge

about Asia against their understanding of how the West developed. Nor did Marx ever take the "Asiatic mode" very seriously; he was always interested in one thing, really, and that was capitalism (even when it came to communism). Anderson recommended giving this theory an unceremonious burial, concluding that "in the night of our ignorance . . . all alien shapes take on the same hue." I eagerly recommended his book to my colleagues: a good friend said, "He doesn't know any Chinese." Another responded, "Isn't he a Marxist?" (Anderson—not Wittfogel). But I didn't make the mistake of recommending it to Wittfogel's prime early acquisition, by then a senior professor in the Russian field, since Anderson had called Wittfogel a "vulgar charivari."

The theory never really got a proper burial, though, it just reappears in less conspicuous forms. It isn't politically correct to say "Oriental" or "Asiatic" anymore (even if some haven't gotten the message). Stalin is long dead, but Stalinism is apparently not, and it's still okay to say almost anything about Stalinism. Furthermore, lo and behold, one set of Orientals has kept it alive: journalists use the term time and again to describe North Korea, without any hint of qualifying or questioning their position. The idea that the DPRK is a pure form of "Stalinism in the East" goes back to the 1940s, and was constantly reinforced by Berkeley's Robert Scalapino, a Cold War scholar who came along in

the late 1950s and benefited as much as anyone from the Fairbank-Taylor accommodation. North Korea was indeed Stalinist in its state-run industrialization drive, and modeled its administration and much of its system on Stalin's Russia—but so did every other communist regime in the 1950s. Chinese communism had greater influence on the North, however, but we don't hear the DPRK called Maoist. In the 1960s Kim Il Sung instituted sharp changes, recasting the state ideology in the direction of nationalism and self-reliance and causing sharp clashes with Moscow—enough to make Premier Alexei Kosygin and KGB head Yuri Andropov come running to Pyongyang, where Kim essentially told them to go to hell. [5] Whatever North Korea has been since then, it hasn't been Stalinist. Stalin's speeches cranked with the newest gains in pig iron and machine tools; in their focus on ideas determining everything, the two Kims' ideology is closer to their Neo-Confucian forebears. High-level ideologue Hwang Jang-yop, the defector whom Bradley Martin relies on most, told him that the two Kims “turned Stalinism and Marxism-Leninism on their heads by reverting to Confucian notions.”



Robert Scalapino

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 a picture emerged of Kim Il Sung in a Soviet uniform with some kind of medal on his lapel. Like Ho Chi Minh, Kim had a “dark period,” whereabouts unknown (in the latter's case, 1941-45), and when some hard evidence finally turned up of a clear connection to Moscow, it was munched over time and again. [6] In my reading this information was never balanced with hard facts that we learned long before—in the work of Soviet dissident Roy Medvedev for example, that Stalin ordered every last Korean agent in the Comintern shot in the late 1930s and began his many mass relocations of subject populations by moving some 200,000 Koreans from the Soviet Far East to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (tens of thousands of whom died on this forced exodus), in both cases on the racist grounds that they might be Japanese spies, subject to Japanese ideas, or generally unreliable—plus one couldn't tell them apart from Japanese. [7] In recent years scholars reading several of the relevant languages like Wada Haruki, Charles Armstrong, Han Hong-ku, and Andrei Lankov have excavated Kim's history as an anti-Japanese guerrilla from 1931 to 1945 and his relationship with the Soviets, which turns out to have been quite modest and uneasy. None of that definitive literature shows up in either of the books under review.

If, however, it had turned out that Stalin handpicked Kim Il Sung and installed him in Pyongyang as his faithful servant that would not

have been too surprising, since he did that throughout Eastern Europe. Several citizens of the Soviet Union held cabinet-level positions, like the Polish defense minister. If Stalin had done so, however, it would still be entirely biased not to point out that the United States engaged the services of an exile politician who had spent the previous 35 years in America, named Syngman Rhee, and that the main wartime intelligence outfit, the Office of Strategic Services, had deposited him in Seoul via General Douglas MacArthur's personal plane *The Bataan*, in an intelligence operation designed (1) to get him there before anyone else, and (2) to make an end run around State Department objections to favoring any particular politicians—and especially Rhee, who had angered everyone at Foggy Bottom by pretending to represent a “Korean Provisional Government” that never governed any Koreans, and had gone belly up in 1925. [8] Yet those who love to feature Kim in his Soviet uniform never mention such things.

What Do We See When We See North Korea?

