mapping a hidden disaster

Personal Histories of Hunger in North Korea

By Sandra Fahy

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IN MAY 2015, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization warned that a major drought in North Korea could lead to severe food shortages. The international media—reminded of the devastating famine of the 1990s that killed approximately 500,000 people—jumped on the story and the drought made headlines all over the world. The media storm was followed by a statement from North Korean state news agency KCNA calling it "the worst drought of the century." As it turned out, this was quite the hyperbolic statement; the drought ended in July without affecting the food supply.

Stories of drought and other devastating natural disasters threatening the country's food supply are a common feature in reports from the North Korean capital of Pyongyang. It is very difficult to gauge the nature and effects of these disasters, however, because the country is hermetically sealed from the rest of the world.

Skeptics have challenged North Korea's claims. Andrei Lankov, a North Korean history professor at Kookmin University in Seoul, has stated that in recent years Pyongyang has overstated significant flooding and droughts to garner international assistance (Brian Padden, 2015).

North Korean officials had learned, after the famine of the 1990s, that they could not request foreign aid while also instructing the state media to paint a rosy picture of life in the socialist state. Blaming a natural disaster was the perfect solution, since it meant that the state did not have to admit to human error or economic weakness.

The fact that Pyongyang reports on floods and droughts does not mean that there is transparency about these events. For example, human casualties often go unmentioned, or reports imply that nobody was killed. So it is difficult to find out how disasters, such as drought and famine, affect people in North Korea.

This is where my research comes in. Curious about the impact of food shortages on people in North Korea, I conducted research in 2005 and 2006 with survivors of the 1990s North Korean famine. Having worked as a volunteer translator and teacher in North Korean defector communities in Seoul and Tokyo for several years, I used my activist connections to meet people who were living ordinary lives in Japan and South Korea, people who were not active in the political activist community. I interviewed more than 30 individuals from all walks of life—15 men and 15 women ranging in age from 17 to 70. Some came from Pyongyang, while others came from the more northern remote regions of Musan or Chongjin. The questions that drove my research included how famine and ongoing food shortages influenced people's social relationships and how they communicated about the famine. In particular, I was curious to know how people spoke about the difficulties within their families, their communities, and even within their own minds through self-talk. How people used language was key to understanding how they survived.

My research highlighted the multiple and versatile roles language played in surviving the famine. The state actively censored speech about the famine, while using euphemisms to describe the food shortages. For example, officials never used the word "famine" in the context of North Korea, although they did use it to describe situations in South Korea or the United States. Instead, official accounts use the term "food ration downturn" or the propagandistic phrase "The March of Suffering." People were expected to use the same terms. An accidental slip of the tongue while angry, intoxicated, or distracted could result in arrest or worse.

The inability to speak directly about the famine resulted in unusual communication styles, and when people left North Korea they took this language style with them. Indirect communication was essential for survival. Precise, direct expression was avoided in favor of obfuscating language. This helped people to share their thoughts in ways that avoided sanctions and danger. Through interviews with survivors I soon realized that, because of these language restrictions and state propaganda, the famine experience in North Korea was exceptional.

FAMINE AND FOOD INSECURITY

Twenty years ago, after major floods washed away crops, the North Korean government appealed to the international community for aid. Officials claimed that the flood had caused severe food shortages, but when the World Food Program (WFP) gained access to the country and measured malnutrition, it found rates of child wasting and stunting consistent with years of chronic hunger. In the period 1995 to 2000, out of a total population of approximately 22 million, between 600,000 and 1 million people died from starvation or hunger-related illnesses (Goodkind and West 2001).

North Korea's food insecurity in the late 1980s, the prelude to the famine, was caused by myriad factors, including the break-up of strategic economic ties following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the need to repay debts to the Soviet Union and China, failed agricultural reforms, and a government distribution system that unfairly distributed scarce resources according to assumed political loyalty.

In a town in North Hwanghae province, North Korea, farmers have brought in the maize crop. North Korea struggles to have proper food storage facilities so when the crops come in much of it lies out in the open. Experts estimate that more than 30% of the crops are lost between harvest and final consumption due to numerous factors.
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Maize which has been harvested is drying in the sun in a small town in South Hwanghae province in preparation for storage during the winter.
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Agriculture in North Korea relies heavily on manual labor with few machines in sight. During harvest season, students and pupils are often drafted in from cities to help bring in the crops in time before the autumn rains.
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These young people from collective farms are still trying to bring in the harvest although recent autumn rains have soaked the crops which may make them difficult to store.
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As a result, millions of people were unable to access sufficient food for survival. By 1995 and 1996, the floods tipped the existing food insecurity towards famine and allowed the North Korean government to blame a natural disaster rather than its own destructive politics.

