

Book Review

**B. R. Myers. *The cleanest race. How North Koreans see themselves and why it matters*,
Brooklyn: Melville House, 2008. 200 pp.
(ISBN 9781933633916)**

The title *The cleanest race* sums up how B. R. Myers analyzes the North Korean state ideology, whose main pillar is said to be a belief in the racial purity of Koreans. According to Myers, North Koreans are led to believe that they constitute a childlike innocent race. As such they are particularly vulnerable and, like children, need to be protected from the evil outside world. This is where the Workers' Party, and in particular the leaders of the Kim dynasty, come in as mother-like protectors. Furthermore, being innocent and pure, the Korean race is morally superior to everyone else. Myers divides the insights from his analysis into a series of themes, such as "Mother Korea and her children", "the parent leader", "the dear leader", "foreigners", and "the Yankee colony". A central claim of the book is that the North Korean state ideology is a modified continuation of the fascist Japanese worldview, which had been "instilled into colonial-era Koreans" before 1945 (166). North Korea, and to a lesser extent South Korea, simply transposed Japanese myths to the Korean context; while in rhetoric vigorously anti-Japanese, Koreans secretly admire the Japanese. The ideological similarity is visible in that part of North Korean propaganda that is directed at the North Korean population itself. Western observers may be unaware of, or not interested in, such domestic material; they focus instead on North Korean propaganda produced for an international audience, which delivers a very different message. According to Myers, this would explain why other "Pyongyang watchers" constantly mischaracterize North Korea's political system as communist, Stalinist, or Confucian. Myers attempts to correct this bias by collecting, describing, interpreting, and contextualizing North Korean domestic propaganda. His conclusion is that North Korea is neither communist nor Confucian, but a "military-first" state, whose "race-based worldview" puts it on the extreme right of the political spectrum (15).

Not all Pyongyang watchers are convinced by Myers' analysis.¹ While most weak points have been dealt with elsewhere, there are some other debatable aspects. One major problem is Myers' recurrent insinuation that South Korea still practices a milder version of North Korea's racist ethnocentrism. Here, Myers tries to corroborate his analysis of the North Korean mindset, which he accesses only indirectly via propaganda materials, by invoking anecdotal evidence from the South. The racist worldview is so appealing to Koreans, he reasons, that even the democratic and open South cannot resist pursuing it. However, comparisons between the North and the South would have been more insightful and convincing if Myers had focused on the authoritarian South Korean regimes between 1948 and 1987.

It is characteristic of Myers' ethno-psychological approach that he downplays synchronic and diachronic variation within contemporary South Korea. As has been the case with North Korea to this day, South Koreans had little exposure to non-Koreans during the four decades following the end of Japanese occupation and the subsequent departure of Japanese residents.² Since the second half of the 1980s, this has been changing. Myers mentions the fact that South Korean farmers have recently taken to marrying women from other Asian countries (71), but does not explain how those farmers reconcile this with their alleged preference for racial purity.³ In accordance with their racist

¹ See in particular Alzo David-West, "North Korea, Fascism and Stalinism: On B. R. Myers' 'The Cleanest Race'" in *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41(1), 2011, pp. 146-156; Alzo David-West, "North Korea and the opinion of fascism: A case of mistaken identity" in *North Korean Review* 8(1), 2012, pp. 105-116; Charles K. Armstrong, "Trends in the Study of North Korea" in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70(2), 2011, pp. 357-371.

² See e.g. Dongsung Kong et al., "The social dimensions of immigration in Korea" in *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 40(2), 2010, pp. 252-274.

³ It is among this population that we find the highest number of international marriages; see e.g. In-Jin Yoon et al., "South Koreans' attitudes toward foreigners, minorities and multiculturalism." Paper prepared for presentation at

ideology, North Koreans live in a closed society, where few North Koreans venture abroad and even fewer foreigners come in. The situation in South Korea could not be more different, as millions of South Koreans have emigrated to Western countries. Contrary to Myers' interpretation that Koreans see themselves as a pure and therefore vulnerable child race, which cannot survive without a leader who protects them from non-Korean villains, South Koreans have prospered in Western countries.

It is true that the various South Korean dictators promoted nationalism as a way of uniting the nation and stifling dissent, but South Koreans growing up during the democratic era tend to have a more differentiated approach to Koreanness.⁴ There is also no need to resort to ethno-psychology to figure out South Korean attitudes towards foreigners, as a multitude of surveys have been conducted.⁵ Yet, Myers ignores counter-evidence to his thesis while exaggerating observations supporting it. One such observation is anti-American demonstrations, which Myers takes as proof that South Koreans harbour racist hatred towards Americans. While anti-American sentiment in South Korea may at times be irrational, criticism of U.S. foreign policy is by no means a Korean specificity, but a global phenomenon. What is specifically South Korean about anti-Americanism is the widespread perception that the U.S. government used to support the dictatorial governments of the past, and turned a blind eye to human rights violations perpetrated during that time, culminating in the Gwangju massacre in 1980. Myers sees Korean anti-

the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, MA, August 1-4, 2008.