Comprehending North Korea raises the vexing problems of balance, proportion, and considered judgment to an excruciatingly fine point because of the regime's own shading, fibbing, lying, and above all its grotesque exaggeration of the merits of its leaders and the accomplishments of the regime. One begins with a farrago of outlandish claims and heroic myths that would make jaws

drop in any grade school, goes on to what the “Dear Leader” says, what DPRK scribes are told to write, what the outside experts claim, what the reporters report, what some other government offers up. Then there are the occasional visitors—what did they see and experience? Easiest to dismiss are the myrmidons of the “Juche Study Groups” around the world; I remember once seeing in a Pyongyang magazine a Bedouin sitting on a camel, one sneaker on and one off, perusing the pages of Kim Il Sung's latest work. With all that, just over the horizon was and is South Korea. For nearly four decades it was run by military officers and bureaucrats who had served the same Japanese masters that Kim and his friends spent a decade fighting in the 1930s. In 1949-50, as civil war loomed between North and South, most of the high command of the southern army were officers who had served imperial Japan. General Park Chung Hee came to power in a coup in 1961, and had served in the particularly volatile milieu of the Japanese military in Manchuria, chasing after Korean guerrillas. His own intelligence chief shot him in the head in 1979, one Kim Chae-gyu, who was also an officer in Manchuria; both Park and Kim had been part of the second class graduated from the Americans' military school in 1946. [9]

The American role since 1945 raises another enormous problem of balance and bias, beginning with the simple fact that Rhee, Park and the KCIA's Kim would not have come to

power without American backing, and continuing with the ubiquitous assumption that Americans were innocent bystanders for the past 60 years, having nothing to do with the nature of either Korean regime. Rhee was 70 in 1945, a patriot of the old school and the ancien regime who would have been a leading politician in a rightwing regime, perhaps, but had no real political base in the country. Park and Kim would have been purged for their servile collaboration with Japanese imperialism (Park got a gold watch from puppet emperor Pu Yi)—as the State Department recommended in its voluminous guidance to the American occupation command in August 1945. Five years later the U.S. chose to join the Korean War and to carpet-bomb the North until every man, woman and child was living in this tunnel or that cave for the duration. Five years after that war ended, the U.S. installed nuclear weapons in the South and kept them there until 1991. Any rudimentary attempt at balance must account for these well-known facts. Particularly for Americans, some recognition of the U.S. role in barging into an alien political, social and cultural thicket in 1945 and not finding a way to extricate itself even today, with all the essential problems save one (South Korea is now a democracy) still unsolved, must inform any examination of the Korean problem. (Aha! the Cold Warrior will say: it was all worth it because South Korea is a democracy. But that democracy grew in the teeth of withering repression under one dictator after

another, all of them supported by successive U.S. administrations, and it took fifty years to emerge.)

Political violence intrudes an essentially insoluble problem into this mix: for example, we know a great deal about North Korean prison camps, indeed President George W. Bush welcomed a survivor who published a book about his experience (*The Aquariums of Pyongyang*) to the Oval Office last summer, and it is clear that even minor infractions of the rules of this dictatorship can get you incarcerated—usually along with your family—in God-forsaken labor camps up in the mountainous wilderness. Is this news? Experts have known about these camps for at least 30 years, after a man named Ali Lameda got stuck in one for a few years and later told Amnesty International about it. But who ever doubted their existence in the first place? After Stalin, what person in his right mind would expect anything different from a communist regime? Some courageous human rights activists managed to penetrate the appalling political prisons run by the South Korean dictators, too, and to write about them for Amnesty International: people thrown into solitary confinement to rot for decades because, after fiendish torture and Japanese-style “thought reform,” they still refused to do a tenko and recant their support for the North. Under the U.S. Military Government (1945-48) the jails held tens

of thousands of political prisoners. Meanwhile, the contemporary American prison system is a daily outrage, with huge proportions of the younger black population shuttled back and forth between ghetto and prison. We know what an Oriental despot Kim Jong Il is: what are the excuses for South Korea and the United States?

Many years ago as I was getting to know the furious and unremittingly vicious conflicts that have wracked divided Korea, I sat in the Hoover Institution library looking through a magazine put out by the Northwest Youth Corps in the late 1940s. On its cover were cartoons of communists disemboweling pregnant women, running bayonets through little kids, burning down people's homes, smashing open the brains of opponents. In the formerly secret internal reports of the U.S. occupation this outfit was routinely described as a fascist youth group engaged in terrorism throughout southern Korea. Its members primarily came from refugee families from the North, and the "youths" ran from teenaged to middle-aged thugs. The U.S. officially sponsored one such group which modeled itself on Chiang Kai-shek's "Blue Shirts" (black, brown and green having already been spoken for). In putting down one strike or uprising after another in the late 1940s (and there were many), this and other youth groups worked hand in glove with the hated National Police, unchanged from the colonial period and the vast majority of whose Korean members had served

the Japanese. On Cheju Island, where leftwing people's committees ran the island's affairs from 1945 to 1948, the Northwest Youth were primarily responsible for a nauseating subjugation in which about ten percent of the island population died and another huge percentage fled to Japan, where many still live in Osaka; after it was over Northwest Youth members joined the island police. This was well before the Korean War, during which terrorist youth groups killed tens of thousands of civilians in North and South Korea.

What scholars learned from declassified American archives thirty years ago is now the subject of continuous historical research in South Korea. A younger generation of scholars has begun to come to grips with the whirlwind of communist and anti-communist violence, the colonial backgrounds of the leaders on both sides, and the civil war, and has poured out book after book on North Korea, studies that are generally far better—and much less biased—than the Western literature on the North. Yet only the authors I mentioned earlier can read it, and most Americans—including our authors and the Bush administration—have no idea how dramatic has been the impact of this literature on South Korean attitudes toward North Korea and, more important perhaps, the United States. In the end Korea's turbulent history in the past eight decades makes it hard to set North Korea off as a singular case, evil author of all its own problems,

and more or less incomprehensible to boot. Instead we look at it and we see ourselves.

