Everyone’s favorite North Korean detective, Inspector O, is back. The fifth novel in this irresistible series by a former Western intelligence officer who artfully mixes North Korea and noir, takes us from North Korea’s ice-free port at Rason to the hardscrabble northeast Chinese city of Yanji, crawling with foreign agents, local thugs and corrupt officials, all the way out to the desolate Mongolian town of Ondorkhaan, a place of “sky and nothing else.” As it opens, we find Inspector O lying low in Yanji, boarding with his nephew Major Bing, the city’s public security chief. O purists might be put off by the switch in narrative voice to Bing until realizing that he is but a young O, just with a drop of Chinese blood. He has the same hardened cynicism hinting at deeper sentimentality, the same worldliness trapped in a claustrophobic, paranoid world.

As usual, classic noir crime and spy fiction devices are all here: severed body parts on a doorstep, dimly-lit interrogations, missing files and mysterious double-agents, even a Poirot-style finale with an assembly of suspects. The pseudonymous “James Church” is clearly having great fun spinning these yarns, and his revelry is infectious. But there is a seriousness of purpose as well. If the tale has a central theme, it is corruption. “Corruption is like carbon,” O tells his nephew, “life on earth couldn’t exist without it.” Few topics could be more timely, in the year of the Bo Xilai affair, and how better to reflect on the forces of corruption unleashed by China’s, and Asia’s, economic boom, than this whodunit with North Korean characteristics?

Reviewed by John Delury, Assistant Professor of International Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul and a book review editor for Global Asia.
Shen Zhihua is one of China’s foremost Cold War historians, and a decade ago his path-breaking study of Sino-Soviet relations became a bestseller in China for its unusually dispassionate and archive-based treatment of a politically sensitive episode in China’s modern history, its so-called “War to Resist America and Assist Korea.” Now, thanks to translator Neil Silver, a retired US diplomat, Shen’s illuminating writings on the Korean War are accessible to readers in English.

Drawing on Soviet archives, Shen reconstructs the mind of Joseph Stalin as he plotted a course that put “Greater Russia’s” national security interests first, but did so in the language of Communist internationalism and solidarity. Even more fascinating is Shen’s attempt to explain Mao Zedong’s attitude toward Stalin and strategic thinking behind joining the North Koreans in their fight against the US. Explaining Beijing, Shen is on even surer footing, and thinner ice, due to his combing of Chinese diplomatic sources. Shen’s boldest thesis is that Stalin gave Kim Il Sung a green light to invade South Korea out of frustration that the Soviet Union had to give up control of an ice-free Pacific port in the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1950 — in other words, that the Korean War was indirectly caused by Communist China’s ability to negotiate with the Soviets as equals! Stalin expected the Chinese to back up the North Koreans if the US sent troops — exactly as ended up happening.

Reviewed by John Delury.