

**"The Languages of Political Order:  
Experience and Symbolization in Non-Western Modes of Thought"**

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"The Geopolitics of the Two Koreas and the United States: see through the North Korean Nuclear Issue"

Yu Nam Kim

Exploring the Ravages of Colonialism: A Political Analysis *of Memory in the Flesh*"

Samah Elhajibrahim

"Styles of Truth in Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*"

Timothy Hoye

On the face of it we have three very diverse papers to consider. Geographically we travel from North Africa to the Chinese mainland to the Korean Peninsula. Topically we go from French colonialism and Arabic culture to the search for Chinese tradition to the geopolitics of North Korean nuclear weapons. Hermeneutically we move from political interpretation of a novel to complicated linguistic explication of a work of fiction that defies the classification of some critics to political analysis of the actions of regional and world powers.

### **1. The Obliteration of Normalcy**

I do, however, discern a common theme: the obliteration of normalcy. Each paper addresses either how to cope with the obliteration or how to recover from it.

Yu Nam Kim sets out various geopolitical concerns of the powers neighboring the bizarre and dangerous North Korean regime and by a realistic assessment at least offers a coping strategy. Samah Elhajibrahim shows how a novel can act as a therapeutic exercise to heal from the mutilation of Algerian culture by ideology. Timothy Hoye presents his exegesis of a

Chinese work of fiction that takes us on a journey to discover the symbols of Chinese civilization and, ultimately, to encounter the engendering experiences.

## 2. North Korea

If someone were unaware of the political situation on the Korean Peninsula for the past half-century, that person might consider the depiction of the North Korean regime to be a work of fiction. Indeed were it not for the fact of a tortured, half-starved population terrorized by a ruling clique whose loyalty to the leader (whose "political friendship") is fortified by a steady dose of the finest cognac--the depiction would be a work of comedic fiction.

But the reality of such a repressive regime armed with nuclear weapons is sobering. After a detailed analysis of the geopolitical interests of the main players in the region--China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and the United States--Professor Yu Nam Kim concludes that any rational assessment of the competing interests of the various powers must lead to the conclusion that there is no hope in the immediate future for any diplomatic settlement. China has a strategic need to keep North Korea in its buffer zone; Russia finds its continuing involvement in the diplomatic stalemate to be a confirmation of its status as a great power; and Japan is balancing its concern with North Korea's missiles and a reliance on the American nuclear shield. South Korea has become more sanguine about prospects of reconciliation. North Korea herself *must* keep nuclear weapons as a precondition of the very existence of the regime and desperately needs the United States as a foil. Even were the North Korean regime to collapse, it is likely that China, if not Russia, would pour in troops.

We might call this analysis a "Thucydidean realist" account. It paints a seemingly intractable diplomatic stalemate. But the potential lurks that the problems can be exacerbated by "abnormal aspirations" of the great powers. Most of these powers have in their historical background sentiments headed toward what Voegelin calls "ecumenic concupiscence."

Professor Kim points out how the Chinese might resort to an updated version of the *T'ien Xia*, pitting a world order inspired by Chinese "moral universalism" against the outdated "Westphalia system" of immoral Western individualism. The original notion of the *T'ien Xia* was simply traditional sacral kingship in the context of the historical experience of the Clan States as the sole carrier of civilization. This notion even survived the Mongol conquest--the Mongols became just another dynasty in accord with the Mandate of Heaven--as would later be the case with the Manchus. But the Western powers could not fit into this system. When representatives, for example, of George III of England sought "normal" diplomatic and trade relations with China in the late 1700's, Emperor Ch'ien Lung sent back a letter telling the king that, as a barbarian, he must "tremblingly obey" the ruler of the civilized world. The subsequent humiliation of China in the Opium Wars, the Arrow War, and the Boxer Rebellion and by the carving out of Western spheres of influence precipitated the collapse of the imperial government in 1911. An attempt to resuscitate anything like the *T'ien Xia* under contemporary conditions would be a dangerous effort of abnormal diplomacy fueled by ideology.

The Russian desire to restore her status as a great power could go beyond the normal demand, as Thucydides would see it, of a power to secure its dignity as an actor on the

geopolitical stage. Her former glory as a superpower came when she was the carrier of the world-historical mission of communist revolution, and the mission was tied through the play of sentiments and images with the millennial and Joachite symbol of Moscow as the Third Rome.

Presently only a small minority of Japanese support ultra nationalism. But if the United States were to deal the "Japanese nuclear option" card--to hint at the possibility of Japan becoming a nuclear power to threaten China to put pressure on North Korea (as John Bolton has suggested)--then Japanese ultra nationalism might be triggered with its tie to the symbol of the Empire of the Sun and its divine mission.

Finally, American diplomacy can be infected with its own abnormality in the form of Manifest Destiny.

What in ordinary circumstances would be a dangerous situation threatens to deteriorate into a more explosive one should any of these abnormalities intrude. Careful statecraft must attempt to navigate through these potential minefields.

But statecraft cannot cure what Voegelin would characterize as spiritual disease. The cure can only come from culture--and indeed most often from culture in the long run and from culture as not purely a world immanent agency of spirit. Our second and third panel papers show acts of resistance to spiritual pathology that can at least inspire in the short run and perhaps contribute to solutions in the long run.

### **3. Algeria and French Colonialism**

In the case of Algeria, we witness the attempt by the French to destroy the traditional culture. In the last decade of the colonial regime, Algerians could no longer read Arabic. The author of *Memory in the Flesh*, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, was sent to Tunis when her father was exiled for anti-colonial activities. It was only there that she was able to enter an Arabic school. It is perhaps both ironic and symbolic that her father had been a teacher of French. In 1993 she published her novel, the first to be written in Arabic by an Algerian woman. Writing the novel in Arabic, then, was itself a victory against colonialism.