None of this troubles Jasper Becker, a reporter with much experience in Asia who peers over his particular board fence (the Chinese border) at North Korea and finds it—well, essentially just like the Northwest Youth painted it six decades ago. Like them he seems to think that if we huff and we puff, we can blow Kim’s house down. Like Wittfogel, he sees a willful and despicable despot presiding over a “slave state.” But the suffering that this despot—“short, pudgy, cognac-swilling Kim Jong Il”—has imposed on his people, Becker writes, is “an unparalleled and monstrous crime.” This comes on the same page where the following body counts appear: five million people lost to Lenin’s erroneous launching of the Bolshevik Revolution, eight million to Stalin’s terror, thirty million in the famine Becker believes Mao imposed on China after 1958 (see his earlier book, *Hungry Ghosts*), and millions more at the hands of Pol Pot. Genghis Khan got left off this list, but never mind: Kim Jong Il is worse than all of them. Indeed, he is so bad that Becker advocates an American “shock and awe” campaign to get rid of the regime—not right now, of course, but should Kim test an atomic bomb. It’s a moral issue, he says again and again; this regime has to be got rid of.

The book begins with a quotation from George

W. Bush tutoring cadets at The Citadel about “rogue states” in December 2001, and then launches into a “fictional scenario” taking up sixteen pages about a preemptive strike against every nuclear, military, industrial, and governmental facility in North Korea—in other words another preventive war. Just like Iraq dozens of F-117 Stealth fighter-bombers open the campaign by trying to solve Kim Jong Il’s perpetual bad hair day through decapitation, followed by phalanxes of F-16 fighters launched from several nearby American aircraft carriers (which Kim somehow failed to notice as they steamed 6,000 miles), B-1 and B-52 bombers, and Tomahawk cruise missiles; thousands of JDAM blast munitions and “high-intensity, heat-generating BLU-118Bs” are unleashed, “designed to penetrate reinforced bunkers;” finally 60,000 Marines rush in from Okinawa to march on Pyongyang. When the North Koreans strike back Americans and South Koreans will be protected because “following the Second Gulf War in 2003,” Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz had presciently upgraded American and Korean high-tech weaponry: “new generation” PAC3 Patriot missiles, “Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s missile Defense system” (described as “up and running, although not tested in wartime conditions”), and air-to-ground “HARPY” guided missiles. “Victory would be swift and total,” Becker assures us, but he still cannot guarantee that this wholesale slaughter will kill or capture the mad, evil, corpulent,

cognac-drenched, altitudinally-challenged Kim Jong Il. [10] Indeed, we recall that many moons passed before Saddam was flushed out of his gopher hole.

We might sleep easier if this were merely Jasper Becker's invention. It isn't: all this is strangely prefigured in the Pentagon's real-world "OPLAN 5027," Becker writes, a scheme for "defeating the enemy in detail" (whatever that means). Last March *The Atlantic Monthly* convened a "war game" with former American diplomats and generals to see how a new conflict with the North might play out. Lieutenant General Thomas McInerney, an Air Force strategic planner with decades of experience, role-played the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Would we win," he asked? Well "there'd be a lot of carnage," but yes, we would win—"quicker than we did in Operation Iraqi Freedom" most likely, or in the worst case it might take an extra month. We would get our hair mussed, no doubt, but the good general thought civilian casualties in Seoul could be "minimized"—no more than 100,000 tops (not one South Korean was invited to participate in this "game"). North Korea's nuclear weapons upset the balance of power in the region, he thought, so the U.S. should give nukes to Japan and South Korea for pre-positioning. Once the war begins, for every nuke the North used "we will use a hundred." That goes double should the North transfer nuclear weapons to terrorists: General McInerney would

tell Pyongyang, "if a nuclear weapon or weapons go off in the United States, you are a target"—even if we aren't sure where the weapons came from. If he was the "hawk" at these games, Robert Gallucci, a supremely level-headed man who led the negotiating team that achieved the 1994 Framework Agreement freezing the North's plutonium facilities, argued that any transfer of fissile materials to terrorists by Pyongyang would lead "either immediately or in the fullness of time" to the use of force "to end that regime." [11] Such transfers are generally assumed to be the "red line" bringing the U.S. and North Korea to the brink of war, which is why the North is extremely unlikely to make any. But it is more the scale of General McInerney's counterforce that invites attention: a hundred nuclear weapons to their every one conjures with genocide. Here the opaque, dangerous and uncontrolled "Other" excites exterminationist impulses; it would be nice to say that this is merely McInerney's view, but unfortunately the pattern runs deep in American history. [12]

