



North Korea as Neighbor: *Critical Scholarship on North Korea (in English)*

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Abstract

How does North Korea become visible and legible to us? What seems like propaganda and what seems like the real North Korea, and why? After more than 70 years of hostility it is an understatement to say that disrespect is deeply entrenched on both sides of the DMZ. Nonetheless, since the end of the Cold War in Europe and the cultural turn in Cold War Studies, scholarship on North Korea has become much more interesting. The monographs and articles examined here shed light on North Korea, but also speak to broader questions about human rights and hegemonic politics, visibility and capitalism, revolution and modernity, work and ideology, and the ethical framework for ending civil wars. In what is referred to here as critical scholarship on North Korea, we catch a glimpse of divergent post-Cold War currents and logic, with some shared commitment to look back, and to look again, from a position of proximity.

Keywords: North Korea, Cold War, famine, visibility, human rights, historiography

Installed in 1994 in the outdoor exhibit area of the War Museum in Seoul, the Statue of Brothers embodies a logic of murderous love. It depicts a dramatic encounter during the Korean War (1950–1953). On the mountains that traverse North Chungcheong and North Gyeongsang provinces, two brothers fighting on opposite sides had come face to face. The older brother, Park Gyu-cheol, was a lieutenant in the ROKA (South Korean Army), and Park Yong-cheol, the younger brother, was a soldier in the Korean People's (North Korean) Army. As depicted in the statue, the two stand on a dome with a jagged crack running up its center. The crack narrows toward where the two brothers embrace, and there the dome becomes whole, signifying the healing of Korea's national division. Because of the embrace, the Statue of Brothers is said to symbolize both the tragedy of a fratricidal war and the yearning for reconciliation and reunification of the Korean nation.¹ But a thoughtful visitor would notice that the older brother, the ROKA lieutenant, stands erect, fully armed, both hugging and holding up his younger brother who is unarmed and collapsing into his older brother's embrace. On closer inspection, then, this reunion, brotherly love, and restoration of the family bond is premised on the younger brother, the (former) KPA soldier, abandoning any and all identification with the North Korean state. This way of imagining national reconciliation and reunification in fact reaffirms a patriarchal narrative and state-centric ambition: The Statue of Brothers depicts South Korea's Cold War fantasy, its desire for unequivocal victory articulated as love for brethren in the North who yearn to be rescued.

A logic comparable to this kind of murderous love informs much of English-language publications about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, especially in the aftermath of President George W. Bush's 2002 reference to North Korea as part of an axis of evil. Since the start of the US

1. In Korean, "minjok-ui hwahap-gwa tongil-e daehan yeomwon" (*War Memorial of Korea Leaflet*. <https://www.warmemo.or.kr/front/viewArticle.do>). Choe Yeong-ji and Yun Seong-jin collaborated with Jang Hye-yong to create the Statue of Brothers. In 1994, when the Statue of Brothers was first unveiled, the depiction of a ROK soldier and a KPA soldier embracing elicited anger from conservative groups. It no longer elicits controversy; the focus of left/right conflicts in South Korea shifts continuously, but pretty much along the long-established fault line of the unending Korean War.

war on terror to its retreat from Afghanistan in 2021, the stated desire to enforce human rights on a global scale and American strategic calculation was almost indistinguishable. The United States would both care and fight in the name of humanity: democracy, humanitarianism, and human rights are central to the legitimizing frame for the use of US military power. So too scholarship that seeks regime change in North Korea (albeit equivocally): it speaks in an affective language that personalizes victimization and rescue. Some, perhaps many, would sharply disagree with this assessment, especially those who are/were directly involved in the formulation and implementation of US foreign policy: for example, former US National Security Council official Victor Cha, who insists,

Critics argue that Bush pursued the human rights issues with North Korea as part of a regime-collapse strategy because he despised Kim Jong-il. Or that he was uninterested in negotiations with the North and therefore castigated the regime's human rights abuses as a way to submarine any potential talks. Nothing could be further from the truth... he was motivated by the sheer horror that such human rights abuses could still take place in the twenty-first century, and that no one stood up for an oppressed population that could not stand up for itself. (Cha 2018, 184–185)²

Whether or not we give credence to George W. Bush's sincerity, such statements have to be understood against the history of US military and clandestine interventions in various parts of the world, and justifications given for those actions. For example, can George W. Bush's concern for human rights in North Korea, while he was president of the United States, be understood apart from what we know about the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003, and all the misrepresentations and outright falsehoods that

2. From December 2004 through May 2007, Victor Cha served as Director for Asian Affairs (Japan/Korea/Australia/New Zealand) in George W. Bush's National Security Council, and was also the Deputy Head of Delegation for the United States at the Six Party Talks in Beijing. He teaches at Georgetown University and is also a Fellow (non-resident) in Human Freedom at the George W. Bush Institute in Dallas, Texas.

were presented to justify that decision?³ For scholars who publish in English about North Korea, such questions are not peripheral to their scholarship. Interestingly, in spite of this highly politicized situation, and because of it, new generations of scholars have produced some very compelling scholarship about North Korea that also raises broader questions about how we understand human rights and hegemonic politics, visibility and capitalism, revolution and modernity, work and ideology, and the ethical framework for ending civil wars.