The main character of the novel, Khalid, symbolizes Algeria. His amputated arm, lost in anti-colonial fighting in the 1940's, represents the mutilation of the country by colonialism. Khalid's ambiguous reaction to his "scar"--humiliation or pride--also symbolizes the psychological plight of postcolonial Algeria, liberated but in hopeless drift. The female character Ahlam meets Khalid in Paris in his self-imposed exile from a culturally and politically corrupted Algeria. In her he sees the landscape of his native city but also a kind of scar--in her soul, for she seems truly alienated from her tradition. In a sense, she has been programmed by the colonial experience to accept a kind of inferiority. She, too, is in exile.

Obviously, no summary of a paper about a novel can do justice to the novel itself with its affective and imaginary power. It is instructive, however, when Samah Elhajibrahim claims that the "novel is devoid of ideology yet it exposes the reality and weakness of ideology." We must be clear that more is at stake here than the horrible injustice of the French occupation of Algeria

through a brutal and destructive "pacification," of the confiscation of lands and resources, of the deprivation of political and civil rights, and of the importation of French settlers. However complex and diverse the motives and however contingent the circumstances that lead to specific policies and actions over the more than one hundred years of French control, there was a significant residual justification for such activities that was not the normal rationale for domination, repression, and exploitation. It was rooted firmly in the French colonial policy of "assimilation," which, although officially pronounced only at a colonial congress in 1889, was in play well before then, its sentiments going back to the French Revolution and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. The official doctrine of "assimilation" explicitly stated the goal of French colonialism in terms of the Enlightenment ideology of progressivism. The French, according to this doctrine, had the duty to bring progress to the benighted populace of the world (presumably whether illiterate dwellers in a tropical village, or Confucian mandarins in Hue, or sophisticated residents of Algiers educated in the high culture carried by Islamic civilization). This meant lifting them all up to the standards of enlightened humanity, conveniently (and perhaps naively) represented in the highest form by Frenchmen. So at least some French colonizers could argue (honestly) that they were doing this for "their own good."

That the novel has no ideology but depicts real people suffering the ravages of ideology is to appeal to a non-ideological identification with the humanity of the victims. This is an act of openness and transcendence. And unlike the abstractness of ideology, it is concrete.

#### **4. In Search of the Soul of China**

When we turn to the third paper, we are also placed in a situation where normalcy has been obliterated by ideology. In this case, colonizers have not replaced the indigenous language, but rather a revolutionary regime fueled by a radical ideology has sought to create a new China by purging--mutilating--its own written language. (To a lesser extent, the Japanese had done so in the wake of the Meiji Restoration as part of westernization.) Classical Chinese writing was to be replaced by a script consonant with everyday speech (the language of the Proletariat).

The author of *Soul Mountain*, Gao Xingjian, makes the startling claim that in the twentieth century "politics interfered with and stifled literature to an extent that has seldom been seen in human history." The author is now in exile from China for his outspoken works. Though now living in the West, he continues to write in Chinese in his effort to find the genuine Chinese language. This is, in effect, to restore Chinese literature--and, in the limit, Chinese civilization. It is an attempt to go from mental disease to sanity.

Gao's effort, therefore, can only be appreciated by an expert in Chinese literature who is completely conversant in the language and the literary texts. Tim Hoyer argues that the confusion by the critics about the text and its genre can be overcome if we understand it as a story of a quest. But this is not an ordinary quest, and the characters are not ordinary characters. The characters are shorn of most properties and reduced to pronouns, perhaps to symbolize them as movements of the soul. So we have "I," "you," and "he." They are in search, we may surmise, of the It-reality. "I," according to Hoyer, is primarily interested in stories, legends, and myths in pursuit of cosmological truth. This path is easier than that of "you," who represents the relation to more differentiated, anthropological truth (as in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism).

Given the destructive sweep of ideology in contemporary China, it is not surprising that the journey of "you" will prove frustrating and apparently unsuccessful. "You" will encounter hints, clues, images of what "you" is seeking, including the figure of "she" (with ying and yang symbolism). With "she," "you" has an "indefinable longing, a vague hope." But "she" vanishes. "You" comes to see old monasteries, but they are abandoned and the haven for bandits. Such are the ravages wrought by ideology. "You" has visited the old places and found "nothing." "I" says he has lost his poetic sensibilities. "He" suggests this is "nihilism"--but not absolute nothingness. "You" ultimately finds not the desired Soul Mountain (with all of its symbolic overtones) but a "mountain of ice," "ice crystal ruins," and "deathly loneliness."

If Soul Mountain cannot be found on earth, it is present as a longing in the soul of the characters of the story reduced to pronouns. We see at once the devastation of ideology and the sorrowful longing of the soul. We are reminded of the plight of the Egyptian contemplating suicide during the Second Intermediate Period (with echoes of Book Nine of Plato's *Republic*).

Shorn of ideological claptrap and even of the symbols of civilization, we are left with the pain and the purity of the longing itself of the soul. But have we not begun the journey by negating the negations of the symbols? And in this masterpiece of images, language, and characters have we not begun to journey to the engendering experiences themselves beneath the symbols?

Why can we find a return to normalcy in these two works of literature? As Aristotle famously argued, literature portrays the universal in the concrete. And the source of order in history and society is the concrete consciousness of concrete persons.