

REVIEWS

voice of a great spirit who is devout, disciplined, completely beyond religiosity, and not at all polite:

People ask about the  
Cold Mountain way:  
plain roads don't get through  
to Cold Mountain.  
Middle of the summer, and the ice still  
hasn't melted.  
Sunrise, and the mist would blind  
a hidden dragon.  
So, how could a man like me get here?  
My heart is not the same as yours,  
dear sir...

If your heart were like mine,  
you'd be here already.

The notes Seaton includes at the back of the collection are helpful, although for reasons of laziness I vastly prefer footnotes to endnotes. The book is compact and sturdy. (I am not kind to books; I think Han Shan would approve, but then again, he'd probably just laugh at me for reading them at all.) Seaton includes 95 of Han Shan's poems, 20 by Shih Te, and even has 27 poems in the final section by Wang Fan-chih, a Buddhist layman who lived well after both of the other poets, during a time when the empire was struggling with urbanization and poverty of a sort that Han-shan and Shih-te never saw. Seaton's reason for including Wang Fan-chih's verses alongside those of his predecessors—something which has not been done before—is that “Wang Fan-chih's poetry shows that the tradition of the outsider, the free agent and the free spirit, initiated by Han Shan and Shih Te, was alive and scuffling in the cruel streets of a failing society.” This tradition, Seaton writes, “seems particularly ripe for reincarnation in this century.”

Han Shan's work entered American culture with Gary Snyder's 1958 publication of selected works, and interest deepened with Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*. Snyder, a respected and intelligent poet, would surely agree that

translation is an almost essential discipline for poets and writers. It strengthens one's sense of language: its beauty and nuances, its moral complications and threats. But loving a poet is no guarantee that one will also love that poet's translations. To me, in comparison with Seaton's translations, Snyder's versions are overly austere. Also, in the format I have, the “Cold Mountain Poems” section is simply an addendum to Snyder's book *Ritrap*, which is wonderful, but contains only 24 poems by Han Shan.

Red Pine's 2000 translation has two things which, for me, will keep it at the top of the list for a very long time: it includes all 307 Cold Mountain poems with notes on the majority of them, and a bilingual format. Red Pine's edition brims with information that really does help those of us who don't know, for instance, that Heaven and Earth refer also to the emperor and the empire, respectively. Red Pine's translations, here as elsewhere, are the generous work of a man not only endeavoring to make a potentially intimidating tradition accessible, but also to deepen our understanding in such a way that the tradition won't seem so intimidating the next time. And while my understanding of classical Chinese extends no farther than some of its overlap with modern kanji, written Chinese is simply too beautiful for words.

Still, Red Pine's translation is in many ways remarkably neutral, too neutral, it could be argued, for a character like Han Shan. Seaton's book, on the other hand, gives a distinct emotional portrait, complete with idiomatic translations that a purist might argue are not truly native to Han Shan's work. This lack of neutrality is exactly what carries certain poems more directly to the reader's mind—and heart. Han Shan would approve, or laugh, or both.

—Terra Leigh Bell

Han Shan translators Red Pine, Gary Snyder and Burton Watson are featured in this excellent online documentary:  
<http://www.cultureunplugged.com/playlist/2457/Cold-Mountain>

## Watching the Watcher

*China Watcher: Confessions of a Peking Tom* by Richard Baum. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 336 pp., \$29.95 (cloth)

YEARS AGO, a veteran observer of the Chinese scene stated that there were no “China Watchers.” What we are, he insisted, were China voyeurs, peering through the keyholes of doors locked long ago, eavesdropping on still-distant sounds.

He may have been right, but Richard Baum's *China Watcher: Confessions of a Peking Tom* goes a long way towards demonstrating that decades of studied persistence and passion can produce something like a bird's-eye view of a secretive political system and society. Part memoir, part survey of Chinese developments, *China Watcher* starts and ends with the author at its pivot, looking in and around, up close and from a distance, finding ways into and finding the means to grasp the complexity that has always been China.

The book begins with Baum's early days as a student of China. It was, we learn, the need for a convenient work schedule, not scholarly design, which placed him in a college class that challenged him and elevated his ambition. Through university and graduate school at the University of California at Los Angeles, Baum seems to have been blessed with professors who pushed him to aim higher and toward broader goals. They must have recognized the rare talents that Baum possessed: a passion for China and Asia generally; a strong work ethic; and curiosity that never quit. All of this would enable Baum to go on to become an academic himself, and eventually replace the mentor who had inspired him.

