"Why do North-South Korean relations remain in a perpetual state of stagnation and why can’t the Korean peninsula evade this state of armistice?” Any self-respecting Korean must have asked herself this question at least once in her lifetime. Division Hysteria by Hong Sŏngnyul [Hong Seuk-ryule] starts off with this sentence and progresses at a pace that makes it almost impossible to lay the book down for even a short moment.

The reconstruction and new facts it offers on contemporary Korean history are based on a detailed inquiry on diverse documents, including the latest ones made public by the government. Moreover, the author’s creative insight and his logical analysis make this book even more valuable. These elements allow for a fascinating and well-balanced depiction of the big picture related to the progress of relations between North and South Korea.

This book analyzes the internal political fluctuations within North and South Korea revolving around the movements for the improvement of US-China and North-South Korean relations in the early 1970s. The period under the microscope of direct analysis by the author ranges from the 1.21 event in 1968 to the axe murder incident at P’anmunjom in 1976. As the author writes, we witness the evolution of an analysis of “the first cycle in North-South Korean relations, a perpetual repetition of moving forward and coming to a stop.”

The elements of the international political background analyzed in this book include the rise in tension during the Vietnam War and its end, the improvement in US-China relations leading to a worldwide detente, and the increasing distance and competition the Soviet Union displayed towards China. By explaining how this international political scene interlinked with the special situation of North and South Korea, the author draws a clear yet multidimensional picture of how such background can explain this lack of certainty, foreclosing any short-term or
long-term expectations in the relations between these two countries.

The "multidimensional" aspect does not only refer to the dynamic reaction between internal and international politics. The author clearly states he will "approach all three dimensions when discussing the ups and downs of the detente in the Korean peninsula revolving around the issue of country division, including international diplomacy issues, the relations between North and South and the political relations within each country." He certainly keeps his promise and achieves a thorough description and analysis that exceeded this reviewer's expectations. Even when analyzing the bigger discourse corresponding with international politics, the author adds the psychological elements, therefore providing an approach from a personal level which is more than convincing. Such attempts allow the reader to clearly perceive the principles operating behind the international situation.

The insight which the author uses to analyze the universal principles behind the diverse phenomena, ranging from a personal level to an international one, is relayed to the reader through a simple and unadorned style. This type of narration allows the readers to understand the dynamics of international relations in an easier way than the convoluted ones they are accustomed to. The following passage illustrates this approach:

There were three major incidents that gave rise to concerns for another war in the Korean peninsula after the ceasefire. The Pueblo incident in 1968, the axe murder incident at P'anmunjom in 1976, and the North Korea nuclear crisis in 1994. As it happens, the superpower state that is the United States was directly involved in all three incidents. The term "crisis" is more often than not linked to perception rather than measurement by any objective indicator. In other words, a "crisis" occurs when the parties involved in the conflict in question and its observers perceive the situation as a "crisis" and define it as such. The development of this perception is closely linked to and reflects the present dynamics. Moreover, when the superpower that has the power of decision in war and possesses greater power in enacting it is directly involved, the sense of crisis naturally increases. The military tension of the Korean peninsula in 1968 clearly shows this tendency.

This passage satisfied the curiosity I personally had on the situation of the Korean peninsula at that time. As we are currently overwhelmed by information, we tend to passively accept what the main producers of the discourse offer us. Even with issues such as the crisis on the Korean peninsula, an issue directly linked to our very own survival, we merely accept the information given to us and tend to think and act based on such passivity. The lucid analysis provided by Hong Sŏngnyul and apparent throughout the book, including in the above paragraph, gives us a glimpse of his earnest concerns in this matter, different
from the attitude of the simple consumer. I believe such an achievement was made possible due to his ability to maintain a clear and sufficient introspective distance from the point at issue.

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This large-size reference book was originally planned as a collective enterprise in the beginning of the 1980s. A group of mostly Moscow-based Soviet Oriental scholars – Sinologists, Japanologists, experts in Vietnam and Mongolia, specialists in the non-Han cultures of China etc. – headed by a veteran Korean expert, Prof. L.R.Kontsevich, decided to compile a book of chronological references for all the political entities of East and Central Asia that were, at least to a certain degree, influenced by the traditional Chinese logographs-based culture. Eventually, Kontsevich ended up taking sole responsibility for the project, although some of the chronological tables on China, Japan, Mongolia and Vietnam were compiled by him with the assistance of his colleagues specializing in these areas. All of them – representing, in fact, the crème of the crop of the Soviet and post-Soviet Oriental studies – are carefully listed in the Preface (pp. 21-26). If a comprehensive work of such scope, attempting to systematize the chronological tables (based on the available information on the reign periods, birth and death dates for Eastern and Central Asian rulers throughout several millennia) for the whole region influenced by the Sinitic culture, would have been published in English by a major publisher in North America or Western Europe, it most likely would have become a key reference for a good number of experts in the related fields, especially those working in traditional history and culture. However, Russian is a language that only very few Western Asianists are fluent in, and therefore Prof. Kontsevich's opus magnum will most likely not be widely used outside of the former Eastern bloc, despite all its scholarly advantages.

The first volume of the book opens with a very detailed outline of the Sinitic calendar traditions, the historical onomastics of China (including an extremely