Bradley K. Martin is also a journalist, of Kim Jong Il's age (early 60s) as he tells us, and the Dear Leader clearly rankles him as well. In contrast to Becker, however, he has strained mightily to provide a balanced account of North Korea. Martin has written for many of America's best newspapers and magazines for decades, and has visited North Korea several times. His interest in

the Hermit Kingdom dates at least from his first visit twenty-five years ago, but he also has that peculiar kind of curiosity that afflicts some people who write about the North: an innocent fascination with the unknown and with difference, with trying to fathom the world's most isolated redoubt, with rational explanation of the seemingly irrational, and as an American he also has in his mind the question, why do they hate us so much? Mark Twain once wrote about this peculiar American quandary, offered appropriately enough to his countrymen under the title, "to the person sitting in darkness:"

There have been lies; yes, but they were told in a good cause. We have been treacherous; but that was only in order that real good might come out of apparent evil. True, we have crushed a deceived and confiding people ... we have robbed a trusting friend of his land and his liberty; we have invited our clean young men to shoulder a discredited musket and do bandit's work under a flag which bandits have been accustomed to fear, not to follow; we have debauched America's honor and blackened her face before the world; but each detail was for the best. [13] Twain speaks of the war of colonization in the Philippines a hundred years ago, but readers will not be blamed if their minds wander to our un-won wars in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq, where—need it be said—our intentions were for the best.

Unlike Becker, Martin has the journalist's instinct to distrust all government claims and statements, and I would guess, to think that avoiding unpalatable facts is a kind of dereliction of duty. Thus we learn on page three that "a quarter of North Korea's population of 10 million died in the Korean War." Later on he mentions the American air war, without quite saying that most of the casualties in the North came from it. But, North Korea has never provided a reliable accounting of its war deaths, and no expert can be certain of the full death toll and what caused it. All we know is that the population experienced a war of such dreadful severity that only the World War II experiences of the USSR and Poland compare. Kim Il Sung was not a Soviet stooge but "a Korean patriot of unusual determination" who fought hard against the Japanese, Martin says, giving him "impeccable nationalist credentials in a country where it had been all too common for capable and ambitious people to serve the Japanese masters." After a decade of fighting the Japanese, Martin has Kim "fleeing to the Soviet Union," but as Japanese scholar Wada Haruki has demonstrated, Kim went with his combined Korean-Chinese partisans to a Sino-Russian border area south of Khabarovsk, where the Soviets and the Chinese Communists ran training camps of some sort, and it wasn't entirely clear where Kim was half the time. But throughout the book Martin clearly paints Kim as his own man.



Kim Il Sung leading anti-Japanese guerrillas.
North Korean portrait

Martin has read enough to get well beyond the usual assumptions about the draconian nature of the two Kims' rule. For example, purges were often not fatal or permanent. General Choe Gwang was up and down time and again: he was nearly executed during the Korean War for perceived failures in battle, he had another conflict with Kim Il Sung in 1968, and somehow still managed to be the top military man in the North in the mid-1990s. Indeed, during the 1994 nuclear crisis when the U.S. was hoping to get China at least to abstain if not to support Security Council sanctions on the DPRK, Chinese generals brought General Choi to Beijing to give him a well publicized bear hug.

Martin discusses the 75,000-odd Koreans in Japan, including many with Japanese spouses, who voluntarily went to the North in 1959-61, noting that many were originally from the South and that most wanted to escape the apartheid-like conditions for Koreans in Japan. He does well in analyzing the North's growth in the 1960s and 1970s, its per capita output being higher for decades and then about the same as the South's

until the 1980s, and the favorable impression that the country made on visitors back then. Riding the train from Pyongyang to Beijing, vistas of "neat, substantial farm houses, tractors and rice transplanting machines" and "well-scrubbed" towns contrasted mightily with China's "squalid rural huts, urban slums, people and draft animals engaged in backbreaking labor." North Korea seemed more prosperous, Martin thought, but China had more vitality.

He went in 1979, but I had the same impressions on my first visit two years later: that North Korea had done well for a developing country, that Pyongyang was surprisingly handsome and pleasant, colorful and well-run, that leaving the North for China was to return to a much poorer place. All that was reversed within a decade; somehow by 1990 individuals appeared who had not existed before in China, a young woman in a well tailored dress with impeccable make-up, a confident young man with easy body language around a foreigner, these and a hundred other experiences indicated the beginnings of a middle class revolution, at least in the big cities. How this can happen in such a short period of time is an unexplained marvel, but this was South Korea's experience in the 1970s and it would have been the North's, had true reform begun twenty-five years ago. Martin also writes about the "amazing changes" that happened after Deng Xiaoping's reform program got going, and speculates, accurately in my view, that the

North's leaders may have been "lulled by the evidence of their successes" into complacency. In any case, within a mere handful of years they fell irrevocably behind.