CENSORSHIP

Historically, food shortages and other forms of extensive suffering often result in rebellion and government collapse. However, in the case of despotic leaders, such as Stalin during the Soviet Famine of 1932-33 and Mao during the Great Famine in China (1958-62), quite the opposite occurred. Rather than causing social unrest, famine in these countries precipitated massive consolidation of power (Lautze, 1997). In Korea, Kim Jong-il (although not as esteemed as his father, Kim Il-Sung, who passed away in 1994) was also able to maintain power. People who were discontent with the state's response to the devastating famine were not able to generate significant agitation among the general public to change the regime (Fahy, 2011). However, there was one serious attempt to overthrow the government when a military-level coup was attempted in Hamhung in 1996, but the group was caught and killed (Fahy, 2015). Kim Jong-il's government successfully avoided wide-scale rebellion. A key feature of this was censoring direct communication about the famine and severely punishing those who disobeyed. Defectors in South Korea and Japan felt angry and resentful toward the regime, but it is difficult to know if they are representative of those who remain at home in North Korea.

One of my respondents, Mr. Jae-young Yoon, a middle-aged former soldier from Chongjin whose son died from starvation, explained that the subject of hunger had to be

In the mountainous region of South Hamgyong province numerous villages were affected by flash floods in July 2012 which destroyed hundreds of homes.
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In the mountainous regions of South Hamgyong province, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) used ECHO funds to assist the North Korean Red Cross distribute aid to 2,500 affected and displaced families in conjunction with similar activities carried out by Save the Children.
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This family in South Pyongan province has lived in a small tent for the past three months since a flash flood destroyed their home in July 2012. As temperatures plummet as winter approached they hope to move into a new home build by the government in the coming week.
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These government built houses in South Pyongan province have been erected on higher ground to house families who lost their homes during the flash floods in July 2012.
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avoided altogether in social discourse:

"If someone had died of hunger you couldn't say that they were so hungry they died. You could say they were in so much pain they died. When you were working you would always feel hungry, to work without having eaten, argh!! There was no way you could say 'I am so hungry, I can't do it.' 'I'm in pain,' you could say" (Field Research January 2006, Seoul).

Other survivors shared equally devastating experiences. Mr. Chung-su Om and Mrs. Sun-ja Om, who were among Pyongyang's social elite, had prepared a small banquet when I arrived at their house. It was common for North Korean's to show this kind of warmth and generosity to me during the course of my research, but it was always awkward. While eating bowls of rice and plates of kimchi and seaweed, they described the sound of the famine, "Like frogs or mosquitoes in the night, the children cried of hunger" (Field Research, February 2006, Seoul).

The sound of the famine could be heard in the night, when the labor of the day was done and nothing remained but hunger:

"The children didn't know better," Mrs. Sun-Ja Om explained, "[unlike us] they did complain about the hunger. They were always crying for food" (Field Research, February 2006, Seoul).

Back in North Korea, these painful observations were not to be discussed. People were either aware of the repercussions of voicing them or they were made aware by the authorities.

Mr. Chul-Su Kim, also among the Pyongyang elite, explained that, while drunk, he lamented his father's death from hunger. The next day he got a knock on the door from the secret police. Two officers ordered him out of the house and interrogated him. He described the exchange:

These water logged rice fields have been harvested but some of the crop appears to have been left in the fields due to a lack of transport.
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In all the villages visited, the small gardens around houses are all being used to grow food, mostly cabbage for the traditional Korean dish "kimchi" or pickled cabbage.
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"'Comrade, your father has passed away?' asked one of the officers." "'Yes, he passed away,' I answered." "'What age was your father?'" "'He had just turned 70.'"
"'Oh, he was quite an age when he died then.'" "'Yes, he was,' I said, suddenly realizing what the secret police was getting at."

"'Did your father have some kind of illness?' they asked me, and I said, "'He had high blood pressure.'" "'Ah! He died from his blood pressure going up. Comrade Kim, comrade, don't go around saying that people are dying of hunger. Do you get it? Why should anyone be dying of hunger in a socialist society?'"

"I pulled my children and my wife aside and told them not to say their grandfather died of hunger because if they say that they would take us away (Field Research August 2006, Seoul)."

During the famine, knowing what not to say was literally the difference between life and death. But how did people learn what they could and couldn't say? As the above example of Mr. Kim indicates, sometimes the lessons on what not to say were taught directly and subtly incorporated. In other cases it was the sequence of events that led people to interpret cause and effect. For example, Mrs. Sun-Ja Om explained how one of her acquaintances disappeared after speaking too critically about the food situation:

"There was no way that the hunger could be spoken about. There was an elderly woman who was very hungry, she was about 80 years old, she went out saying, 'Oh my gosh! I am so hungry. How are we meant to live like this?' and that very night she was taken off somewhere" (Field Research February 2006, Seoul).