But while Baum made all the right moves in his early days in the academy, China watching was never straight-

forward or formulaic for him. He did the standard penance, studying Chinese in Taiwan, as the Mainland was then off limits. While there, Baum had the great fortune to be asked to translate what turned out to be high-level, internal-circulation-only documents which, in his eyes, seemed to suggest an emerging political struggle in Beijing. This opportunity demonstrated to Baum that there was much more that needed to be said than could be found in the standard sources about what he refers to as “the baroque political theater...acted out in China in the early 1970s.”

As Baum notes, China watching in that decade, and much of the one to follow, was done, for the most part, only from a distance. He did manage to make a number of sorties into the forbidden country, though, and his accounts of these incursions are among the most engaging moments in the book: snapshots of a time where China was straining to pull itself out of the muck and into modernity. Baum presents in fine detail some of his personal encounters, highlighting the mix of suspicion and head-scratching with which many Chinese dealt with Westerners at that time.

Equally valuable — and representative of the breadth of Baum's book — are his accounts of encounters with American policy-makers and the ways in which US officials sought to come to terms with Beijing. Baum writes about being summoned to Camp David in the early spring of 1989 to provide President George Bush with his view of developments in China. It is typical of the self-effacing tone of this book that Baum then goes on to tell about how his efforts to help a journalist friend who was working on an article about White House attitudes toward China blew up in Baum's face and how, as a result, he had to write a self-criticism.

The book continues nearly to the present day. Baum is astonished by the positive changes he sees in China, but never forgets the challenges the country faces. He takes justifiable pride in

his experiences and perspectives. His fondness for China and his life watching it come through. Thankfully, he remains, in this book, ever the watcher, and never the Prognosticator or the Policy Prophet.

Throughout the volume, there is grace and generosity, fun and farce, a seriousness leavened by light-heartedness and self-examination. This engaging treatment of a man watching a country tells us a great deal about the complexity of the Chinese system and its modern evolution. With this book, and his work over the years, Baum has opened doors and windows that allow us to see more deeply into China than we would otherwise be able to do, and for this we must be grateful.

—Russell Leigh Moses

## Minjok Mama Madness! and Other Fairytales From North of the 49th Parallel

*The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—And Why It Matters* by B.R. Myers. New York: Melville House, 2010, 208 pp., \$24.95.

FORGET WHAT YOU THINK you know about North Korean ideology, argues B.R. Myers. According to him, pretty much everyone has it wrong: the DPRK's ideology has nothing to do with socialism, Marxism, Stalinism, Confucianism, or any of those other -isms we have become accustomed to associating with that benighted country. If we want to understand North Korea, Myers insists, we need to forget the shelves of tangled texts expounding *juche*, set aside the frustrated accusations of (oh-so oriental) “inscrutability,” and look instead into its “Official Culture.” If North Korea has a functional ideology, it is to be found in the society's modern-day



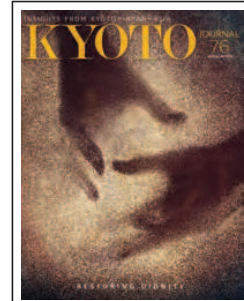
legends and fairy tales — a collection of narratives that Myers calls “The Text,” and which, he demonstrates, are centered on the imagined “purity” and childlike vulnerability of the Korean race.

Clearly the product of years of research, Myers’ book has many virtues: its exploration of the North Korean mythology is logical and straightforward, and while guiding us, Virgil-like, through the hellscape of the DPRK’s collective unconscious, he fails neither to entertain, nor to impress. Commencing with an analysis of the historical roots of North Korea’s “Official Culture”—its literature, visual art (with many images helpfully reproduced), news-media, and more—Myers turns to a painstaking, almost archaeological, excavation of the central heroes, villains, and victims of North Korean mythology. He discusses, in order, the myths of the Korean race, the country’s two President Kims (*père et fils*, though they come off rather more like *mère vieille et mère jeune*), non-Koreans (especially Americans), and the supposed “Yankee Colony” of South Korea.

The composite image is of a society drunk on the fantasy that its members are a uniquely pure race, uniquely childlike, and in desperate need of a uniquely virtuous (and, apparently,

motherly) leader who can protect it from a vicious, cruel world peopled by deprived, impure non-Koreans, especially Americans. The mythology is crude, of course, scarcely more sophisticated than Phil Hartman’s Frankenstein, whose complete world view was, “Bread Good! Fire Bad!” To say it is crude, however, is not to say it is without power.