It so happened that Martin and I were each given our first closely-chaperoned tour by the same person—Kim Jong-su. He presented himself as an official of the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, which Kim told me was the agency used to deal with "capitalist visitors." He was one of several officials I met in the country who were thoroughly worldly, self-confident, conversant with American policy in a sophisticated way, not to mention being humorous and enjoyable companions. When I asked him about his family background, he said his father had died when he was a baby and he and his mother were beggars in the streets of Pyongyang in 1945. He told Martin, however, that he was an orphan brought up by Kim Il Sung and that his name was Bai Song-chul; when Martin saw him again in 1989 and asked why his name was now Kim, Bai/Kim said only that "old friends" knew him as Bai. (I had more than one experience in which a person I had met earlier showed up later with a different name card.) The violence of colonial rule and the war made for thousands of orphans, and Martin is right that Kim Il Sung paid particular attention to them, becoming their surrogate father in effect and putting them through the best schools, thus creating a group of elites who later became a

major buttress of the succession to Kim Jong Il. But Martin goes on to suggest that Kim Jong-su was really an intelligence officer, and might be one of Kim's own sons by a mistress; he found one informant who told him that Kim was "the most powerful" of Kim Il Sung's unacknowledged sons. I had thought the same thing, the first because of the kinds of questions Kim Jong-su was interested in, and because he became the number two man in the North Korean embassy to the UN, a top foreign posting; I thought the second because I once saw Kim's face near the door when Kim Il Sung was welcoming a foreign head-of-state, and, like Martin, noticed a modest facial resemblance—but mainly noticed that Kim had pretty altitudinous access.

In the late spring of 1995 I sought out Kim Jong-su in New York, hoping for a visa to visit his country again. When we met he asked me if any Chicago firms might be interested in investing in North Korea. I asked him what they needed. In Korean there is a word, *nunch'i*, which has no direct English equivalent. It suggests a trace of meaning in the eye, or that eyes are the windows to the mind. Kim replied to my question with a single word: "everything," as a look mingling distress, mortification and sadness flitted momentarily in his eyes. I had always known him to be the soul of hard-eyed conviction, but it had fled somewhere; it was a telling moment. Ambassador Kim said he would arrange my visa,

but soon came the torrential rains and floods, he returned to Pyongyang, and I never saw him again. Around this time Bradley Martin took another train ride in the North; a carload of Koreans passed in the opposite direction: “They were a ghastly sight. Their clothing was ragged and filthy, their faces darkened with what I presumed to be either mud or skin discolorations resulting from pellagra.” Soon incredible spectacles opened up, of entire industrial cities like Ch’ongjin creaking to a halt, their equipment scavenged for black market barter, or the permanent shuttering of the regime’s endlessly touted Kim Chaek Steel Works. For the past decade the regime has not been able to feed its people, leading to malnutrition, famine, the stunting of perhaps 40 per cent of the younger generation, massive death, and seemingly permanent hunger.

Faith-Based Punditry

The ragged and filthy Koreans whom Martin spied on the windowless train stand in for all North Koreans in Becker’s account. He has moving passages about the “famine and flight” that afflicted large sectors of the population, garnered mainly from talking to refugees who crossed into China. Becker liberated Korean women from Chinese men who held them as sex toys by buying them outright, in one case for the equivalent of \$24; a twenty-eight-year-old, she looked like fifty. A friend of mine who worked

for the Mercy Foundation used to prowl the border with \$100 bills, hoping to buy back young Korean women from the hundreds—more likely thousands—of Chinese men who had done the same. Entire families swallowed poison rather than try to get out, or they stood by railway tracks proffering their babies, hoping some kind soul might take them away and feed them. Packs of wandering children dotted the countryside, or ran across the border. Most people, however, just bribed the guards and went over in search of food or escape; the majority, according to the best evidence, went back and forth time and again to feed their loved ones. It was and is an inexcusable travesty on the part of a state that can penetrate every nook and cranny in the country. Becker believes that Kim Jong Il has the blood of four million people on his hands.

Distinguishing between four million and 600,000 dead is rather like casting a horrific problem onto the terrain of real estate prices, as Gore Vidal once remarked, but experts who have studied the famine closely believe that the figure is much closer to 600,000 than to four million. Becker’s is the highest estimate that I have encountered; perhaps history will prove him to be right. But on other aspects of history his book is sloppy and careless to the point of embarrassment. He says Kim Il Sung stole the name of a famous anti-Japanese patriot; his real name was “Kim Song Juh.” This is the oldest shibboleth in the South Korean anti-communist repertoire, demolished

by Dae-Sook Suh's scholarship four decades ago; [14] indeed, within days of Kim's return to the North in the fall of 1945, the *Pyongyang Times* discussed his real name (Kim Song-ju), his birthplace just outside of Pyongyang, and his exploits against the Japanese. (Ho Chi Minh was a nom de guerre. So is Commander Marcos in Chiapas. Anything new about this?) In the opening pages we learn that "rogue state" was a term coined in 1994, but it was widely used upon the collapse of the Soviet Union. [15]

