

**Book review: Rainer Werning, Helga Picht (eds):  
Brennpunkt Nordkorea - Wie gefährlich ist die  
Region? Berichte, Daten und Fakten; Berlin: edition  
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(p. 14), and offers separate maps showing political and religious developments in these regions, which were themselves centres of Tibetan culture with their own administrative systems.

The well-elaborated maps clearly show the interrelationship between religious influence and economic and political power (Maps 13, 22–23, 25–28, 32 and 43–45) and are able to support or contradict claims of the territorial control of, for example, Mongol tribes or the Chinese imperial court (Maps 22 and 25). Moreover, the maps also help to illuminate the less clear links such as between the existence of functioning administrative networks and local political and religious authority and climate change (Map 18).

Presenting historical narratives in the form of maps allows us to view the historical events and their complex backgrounds from new perspectives. Providing unique perspectives from the viewpoint of the various Tibetan centres of political, religious and economic influence, the Historical Atlas of Tibet is a valuable tool for all those who seek to understand historical developments on the Tibetan Plateau and the complex interrelationship between Tibetans and their neighbouring regions.

*Jarmila Ptackova*

**RAINER WERNING / HELGA PICHT (eds), *Brennpunkt Nordkorea: Wie gefährlich ist die Region? Berichte, Daten und Fakten*. Berlin: edition berolina, 2018. 192 pages, €9.99. ISBN 978-3-95841-088-6**

In response to the latest nuclear and missile crises as well as the increase of media (and policy) attention to North Korea, Rainer Werning and Helga Picht have released a timely publication. The book at hand is an edited volume, consisting of essays by the editors and other authors. The range of authors runs parallel to the range of topics being discussed: from the latest crises to the Korean War, from cultural insights to travel reports and regional comparisons. Moreover, the annex (pp. 178–187) provides facts on the isolated state, such as geographic data, national holidays – which all have political meaning of some sort – and the structure of the political system. Such a list of objective facts is not trivial; the scarcity, dispersion and ambiguity concerning data on North Korea demand the continuous compilation of available and verified statistics.

The academic (and social) objective is explicit throughout the book. The editors aim to provide background information and shed light on often neglected aspects of the ongoing conflict. This objective of clarification has resulted in a book that focuses mainly on discussing actions taken by the US and

dynamics within South Korea. As counterintuitive as this might seem, Rainer Werning and Helga Picht employ these historical aspects to explain North Korea's threat perceptions and subsequent arms development, isolation and foreign policy behaviour. The book thereby fills two gaps in the existing literature: it offers key insights into North Korea and illustrates how internal narratives have served the stable dictatorship. Additionally, early events within South Korea are rarely discussed in English- or German-speaking circles – even in South Korea, many aspects of its authoritarian past and Washington's role remain underreflected.

With regard to the latest crisis in 2017, Arnold Schölzel (pp. 15–30) argues that it stemmed from Washington's policies since the end of the Cold War: guided by false assumptions – mainly the prevalence of democratic liberalism and the demise of communism – the US was unable (and unwilling) to resolve the conflict on the Korean Peninsula, focusing instead on preserving its superpower status. This depiction of US–North Korea policy simplifies the manifold dynamics, especially in the 1990s: from the decision to withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea, to the first nuclear crisis and its successful bilateral resolution, as well as the number of missile talks and high-level visits, the Bush Sr. and Clinton administrations showed a willingness to engage North Korea and shape the relationship, the latter even considering a presidential summit. It is true, however, that all US administrations were biased by the presumption of a looming regime collapse in Pyongyang (pp. 16–17).

Rainer Werning continues with the denunciation of US actions on the Korean Peninsula. He rightly describes the Korean War (1950–53) as the first “hot” conflict of the Cold War and, moreover, as a welcomed opportunity for the US military to experiment with chemical and biological weaponry (p. 37). This argument of the Korean War as Washington's geopolitical endeavour is reinforced through the example of General MacArthur's plans to drop atomic weapons across Korea and Northern China (p. 57). The depiction of horrific US actions serves Rainer Werning's argument that North Korea's behaviour is merely a reaction to these (p. 82). As plausible as the justifications of the North's continued trauma (“bunker mentality”, p. 37) are, the regime in Pyongyang has craftily utilised the events endured by the country: the Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities and similar, mandatory exhibition rooms in all schools are only small examples of how the North Korean population is constantly and consistently reminded of the evilness of Americans. Nevertheless, people in North Korea never learn that it was Kim Il Sung who initiated the Korean War with his very own strategic agenda in mind; this fact is also not mentioned in this book.

In one essay (pp. 116–134) Rainer Werning depicts the struggles of making a long-time foe into a possible friend: deep-seated mistrust and threat percep-

tions complicated Seoul's and Washington's attempts at engagement at the end of the 1990s, creating a zig-zag pattern in Pyongyang's foreign policy behaviour. An analysis of whether such behaviour is indeed unintended, or instead a bargaining tactic, would have been helpful here. Nevertheless, the question of overcoming suspicions of genuine offers of cooperation is now once again of the utmost importance.

As becomes clear in her contributions to the book, Helga Picht has a broad and deep knowledge of Korean history, language and culture in addition to having worked in Pyongyang for many years. Her insights from one of her first trips to North Korea in the early 1950s offer indispensable information about the country's internal state before Kim Il Sung's seizure of absolute power (p. 90). Helga Picht's profound knowledge of East Asian history and culture allows her to draw valuable comparisons and conclusions: she explains North Korea's constant aim of gaining political and ideological autonomy, especially with respect to China and the Soviet Union (p. 83). Nationalism and the determination to break free from the common Korean self-description as a shrimp among whales are driving Pyongyang's omnipresent narrative of self-determination. Helga Picht skilfully illustrates North Korea's internal struggle to create fitting philosophical underpinnings and emphasises how the enabling, socio-psychological circumstances have made it easy for the ideology of Tschuche and Tschuchesong to take root in the population (p. 106).

As there are (at least) two sides to a story, this book offers the other side of a commonly known narrative. The authors fulfil their stated objective of clarification, but tend to emphasise solely all the wrongdoings on the US and South Korean side. Despite the refreshing counter-narrative, many depictions and arguments run short, as they fail to reflect on North Korea's own actions and instrumentalisation for the sake of the stability of the regime. It should be noted that for a complete and comprehensive discussion of the conflict concerning North Korea, this book is certainly to be recommended, but only in conjunction with the existing literature.

*Elisabeth Suh*

SCOTT A. SNYDER, *South Korea at the Crossroads. Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 355 pages, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-23118-548-6

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