The State's censorship of speech had far-reaching consequences, both psychological and practical. People were unable to share their hardships and frustrations with each other and were forced to deal with loss and desperation all on their own.

As Mrs. Sun-Ja Om explains:

"That's right; truly you wouldn't let it [the famine experience] out of your heart. Well, for that matter you wouldn't think about it. And you wouldn't speak of it. If you spoke of it you were dead. Your neck wrung. Banished. Executed. So because of that, it wouldn't leave your lips" (Field Research February 2006, Seoul).

Strict censorship of speech prevented like-minded people to fraternize and rebel against the government, but it also prevented people from hypothesizing about the causes of and solutions to the famine. Without effective coping strategies, people felt a prolonged impact of the famine.

PROPAGANDA

While coming down hard on people who openly discussed the negative impact of the food crisis, the North Korean government, through state-controlled media, increased ideological messages about solidarity and endurance (Oh and Hassig 2000). Editorials in the leading party newspaper acknowledged the food shortage and placed responsibility for overcoming it on the people through prescriptive calls for "revolutionary" and "collective" responsibility (see Rodong Sinmun 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1999d). Local authorities advised alternative foods and cooking methods such as eating one meal a day and cooking roots and tree bark. Eating substitutes became so common in North Korean society that the Korean motherly greeting "Did you eat rice today?" was replaced with "Did you eat the substitute today?"

In state propaganda the famine was referred to as *Konan ŭi Haenggun*, or March of Suffering, which directly evoked North Korea's founding leader, Kim Il-Sung's historic march in Japanese-controlled colonial Manchuria. In the 1930s, Kim Il-Sung had joined the Korean guerrilla re-

sistance against the Japanese occupation of Korea and in 1938, he and a group of resistance fighters were forced to undertake a long march as the group was pressed by Japan's revamped counterinsurgency activity. During their march—which lasted for about a hundred days during the winter—they fought hunger and enemy troops. The march was considered a trying time for Kim and his militia. The famine of the 1990s was considered another period of hardship in the evolution of the North Korean revolution. During the famine, people were reminded that their fight against hunger was like Kim's fight against Japanese imperialism: difficult, but essential for the revolution. Mr. Jae-young Yoon explained:

"This is what they taught the people: 'America, the international community and its puppet South Korea are ceaselessly preparing for war. We have to tighten our belts to build up the national defense, to build up the economy. So let's build up the economy.' And for that, the citizens suffered tremendously, not anticipating the rain and snow storms that came and destroyed the farms [and the food supply]" (Field Research January 2006, Seoul).

Besides the term March of Suffering, the press and state officials used other euphemisms to describe the country's desperate situation. Miss Hye-jin Lee, from Musan, explained:

"They did not use the expression "famine," nor did they use the expression "hunger." Rather, they used the term *shingnyang t'agyok* (food ration down turn). Starvation was a term we really didn't use. I had been taught that starvation was happening to the beggars in South Korea, and in that instance we used the term a lot. But for the situation we were going through with the food, we didn't use that term" (Field Research August 2006, Seoul).

Speaking about hunger or starvation was considered counter-revolutionary since it meant identifying the state's failures and shortcomings. In socialist North Korea, the state was expected to provide food, housing, education, and health care. Failing to do so equaled the failure of socialism.

It is impossible to say how many people believed the famine wasn't a famine but another period of hardship in the evolution of North Korea's revolution. However, control and surveillance in both public and private spheres of life meant that if you did not agree with the state's official line regarding the famine, or anything else, you were unable to verify if others were like-minded without risking your life.

CONCLUSION

The oral accounts I collected from North Korean famine survivors underscore the overlap between the multiple human rights violations people faced. The inability to access sufficient food in North Korea was tied to the inability to speak clearly and critically about the situation. That, in turn, was tied to the nation-wide system of surveillance and punishment.

Famine and food insecurity in a place like North Korea, where the state controls all culture, media, and communication, is fundamentally different from experiences of food insecurity elsewhere. Besides being deprived of food, in North Korea the people were deprived of information about the famine, of the opportunity to protest, and of the freedom to accurately describe their situation and share experiences and trauma with other victims.

With the recent reports of drought in North Korea we see that the state, yet again, blames forces of nature for food shortages and fails to identify how its stubborn isolationist politics is culpable. I expect the North Korean government to continue to obfuscate, conceal, pass the buck, and propagandize, which is why defectors' accounts are so valuable. The insights that these survivors offer will benefit aid agencies when responding to future disaster situations.

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