Becker believes the U.S. "might be drawn into a devastating war on the Korean Peninsula," somehow failing to mention that we tried that already—and it didn't work. When he does get around to that prehistoric conflict, we learn that MacArthur raced from Inch'on to the Yalu River in 1951; no one who has ever inquired seriously into the history of the Korean War could make such a gaffe. MacArthur wanted to nuke China but Truman overruled him, Becker says: wrong again; he has both the timing and the context wrong. In April 1951 Truman dismissed MacArthur to put a reliable commander in the field should he nuke China—and at the same time Truman transferred to the Pacific the operational capability to do so, in the form of Mark IV nuclear cores, never before released from the custody of the Atomic Energy Commission. [16] Fighting ceased along the 38th parallel in 1953, Becker says, when in fact the DMZ runs well north of the parallel in the east

and well south in the west. Becker hopelessly muddies up what experts know about the North's plutonium facilities at Yongbyon (not "Yongbyong"). State farms did not begin in the 1940s but in the late 1950s (and North Korean collectives were never much like huge Soviet state farms). The name of former Seoul CIA station chief, close advisor to George H. W. Bush, and subsequently Ambassador to Korea is not "Donald Greg." [it's Gregg] The faux South Korean leader in Becker's war scenario, "President Choi," is an obvious stand-in for Roh Moo Hyun who won election over the Bush administration's opposition in 2002; a principled and courageous lawyer who fought South Korea's militarists during the worst decade of violence in the 1980s, all Becker says about him is that "in his youth [he] had called the military 'fascists and imperialist stooges.'" I'm unaware of this reference, and the reader will be, too, since the book rarely bothers with footnotes.

However bad Becker's research may be, it gets worse. He belongs to a faith-based fraternity of pundits who still believe in things like "the 'shock and awe' campaign that quickly defeated Iraq," Rumsfeld's missile defense fantasies, the verisimilitude of "the axis of evil," the steady, experienced leadership of Bush, Rumsfeld and Cheney as opposed to pusillanimous Bill Clinton, and above all, as contrasted to the feckless United Nations—Becker would be happy if it would closed up, too. Shock and awe, Rumsfeld the

crafty strategist, Bush the steely liberator: if this book had come out in 2003 we might politely call it “dated,” but it came out in the middle of last summer. At the end of the book we again encounter scenarios for violent “regime change:” Dark Neo-Con Force Richard Perle thinks Americans should be able to inspect anything they want to in the North, and remove their nuclear physicists to a neutral spot for interrogation. Failing that, the U. S. “should take decisive military action.” A defector tells Becker that “many North Koreans believe that the United States is their savior and the only nation that can liberate North Korea.” Funny: that was also the position of the Northwest Youth Corps in 1948. Funny: that was what Harry Truman authorized MacArthur to do in September 1950 (a “roll-back” in the language of NSC 81, the enabling document). That attempt at regime change got us into a war with China, and that war with China sharply limited what Lyndon Johnson could do in Vietnam a decade later: like invading the North to overthrow Ho Chi Minh. Today a new attempt to do the same thing would assuredly involve the nuclear destruction of North Korea: Rumsfeld has succeeded in getting a new generation of bunker-busting nukes through Congress, over much opposition.

Like Becker, Bradley Martin relies heavily on defectors for his evidence, indeed I can’t think of a book that has made more use of defector testimony than this one. But Martin scruples to

check facts and cross-reference stories, so that he doesn’t get sold a bill of goods. Former officers in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) say that most North Korean defectors are useless, beyond telling you what daily life was like in their neck of the North Korean woods. Other officials say they are useful when they first come out, but not if the South Korean agencies get hold of them first. But these spies are trying to find out about the big issues, like how and why the North might go to war, how they would react to a preemptive strike on their nuclear reactors, or whether they have atomic weapons. Defectors with that kind of knowledge have been few and far between in the past six decades. But Martin wants to find out what makes North Korea tick, what it’s like to live there, raise a family, work in a factory, be a policeman, go to a prison camp. He spreads defector testimony through the broad middle of the book, which is the main reason for its extraordinary length, but this gives the reader a nice chance to sample the give and take between him and his interlocutors, which I found fascinating. Despite the book’s intimidating length, these chapters read easily and indeed the whole book is a reasonably quick read, lively and well done.

Many who have lived in North Korea—natives and foreigners, defectors and visitors—speak of the kindness, modesty, generosity, simplicity, and warmth of ordinary people there, and what until the recent catastrophe appears to have been

a vibrant collective life. It runs against everything outsiders expect, and Martin rightly asks of a country widely thought to be “evil beyond redemption” how it can inculcate values of kindness and modesty in its people. His defector interviews provide much testimony on this, and one particular canard that he nails is Western reporters’ common assumption that handicapped people live miserable lives, hidden off from view in some nightmarish hellhole or simply exterminated. Instead Martin finds that the regime has many programs for supporting and rewarding the handicapped (with amputees from the war getting the best care), finding marriage unions among the handicapped, and providing them a dignified life at government expense. When I visited North Korea in 1987 with a Thames Television documentary crew, we interviewed a man who had been drenched from head to toe with napalm during the Korean War. The only remaining part of his ruined face that looked human was his right eyeball, which I was able to focus on as I interviewed him. He worked in an electric factory, had five children, and gave us eloquent testimony on the horrors of war. I was also struck by the Korean guides that were always with us, and how gentle and kind they were to him. I was on a hotel elevator with this man the next day and a Korean from Japan got in and circled around him in disgust, muttering “sheesh.” Defector Chung Seong-san detailed for Martin the many programs for the handicapped, special schools for the disabled, and the general

respect that citizens have for the walking-wounded casualties of war. “The South Koreans don’t have [this] kind of compassion,” Chung told him; as I read this, images came to my mind of legless amputees dragging themselves through the markets of Seoul on scuffed leather mats, with proprietors shooing them away when they paused in front of their shops to beg. But Chung also thought this admirable altruism declined badly when the food shortages began.

