

IIAS Reports *continued*

North Korea in the Spotlights IIAS Annual Lecture 2012 given by Geir Helgesen

Video of the Annual Lecture: www.iias.nl/channel
Full transcript: tinyurl.com/c96ao97

THE HISTORIC, MID-17TH CENTURY WAAG ('weigh house'), in the centre of Leiden seems an unlikely venue for a lecture on North Korea. What can the relationship be between a beautiful Dutch Classicist building, where goods entering the city were once weighed on huge scales, and an enigmatic country in East Asia that is often perceived as the last bastion of old-fashioned communism? Yet on Wednesday, 19 September, the *Waag* was filled with some 120 people attending the 2012 IIAS Annual Lecture and the subsequent reception. The speaker was Geir Helgesen, director of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen and a renowned expert on this mysterious East Asian country. The Annual Lecture was one of a trilogy of events putting North Korea in the Leiden spotlights: the lecture preceded a Round Table conference on North Korea, and some time later we enjoyed the inaugural lecture by Prof. Remco Breuker, the new professor in Korean studies at Leiden University, and also a member of the IIAS board.

Bearing in mind the topic of the Round Table conference and the inaugural lecture by Remco Breuker, the subject of the Annual Lecture was clearly not chosen at random. But neither was the speaker, Dr Geir Helgesen, director of NIAS. In his introductory words, IIAS director, Philippe Peycam, stressed the strong relationship between IIAS and NIAS. This institute has for many years been a close partner of ours. We share many characteristics and focus on the same part of the world, namely Asia. The institutes are also complementary; IIAS has a strong focus on the Humanities, and NIAS is more inclined towards a Social Sciences approach. The Annual Lecture was an excellent opportunity to strengthen the mutual relationship, which both institutes would like to expand through the exchange of scholars and managerial staff. In fact, in October IIAS welcomed a staff member of NIAS who, for some days, joined the IIAS to exchange information on current and future projects, management, and to discuss further forms of cooperation, including the training of PhD students. Both IIAS and NIAS hope to extend their partnership to include other groups, especially within the framework of the European Alliance for Asian Studies (EAAS), of which IIAS runs the secretariat. The Alliance includes a number of renowned European research centres in the field of Asian studies.

The title of the IIAS Annual Lecture was informative: 'A user's manual to North Korea: matters and issues that shape relations between them and us.' The lecture was indeed not solely about North Korea, but it instead focussed on the relationship between North Korea and 'us'. The speaker, Geir Helgesen,

is a Norwegian citizen, trained as a cultural sociologist at Copenhagen University. His main publications include: *Democracy and Authority in Korea. The Cultural Dimension in Korean Politics* (1998) and *Politics, Culture and Self, East Asian and North European Attitudes* (2006) edited with S.R. Thomsen. Forthcoming books are: *Ideas, Society and Politics in North East Asia and Northern Europe. Worlds Apart, Learning from Each Other* (2012) (in press), and *Preconditions for a Human Rights Dialogue with North Korea* (2012). He is a frequent visitor to Korea, North and South, and in his work he tries to approach North Korea independently, without being influenced by the stereotype images that prevail among Western politicians and the media. In fact, he is always trying to counter-balance these preconceptions.

Helgesen started his lecture with a quote from the blogger Mark McDonald, who earlier this year – after Kim Jong Un had succeeded his father as the new North Korean leader – wrote: "Here's a modest proposal for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Give the kid a break." (blog hosted by *International Herald Tribune*). McDonald made this suggestion following large-scale American and South Korean military manoeuvres that did not trigger any retaliation from the North Koreans. However, most Western media interpreted the North Koreans' reticence by saying that the new leader could not be trusted and would draft his own, negative agenda. Helgesen used this quote, and the Western response, in order to illustrate the prevalent Western attitude to North Korea, which tends to put whatever happens in the country into a negative context. Helgesen concluded: "The boy has not yet got his break."

Helgesen seeks to understand North Korea from its own historical and cultural dynamics. In doing so he follows, as he stated in his lecture, in the footsteps of Cornelius Osgood, who in his book *The Koreans and their Culture* (1951:v), wrote:

It may be said of Korea that there is no country of comparable significance concerning which so many people are ignorant. For hundreds of years the Koreans sought safety in complete isolation, developing unique customs and a distinctive way of life. Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, they have suffered deeply in the discovery that a nation cannot sustain its independence if it will not share in the general development of civilization. Shocked by violent Japanese, Russian, and American occupations, the Koreans now struggle for the restoration of their liberty and national dignity. As that effort, with its far-reaching implications, can affect the whole world, it has seemed desirable that the characteristics of Korean culture and the circumstances which led to their development should be made available, particularly to those whose obligation is the welfare of the sorely beset Koreans.



Above: UN soldiers facing North Korea, on the border. Courtesy of Karl Baron Creative Commons/Flickr.