Myers restricts his exploration to just one hundred and sixty-eight pages of text. This is unfortunate, because there is no lack of deeper issues which could have been addressed. Much is left out or glossed-over, and any reader who has more than basic knowledge of either or both of the two Koreas will be left with many questions: To what degree has this race-myth ensnared the upper echelons (and even the top leaders) in North Korea? To what degree does this “official culture” actually reflect the beliefs of, on the one hand, the masses, and, on the other hand, the victims of North Korean mythology? He discusses, in order, the myths of the Korean race, the country’s two President Kims (*père et fils*, though they come off rather more like *mère vieille et mère jeune*), non-Koreans (especially Americans), and the supposed “Yankee Colony” of South Korea.



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texts, rather than of people, and one is left wondering whether North Korean minds — across classes, educational backgrounds, and experiences — are as monolithic as their state’s mythology — and Myers — imagines.

There is also the matter of the other race-obsessed Korea, the one to the South, which haunts this text, peeping out in countless asides and examples. Why does Myers mention, but not analyze, so many parallels in the racialized thinking and historical revisionism of North and South Korea? What are the implications of both nations’ rehabilitation of the same racial myths (such as that of Tan’gun, the legendary first king of the Koreans, and of Koreans’ “pure-bloodedness”), the countries’ antipathy for one another notwithstanding? (The influence of Japanese propaganda noted by Myers may or may not fully explain this; he tells us too little to be sure.) Given the number of cameo appearances South Korean race-fantasy receives, one wonders why it is not given a speaking part.

The reason may lie in the book’s intended audience. The blurb on the dust-jacket of the edition of the book I read, penned by a retired US senator, is suggestive: Myers, the senator tells us, “renders great service to the global foreign policy establishment,” and his book should be made “mandatory reading for all the stakeholder leaders, particularly the American establishment.”

For such an audience—readers looking for a quick, easy-to-grasp, and well laid-out picture of North Korea’s dominant mythology in English—I can recommend Myers’ text as a refreshing antidote to some of the most common (and, in some cases, perniciously misguided) misconceptions about the DPRK. However, those of us who want a deeper, more nuanced exploration of the many issues raised and implied by his text will hope that Myers is joking in the preface when he suggests this might be his last book on North Korea; we can only hope that he will change his mind and finish the task he has begun. —Gord Sellar



## Ai Weiwei on Ai Weiwei

*Ai Weiwei’s Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants 2006-2009*, by Ai Weiwei. Edited and translated by Lee Ambrozio. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011. 250 pp., \$24.95

CHINA’S ongoing attempts to silence Ai Weiwei make this an important book for understanding China and the intersection of politics, dissent and art. It is hard to understand any nation from the outside, and almost as difficult to reach understanding from the inside. Expatriates play an important role in interpreting the country they come from (think Americans in 1920s Paris) and the country where they live (*Kyoto Journal* itself is an example). Artists play a similar role, never being completely comfortable within their own culture.

Ai Weiwei has been an expatriate; he lived in the U.S. from 1981 to 1993. And he is a serious artist, a Marcel Duchamp for China, or perhaps an Andy Warhol, but with a more explicit political edge. The son of the celebrated and persecuted poet Ai Qing (a book of Ai Qing’s selected poems has been translated and published by Foreign Languages Press), he has always lived in an environment where politics and art are interlaced.

Ai Weiwei has been exhibiting in the US since the early 1980s and after his return to China in 1993 he became active in the East Village scene on the eastern outskirts of Beijing. In the 1990s he edited and published the iconic *Grey Cover Book*, *Black Cover Book* and *White Cover Book* documenting the lives and works of East Village artists. Thus began a long series of works that are based on documentation while questioning it. Ai Weiwei’s career has blossomed over the past 20 years and he has become a fixture on the international art scene, representing China at events such as Documen-

ta 12 in Kassel, Germany where he presented *Fairytales* (an installation and performance piece in which he had 1,001 Chinese people from all walks of life come and live in Kassel). He has also had major installations at museums such as the Tate Modern (where his *Sunflower Seeds* project opened in October 2010). Ai has complemented his art and documentation work with a minor career as an architect, designing restaurants, studios and houses in China and most famously consulting on the Herzog & de Meuron design for the Bird’s Nest Stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. An investigation of architecture informs many of his art projects.

Ai Weiwei began blogging on [sina.com](http://sina.com) in 2006 and it quickly became an obsession. He would spend hours each day adding posts and interacting with readers. This book is a sampling of the blog, which had more than 2,700 entries over the three-and-a-half years it was active, and has only a small fraction of the photos the blog was known for. A sampling, but for a West-