

Has North Korea given birth to a Soljenitsyn?

Dr Pierre Rigoulot (*) has just come back to Paris from Seoul where he carried out some investigation about a collection of short stories that were smuggled out of North Korea and will be published on the 3rd of March in Paris. Human Rights Without Frontiers has interviewed him.

HRWF (22.02.2016) -

HRWF - The British newspaper *The Guardian* has just announced that several European publishing houses have issued a collection of short stories by an anonymous writer from North Korea which was smuggled out of the country.

PR - These short stories are being talked about a lot even though the collection has only been published in Korean! The very existence and the quality of it have sent a shockwave not only in Europe but throughout the world. There will soon be a Japanese edition, a Chinese edition in Taiwan and an American edition, since Grove Atlantic, one of the great American publishers, just bought the rights to translate it. However, the French edition, which is planned to come out the 3rd of March 2016, will come next.

HRWF - You were invited to write the afterward for the French edition. How did you learn about the existence of this work?

PR - In Paris people know already my interest in what is happening in North Korea! I found out about it in two ways all at once. A friend of mine who is a literary critic sent me the proofs of the text. And then at a meeting of our Committee to Help the North Korean People, the translator (from Korean to French), Ms Lim, spoke to us about the text, not only about its quality but also the emotions that the upcoming French translation has aroused among some South Korean intellectuals. Some of them prefer to imagine North Korea to be more or less on the side of progressives, because it is hostile to the capitalist South and to 'American imperialism' rather than a model of a totalitarian state for which the very notion of human rights is unthinkable.

My meeting with the editor, Philippe Picquier, did the rest. He has the feeling that he is about to publish an interesting collection that will appeal to readers far beyond the few specialists in East Asian literature. He offered for me to write the afterward and it suited him well that I do it.

HRWF - But if he asked you to write an afterward, that means there is a preface?

PR - Yes, it has been written by a human rights activist in South Korea, Mr Do Huy-yong, who is likewise determined to do everything possible to make these texts known.

HRWF - Are these short stories that interesting? What was your first impression when you read them?

PR - I found the stories to be quite exceptional. Not only politically and morally but also for their literary importance. There are seven short stories that describe the very real effects of North Korean totalitarianism: the freedom of movement, the freedom of thought, the arrogance of the thin layer of society that is profiting from the system and the profound inhumanity of that system. It is not so much a vast tableau as it is a dense mosaic of metaphors and symbols while at the same time a tribute to those who resist every day under such difficult conditions. The stories leave a sense of hopelessness, but love and friendship are hard to brainwash away, and that is the way you resist. A beautiful and moving message.

HRWF - Excuse my suspicion, but are we sure about the origins of these texts? *Human Rights Without Frontiers* co-financed your fact-finding mission to Seoul to uncover the hidden faces that appear in this mysterious work. Do you know a little more now?

PR - I had the same reaction as you did when I first read it, with some suspicion, especially since the biographical information given in the first edition, the Korean, seemed so precise as to be dangerous! I have since been reassured that biographical details have been changed and by hearing accounts of how these texts (and others: a collection of poems) actually got out of North Korea. I can hardly give details here, but other reliable sources say that the author does indeed exist, he goes by the pseudonym Bandi, he is not unknown in his own country, and he assumes all the risks that you can imagine. If Bandi's book has success abroad and perhaps even in the South, the police will double up their efforts to find him!

HRWF - Does the alias 'Bandi' mean anything?

PR - Yes, 'bandi' in Korean is a firefly. We were speaking earlier of symbolism. Here is one. The author is one who resists but does not run away. It's a small light, alive in the North Korean night...

HRWF - The stories then found their way to South Korea. How do you explain why they are not such a sensation in that country?

PR - This is still difficult for me to understand. How could have our South Korean friends, who have such undeniable commitment to freedom and human rights for North Korea, not known about this collection or at least be aware of it and not want to read it? It will take some time to gather more explanations for this. I think that we'll have to consider the gap that exists between the activist community and the literary community. After all, it was by his art that Solzhenitsyn reached the entire world. The fact of the gulag was known. The testimonies, the studies, had all been published. But it took a writer and the retelling of the horrors of the Soviet camps before to global public opinion would face up to it.

There is also what I referred to earlier: many intellectuals of the South Korean left imagine that North Korea is on the 'right side', because it denounced the faults of the very capitalist South Korea. However, the enemies of my enemies are not always my friends! There may still be other things. The South Korean news editor is clearly labelled on the 'right.' From there to suspicion there is only one step. I also wonder if it is not more difficult for people from the South than for us to criticise the North, who are their brothers in the end. Finally, Bandi is taking down communist totalitarianism. But are South Koreans even educated on what communism actually is? This is unclear. And so without reference points, without some elements of recognition, how can they relate to these stories?

HRWF - Do you think then that we can speak of a North Korean Solzhenitsyn?

PR - It is too soon to say. These works that we are just learning about are not new, even though they evoke realities in North Korea that still exist. What has he been writing since then? I do not know. And these short stories (each is about thirty pages) call for another kind of writing than the sweeping canvas that we have in the *Gulag Archipelago* or even the short *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. But the criticism is harsh (the author goes back to Marx and to communism in his criticism, as did Solzhenitsyn) and it is the author's location that counts to the outside world to break the silence, undeniably bringing them closer together.

HRWF - What can we do?

PR - What we are doing: read this work, talk about it to others around us and respond to what it calls us to do. For example, Bandi says in one of the stories that a magician can bewitch those around him more easily if he does it behind closed doors. I think that Bandi shows us a way to make totalitarian propaganda less effective. But can we break through the walls that exist in North Korea? And how? That is what we have to think about.

For more information, you can contact Pierre Rigoulot at p.rigoulot@free.fr

(*) Pierre Rigoulot is a philosopher and a political scientist. His PhD thesis was about the methodology and the challenges of his criticism of Communist totalitarianism. He is the executive director of the Institute of Social History in Nanterre. He published more than 15 books in Paris and a number of them were translated in several languages. His contributions about North Korea involve:

Les Aquariums de Pyongyang (avec Kang Cheol Hwan), Laffont 2000, translated in several languages

Corée du Nord, Etat voyou (Paris 2003)

A contribution to *le Livre noir du Communisme* (Laffont 1997),

An afterward to the work of Blaine Harden, *Echappé du camp 14* (Belfond 2013)

An afterward to the work of Bandi, *La dénonciation* (Picquier 2016)