⁴ As Campbell puts it, South Koreans “no longer consider ethnicity to be the basis of the Korean nation” and “show a positive attitude toward the arrival and integration of foreigners into South Korean society.” Emma Campbell, “South Korea’s G-generation: A nation within a nation, detached from unification” in *East Asia Forum* 13 April 2010.

⁵ See e.g. Sang-su Ahn, “Receptiveness to multiculturalism and gender” in *Korea Focus* 11/2012.

Americanism as a natural corollary of an immutable racist ideology, speaking of “xenophobic frenzies” (62), when in reality its emergence and manifestations are linked to specific historical and political events. Finally, Myers contradicts himself when describing anti-Americanism as a pan-Korean feature, while at the same time acknowledging that Lee Myung Bak, the South Korean President at the time of writing, was decidedly pro-American. Another contradiction in Myers argumentation appears when he claims that many South Koreans “feel a nagging sense of moral inferiority to their more orthodox brethren” in North Korea (58), but later writes that “the southern brethren are proud of their state, indifferent to the Dear Leader’s very existence” (162), and “happy with their own republic and do not want to live under Pyongyang’s rule” (169).

With regards to North Korean refugees, Myers explains that “half of these economic migrants—for that is what most of them are—*voluntarily return* to their homeland” because the North Korean ideology “has generally enjoyed the support of the North Korean people through good times and bad” (16-17). Even refugees, so the argument goes, remain loyal to North Korea. This claim can easily be critiqued, as North Korean refugees in the South are under constant surveillance by both state officials and academics.⁶ Most North Koreans who return to the North do so because life in the South turned out to be harder than expected, for economic and family reasons. It seems therefore more plausible that they return *in spite*, rather than *because* of North Korea’s state ideology.⁷

A minor criticism concerns the alleged contradiction between the general labelling of the North Korean regime as

⁶ See Andrei Lankov, “North Korean refugees head for home” in *East Asia Forum* 20 August 2010.

⁷ This is corroborated by the observation that many of those who fled South were convinced that the North Korean regime was “on the verge of collapse and that they would return within a few years to a free North Korea.” Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy. Real lives in North Korea*, (London: Granta, 2010) p. 284.

“communist” and its actual nationalist and racist policies. A label is different from a scientific definition. Therefore, a label such as “communist regime” is just a convenient shortcut to group together certain regimes and states with a related ideological genesis, which upon closer inspection might turn out to have quite different characteristics. Another caveat concerns the disjunction of such labels from their time and place of origin. Concepts such as communism and Stalinism emerged and were defined in the context of Europe in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century. The common meaning of concepts evolves over time, and when transplanted to a new environment. As a result, the label “communism” as applied to North Korea in the 21st century might very well include nationalist elements, even though the initial project had an internationalist outlook.

Despite these criticisms, the claim that the North Korean rulers have been inspired, at least in part, by Japanese ideas and policies from the colonial era is plausible and worth pursuing. And it is in this area that we find supporting evidence in South Korea. While Myers’ view that the democratic and pluralistic South Korea of today is still characterized by a racist ideology inherited from the colonial period should be dismissed as an instance of biased stereotyping, the authoritarian regimes that preceded it did indeed promote race-based nationalism. In doing so, they also employed strategies adopted from the Japanese.⁸ Many descriptions of these strategies can be found in Seth (2002), which Myers does not include in his references. Here and elsewhere, Myers would have found ample evidence for his thesis that both Koreas used ethnocentric nationalism as a propaganda device and resorted to Japanese ideological precedents in doing so.

The cleanest race is based on valuable and hitherto neglected materials from North Korea. Myers deserves praise for his painstaking analysis of a large variety of propaganda materials,

⁸ See Michael Seth, *Education fever. Society, politics, and the pursuit of schooling in South Korea*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), pp. 196-198, 204, 208, 210-211, 222.

and for making them accessible to the non-Korean public. Unfortunately, as this and other reviews have pointed out, his conclusions arguably go too far, his evidence for bold theories is often too anecdotal, and many claims are mere assumptions. In summary, *The cleanest race* looks like the first draft of a very promising thesis, but like many first drafts it contains biased and speculative parts as well as unexplored areas requiring further research.

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