

# book reviews

## TRAIL OF CLUES THROUGH FICTION AND ART

### *The Corpse in the Koryo*

By James Church  
St. Martin's Press  
NYC, 2006  
ISBN# 0-312-35208-5

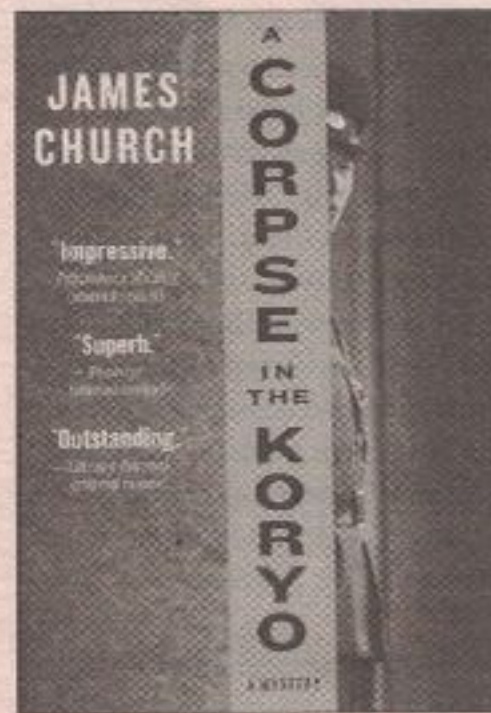
### *Art Under Control in North Korea*

By Jane Portal  
Reaktion Books  
London, 2005  
ISBN# 1-86189-236-5

Review by John Feffer

The mystery genre is famous for improbable settings and characters. Dutch diplomat Robert van Gulik sets his Judge Dee mysteries in China a thousand years ago. Brad Geagely goes back even further in time with his mysteries of ancient Egypt and Babylon. Mystery writers draft real-life personages — Sigmund Freud, Teddy Roosevelt — to be their detectives. They'll do almost anything to reinvigorate their often-predictable genre.

But a mystery novel set in North Korea? The country is already a profound mystery, why fictionalize it?



North Korea presents to the world.

As in all such noir fiction, there is a mysterious woman, betrayal, and unexpected loyalties. There are also the temptations of the material world, in this case the lands that lie beyond North Korea. But like any good noir detective, Inspector O is not beguiled. "I have been overseas," he explains. "Some things are good, some things aren't, same as here. Nothing is perfect."

Inspector O is a great character. There is some good writing in *A Corpse in the Koryo* and some very intriguing glimpses of places that even visitors to the country rarely see.

But ultimately, the novel is unsatisfying. The plot seems needlessly complex. And the characters are alternately too revealing in their dialogue and not revealing enough. The country's constant surveillance suggests that Inspector O would not speak quite so candidly with other characters. But when the inspector talks with his Irish counterpart — in an odd narrative framing device by which O reveals his story — he doesn't provide the kind of cultural and historical reference points that an outsider would need to understand the true significance of certain events and actions. We don't even find out when the action of the novel takes place, though it is presumably before the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

intelligentsia working together, and the depictions of the ever-vigilant soldiers. It's all there in the political posters, solid sculptures, and melodramatic films. Portal documents the manufactured reality of North Korea, which is, to its credit, lacking in Church's novel.

In addition to many interesting reproductions, Portal's book offers some interesting interpretations of the agitprop art. She is particularly interesting on the influence of North Korea's peculiar brand of nationalism, so strong that it dictated the development of homegrown color pigments for ink painting so that the country would no longer have to rely on Soviet imports.

Although the book has its defects — it detours into some not-entirely-relevant history, covers architecture like a tour guide, and slips into the North Korean style of treating monuments solely from the point of engineering (so many meters tall, so many meters wide) — it remains an invaluable introduction to one of the few forms of socialist realism still alive today.

Of course, neither Portal's exploration of North Korea's official culture nor James Church's fictional examination of the country's seamier underside fully explains North Korea's mystery. But the half-light that they cast is better than no light at all.



It might be a stroke of genius to choose a mysterious locale for the action of a mystery novel, like using beautiful Venice as the backdrop of a romance novel. Or it could be an exercise in abstraction, like Kazimir Malevich's famous painting entitled *White Square on White Field*, where it becomes almost impossible to determine where the mystery of the country ends and the mystery of the novel begins.

For readers hoping to learn the secrets of North Korea, James Church's *A Corpse in the Koryo* certainly provides more details and general atmospheric information than the usual journalistic account. A former Western intelligence officer, Church has obviously spent enough time in the country to describe, for instance, the conditions of the apartment buildings or the aloofness of the traffic ladies. An oppressive fog of surveillance hangs over the novel, as it does over the country. Travel is difficult, communication more so. No one trusts anyone. On atmosphere alone, the novel succeeds in conveying the tumbledown reality that lies behind the carefully airbrushed exterior

The protagonist of Church's novel is Inspector O. The name, a relatively common Korean last name, is also pregnant with mysterious possibilities. O is a member of the North Korean elite, the grandson of a famous revolutionary general. This status protects him to a certain extent.

As it turns out, Inspector O needs the protection afforded by his lineage. From an official North Korean point of view, he has a bad attitude. He won't even wear his obligatory Kim Il Sung badge: "Every time I put the little round badge on, it pricked my finger. Same place, every time. As far as I was concerned it was a nuisance, a sharp point in my life I didn't need."

As Inspector O gets drawn into a very complicated chain of events — which begins with a bungled photo surveillance and somehow involves a dead Finn, Japanese abductions, and smuggled cars — his embittered view serves him well. He is the prototypical noir detective. He is cynical and self-reliant. He clings to a certain code of honor even as he breaks the rules in order to solve the mystery.

It requires a certain leap of faith to believe in Inspector O. The noir detective is almost, by definition, without connections — to family, to society, to colleagues. O has no wife, no friends, and no family (except for a Stalinist brother that he disavows). For readers to understand how Inspector O can survive in North Korea, the character would have to do more explaining, in asides to himself or to others, about how such a lone wolf manages in an oppressively collectivist society.

As such, *The Corpse in the Koryo* generates more mysteries than it solves. While this approach might be appropriate for a novel about North Korea, it leaves the reader at sea. Like Malevich's famous painting, the mystery of the book and the mystery of the country overlap in a most disconcerting fashion.

It is interesting to read Church's novel alongside a new study of North Korean culture, Jane Portal's *Art Under Control in North Korea*. Here is a detailed study of the official art of North Korea: The glorifications of the Kim family, the proud visages and strong biceps of the proletariat and the