Martin’s defectors also get around to some unpalatable facts. One of them is the fear among insiders that North Korean soldiers are much tougher than their southern counterparts. In 1983 terrorists blew up much of the South Korean cabinet in Rangoon. Amid much speculation about who did it (maybe South Korean dissidents?), a former American official told me, “Look: two of the guys blew themselves up with grenades before they were captured—you can’t get that kind of commitment out of South Koreans.” Defector Ahn Young-kil told Martin essentially the same thing: discipline is very loose in the South, and southern soldiers won’t be willing to make “the sacrifice needed when war erupts.” For decades the South has towered over the North in military equipment; its current defense budget is greater than the North’s annual GNP. Mr. Ahn knew that, but his point was that people win wars. It’s also true that North Korea is the world’s most complete garrison state, and defense spending doesn’t begin to gauge how

deeply entrenched the military is—in every way, including the 15,000-odd security-related underground facilities.

Reporters and Historians

Bradley Martin has written an admirably ambitious book. He wants not only to tell the reader about his reporting and his research over decades, but what he thinks about the scholarly literature on North Korea. Indeed, the copious endnotes carry on lengthy dialogues with the leading people in the field. The risk here is that reportorial facts about people's opinions get mixed up with unimpeachable documentation, facts about which there is no dispute among historians. Facts rarely exist apart from interpretation, of course, but certain issues do get settled and scholars move on to other things. Martin has Kim Il Sung unimpressed by Chinese warnings that the Americans would invade at the port of Inch'on in September 1950, when captured North Korean materials show that his own operatives had been sending him detailed information about the American invasion for nearly a month before it happened. MacArthur makes the basic decision to invade the North and Washington acquiesces, he writes, when historian Rosemary Foote and other scholars demonstrated that President Harry Truman and his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, made the decision in late August, 1950 for their own reasons, without reference to MacArthur. Martin

thinks the Chinese had to tell Kim on October 9 about setting a trap in the North by withdrawing quickly before advancing U.S. and South Korean forces, when North Korean documents from the time show that this plan was being implemented two weeks earlier. Martin claims that the Soviet bloc gave as much aid to the North between 1946 and 1960 as the US gave to the South, about \$125 per person over fifteen years, which is preposterous; various sources estimate that the South got a per capita average of \$600 per year in all forms of aid during this period, and through much of the 1950s U.S. aid provided about half of the entire ROK state budget. Martin thinks that by now North and South Korea differ from each other "far more profoundly than the Union differed from the Confederacy," a judgment that is simply embarrassing.

Martin is more interesting in his big question about Acheson's famous "Defense Perimeter" speech of January 1950, namely, why did he not mention Korea or include it in the perimeter? The best answer, he thinks, is that Acheson "wanted to keep secret the American commitment to Korea's defense." He is right about that, but wrong about Acheson leaving Korea out of the speech; he implied that should an attack come there, the U.S. would take the problem to the United Nations Security Council—which is what Dean Rusk had recommended to him in July 1949, and exactly what Acheson did when the war erupted. Martin mentions this, but misses its

significance. It has been known for fifteen years that in the many drafts leading up to this speech, South Korea was consistently referred to as a direct American responsibility, along with Japan. But internal documents also show that Acheson did not want to say this publicly, lest Syngman Rhee be emboldened to start a war. It has also long been known that when the North Koreans commented on this speech, they had South Korea included in the defense perimeter. Why? Because for weeks there was no official transcript of the speech, and the North Koreans probably read the New York Times—which in the Sunday News of the Week in Review after the speech also had Korea included in the defense line. In the end it all worked beautifully for Acheson, who was seeking ambiguity and trying to keep both the communists and volatile allies like Syngman Rhee and Chiang Kai-shek guessing about what the U.S. would do if South Korea or Taiwan were attacked. As for Stalin, thanks to Kim Philby and other spies he was reading Acheson's secrets with his breakfast, and had no reason to pay attention to what he said for public consumption. [17]



Dean Acheson

Martin's account of the American role is the first

major flaw in the book, and I believe it comes from not subjecting his own country's record in Korea to the same scrutiny that he gives to the North and South, or to the Russians and the Chinese. He doesn't begin to grasp what went on at the start, in the three-year military occupation that is still mostly unknown, but which shaped postwar Korea far more than MacArthur's did Japan. It is the first blind spot in the book, a mote in the eye; it is not possible to understand North Korea without laying out for the reader how it has been in continuous confrontation with the greatest power in the world for sixty years, while that power is simultaneously giving every possible manner of support to the South. The U.S. long ago put North Korea under siege (embargoing its economy since 1950, running huge war games near its borders, surveilling it by any and all means), and if that does not excuse North Korean behavior, it is nonetheless a central part of the story.