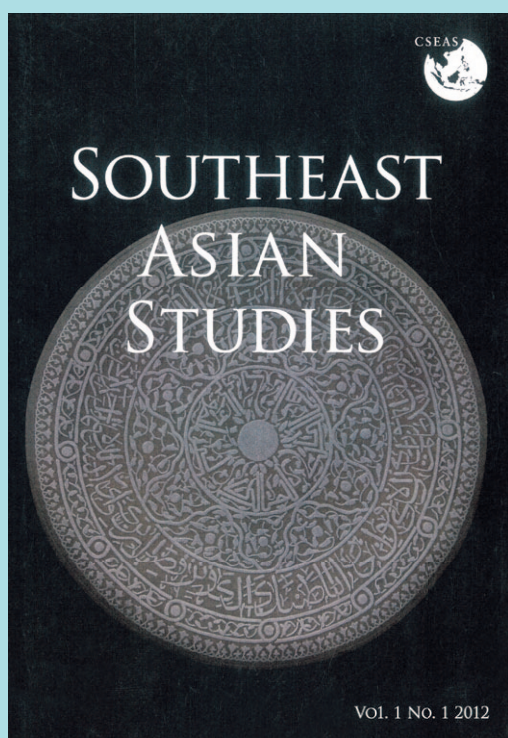
Commenting on these words, Helgesen speaks of how in the West we are used to recognising and respecting the culture and history of other parts of the world, yet we seem to turn a blind eye towards the uniqueness of North Korea and its history and culture. The country is often regarded as the last communist dictatorship, and we tend to look at whatever happens in the country through this unique prism.

Helgesen states that the present system in North Korea is neither completely run by, nor completely dependent on a small group around the Kim family. He notes that "the ideology, politics and leadership of North Korea have been created, developed and formed based on internally given traditions and in relation to external influences and pressures." He adds that this system is very strong, because it makes sense to the people. It is rooted in the history and culture of the North Koreans. It is also rooted in the way the North Koreans perceive the outside world, whether they do so correctly or not. The external influences and pressures, Helgesen continues, include the doctrine of communism, but especially the hostile relations with Japan, the US and South Korea.

As Helgesen put it in his introduction: "With the ever dominant picture of a Stalinist-like dictator as the front figure of a system inhumane in its core functions, the nuances tend to not only disappear, but even to be unwanted." Helgesen emphasises that the black-and-white approach to North Korea simply does not work, and in the end surely does not help the people of North Korea. For Helgesen, the 'old manual' for the Western attitude towards North Korea included the general advice: "... always believe the worst and question positive information, should it ever occur." The 'new manual' in the lecture's title refers to the need for a new approach. He stresses the necessity of a more balanced approach, that takes into account the particular characteristics of North Korean society, which is only possible when the Western audience becomes aware of its own position. It simply does not help to see North Korea as a country that is merely evil, led by an evil dictator; or as a country that, as stated by Bruce Cummings in his book *North Korea, Another Country*, "every American loves to hate." (Preface, p. viii) Helgesen adds that within this Western context, politicians tend to regard it as suicide to say anything about North Korea that may be perceived as positive. North Korea may thus be a source of abhorrence, amazement or, rather cynically, entertainment, but such a position will never reduce the tensions in East Asia and alleviate the dire problems of the North Korean population. That these problems are very much present, is also stressed by Helgesen. He refers to the hunger catastrophes of the 1990s, the labour camps, the complete lack of access for the North Korean people to information about the outside world. But Helgesen stresses that these enormous problems cannot be solved by regarding and depicting North Korea as a rogue state that cannot be trusted and where people blindly follow their unpredictable leaders from the Kim dynasty. Helgesen is very clear. He believes a new approach is so necessary because the old way simply does not work; by not changing the 'manual', the West, together with the Pyongyang leadership, is responsible for the continuing human suffering in the North. What is needed, Helgesen told his audience gathered in the Leiden *Waag*, is a far more balanced approach.

Willem Vogelsang, IIAS Institute Manager

Announcing ...



IN 2012, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, re-launched *Southeast Asian Studies* as an all-English journal. Intended for a regional as well as global readership, *Southeast Asian Studies* will be published three times a year.

The new journal aims to promote excellent, agenda-setting scholarship and provide a forum for dialogue and collaboration both within and beyond the region. *Southeast Asian Studies* engages in wide-ranging and in-depth discussions that are attuned to the issues, debates and imperatives within the region, while affirming the importance of learning and sharing ideas on a cross-country, global, and historical scale. An integral part of the journal's mandate is to foster scholarship that is capable of bridging the continuing divide in area studies between the social sciences and humanities, on the one hand, and the natural sciences, on the other hand.

The journal welcomes accessibly written articles that build on insights and cutting-edge research from the natural sciences all year round.

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