For reasons that I cannot fathom, Martin also inquires into the political divides that animated the East Asian field in the United States. He discovers unnamed "Korea scholars" who founded the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, the main alternative caucus in Asian Studies in the 1960s and 70s. This is flat wrong; to the extent that this group had a founding, it was with young China scholars, particularly graduate students of John Fairbank at Harvard. For Martin, these folks were "revisionists" who often

“started from a romantic, very ‘60s and ‘70s view of revolution and social egalitarianism,” whereas people like Robert Scalapino wrote “landmarks” about North Korea. Would Martin also like to revisit Berkeley’s Free Speech Movement, where Scalapino fronted for this mega-versity’s terrified administration? That is his business and Berkeley’s, but Martin should know that these conflicts had to do with how McCarthyism shaped the field in the 1950s, and little things like the Vietnam War, Watergate, a compromised professoriate, and the collapse of a principled liberalism. He should also know that “romantics” of the Concerned Asian Scholars stripe like John Dower (who won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer for *Embracing Defeat*, his study of the occupation of Japan) and Herbert Bix (a Pulitzer for his study of Hirohito) have had far more impact in this field and outside it than the multitude scurrying about trying to stay inside the mainstream and out of trouble.

If Becker begins his book with shock-and-awe fiction, Martin ends his with a “daydream” about how Kim Jong Il might meet with a high-level American envoy and be convinced to improve his human rights act, open up the prison camps, reform the economy, give up his nukes, and solve everybody’s problems. “I felt that in my years of studying Kim I had succeeded to some extent in my goal of getting into the mind of that traditional Oriental despot, who happened to be my own age.” But Kim probably won’t do it,

because “the key” for the despot is “maintaining face” and avoiding “humiliation.” One day my North Korean guides took me over to the coast to observe the “West Sea Barrage,” a five-mile-wide dam across the Taedong River, designed to irrigate old and newly-reclaimed farmlands. During the usual propaganda treatment about what a world-beater this dam was, with everything thought up and closely guided by Kim Il Sung, my mind wandered to Karl Wittfogel and his hydraulic theories. Martin should have restrained himself, however; this isn’t a daydream, but a fantasy rooted in the soil of prejudice. Still, Martin’s inadequate self-reflection is a small blot on an otherwise fine book. This is easily the most comprehensive account of North Korea that simultaneously remains accessible to the general reader.

The general reader, though, has been ill-served time and again by the American media and pundits passing for experts. Perhaps the best evidence is found in *The New Yorker’s* recent articles on North Korea, which routinely contain blatant errors and misinformation in spite of that magazine’s legendary reputation for fact-checking (Ian Buruma gave Becker’s book a rave review there last summer). That’s because, as with Bush’s faith-based presidency, it isn’t a question of facts: this is the Orient, cunning and mysterious, and we can say just about anything we want to say about it. Kim Jong Il twiddles that neuralgic spot in our perception where

unexamined assumptions about Asians linger, the same one Wittfogel twiddled (with a meat ax). True, North Korea presents such an opaque front that it is hard to remember that 23 million human beings live there. But when all is said and done the place to begin is not with them but with us, with that night of our ignorance where Korea's alien shapes get draped in the same hue—chafing, rankling shapes, summoning our worst fears and instincts, and challenging our best convictions.

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[1] Leon Trotsky, *Stalin* (New York: Stein and Day, 2nd ed., 1967), p. 1-2, 358. See also Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 291, Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 472.

[2] Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

[3] I know these cases very well, but Poppe's defection is discussed in Christopher Simpson, *Blowback*.

[4] Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. London: Verso, 1974, pp. 462-549.

[5] See the transcript of this visit in Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (The New Press, 2003).

[6] See for example Nicholas Eberstadt, *The End of North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1999), p. 1.

[7] See for example Chong-sik Lee, "Stalinism in the East: Communism in North Korea," in Robert Scalapino, ed., *The Communist Revolution in Asia* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

[8] I found the documents on this and reported them in Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War*, v.

2.

[9] I document this in *Korea's Place in the Sun*.

[10] Becker calls Kim insane, evil, dangerous, a drunkard, and a lecher, among other epithets—see pp. ix, xiv.

[11] Scott Stossel, "North Korea: The War Game," *The Atlantic Monthly* (July/August 2005), pp. 97-108.

[12] See Richard Slotkin's brilliant study, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1973.

[13] Mark Twain, *To the Person Sitting in Darkness* (1901).

[14] *The Korean Communist Movement, 1918-1948*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

[15] For example in Leslie Gelb's column just after the Gulf War ended, designed to link Iraq and North Korea, Saddam and Kim: "The Next Renegade State," *The New York Times* (April 10,

1991).

[16] Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, II: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-50* (Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 749-50; also Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun: The Making of the*

Hydrogen Bomb (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), pp. 444-46.

[17] I discuss all this over a full chapter in *Origins*, v. 2.