About American power in its raw form, it has to be noted that from the end of World War II in 1945 to the present, the number of US military interventions and clandestine operations in various countries averaged close to one per year.⁴ Directly relevant to American policy on North Korea, the Korean War was the first war the United States could not win, and the armistice that halted full-scale war in 1953 has not been replaced by a peace treaty. In a situation where North Korea has been an enemy of the United States longer than any other country, whether in Washington, DC think tanks or on the staff of US Congressional committees, intellectuals of statecraft maintain credibility by interpreting North Korea via a securitization paradigm, one that is said to be based on hard truths and

3. The Bush administration gave four reasons for military action in Iraq: 1) Iraq has weapons of mass destruction (later proved false); 2) Iraq supports terrorism, including *al-Qaeda* (a misrepresentation); 3) Iraq threatens its neighbors; and 4) Saddam Hussein is an evil dictator. As the US began its “shock and awe” campaign, president Bush told the American people that the aim of the US-led invasion was “to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger” (President Bush Addresses the Nation, March 19, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030319-17.html>).

4. This list of US military and clandestine operations since World War II is probably not comprehensive. 1945–1950: China, Iran, Greece, Italy, Philippines, southern/South Korea. 1950–1959: Korea, Iran, Vietnam, Guatemala, Lebanon, Panama, Haiti. 1960–1969: Vietnam, Cuba, Laos, Thailand, Ecuador, Panama, Brazil, Indonesia, Congo, Dominican Republic, Laos, Ghana, Guatemala, Cambodia. 1970–1979: Vietnam, Oman, Laos, Chile, Cambodia, Angola. 1980–1989: Iran, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Lebanon, Grenada, Honduras, Libya, Philippines, Panama. 1990–1999: Liberia, Iraq, Haiti, Somalia, Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Croatia, Zaire (Congo), Sudan, Afghanistan. 2000–2009: Macedonia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen. 2010–2019: Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Niger.

material realities. On that point, it has been argued that the foreign policy environment in Washington DC spatializes international politics in a certain way, as a world characterized by particular types of places, peoples, and dramas. (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992, 192) In practice, toward North Korea, it is a foreign policy environment that discourages initiatives seeking an end to hostilities and, instead, promotes a “crime-and-punishment approach” (Sigal 1997, 40).

The discursive construction of North Korea as a rogue state does have basis in certain hard truths and material realities. It is altogether true that since 1953 North Korea has taken militant action against both South Korean leaders and US forces in South Korea.⁵ Indeed, it has also developed nuclear weapons and missile programs that can devastate South Korea and Japan. After more than 70 years of intense hostility, it is an understatement to say that disrespect is deeply entrenched on all sides. In North Korea, Americans are depicted as imperialist wolves. In South Korea, Japan, and the United States, there is systematic, deep-rooted dehumanization of North Korea. Given this unending war, and politics as a continuation of this war, what I refer to in this essay as critical scholarship on North Korea questions the premise, in different ways and to different extents, that North Korea is fundamentally illegitimate. While critical of authoritarianism and oppression in North Korea, a common point of departure is one of respect. Respect, as Sonia Ryang reminds us, is derived from the Latin *re-specere*, to look back at, to look again (Ryang 2012, 8–9). The stakes being so very high, we have to be willing to look back, and look again, at the conditions that produce, for all sides, what seems to be hard truths and material realities.

The origins of this unending conflict go back to the Korean War, or more precisely, to how the Allies defeated the Japanese Empire in August 1945. As Japan surrendered to the United States, it was the United States

5. The most well-known attacks include: the Blue House raid targeting president Park Chung-hee and seizure of the USS Pueblo (1968); the ax murder incident at the DMZ (1976); the bombing in Rangoon targeting president Chun Doo-hwan (1983); the sinking of the Cheonan near the disputed Northern Limit Line (the ROK government purports a DPRK submarine attacked the ROK Navy corvette) (2010); and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island during US-ROK military exercises (2010).

that proposed to its ally, the Soviet Union, that Korea be divided along the 38th parallel. Three years later the Cold War was in full swing, the Soviet and American occupation forces created two Koreas, and the stage was set for the Korean War. The armistice that stopped full-scale war in 1953 was not followed by a peace treaty that would have brought the war to some resolution. In fact, the armistice agreement has been repeatedly violated by North Korea, South Korea, and the UN Command led by the United States.

Historians like Steven Lee (2013) have pointed out that the US was responsible for fateful violations of the armistice: in 1958, the UN Command, led by the United States, unilaterally declared that it would no longer abide by paragraph 13(d) of the armistice which stipulates that no new weapons should be introduced to the peninsula. That same year, the United States introduced tactical atomic weapons to South Korea, in violation of 13(d) of the armistice.⁶ South Korea, for its part, made many military incursions across the DMZ, as did North Korea.⁷ The number of soldiers killed in these various operations is significant: for example, in the period 1966–1969, during North Korea’s militant phase,⁸ 43 American, 299 South Korean, and 397 North Korean soldiers were killed in “low intensity conflict” along the DMZ (Bolger 1991, 112). Rather than a stepping stone to peace, the armistice (with paragraph 13[d] disregarded) created the conditions for the extreme militarization of the Korean Peninsula.

6. In 1953, Syngman Rhee (president of South Korea, 1948–1960) refused to sign the Armistice, but he did assure the United States that South Korea would abide by the truce agreement. In 1991, President George H. W. Bush withdrew tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea.

7. In a 1976 meeting chaired by then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a week after two US soldiers were killed in the Joint Security Area by North Korean soldiers (the ax murder incident), Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements told those present: “I have been told that there have been 200 other such operations [by the South Koreans] and that none of these have surfaced.” Kissinger responded, “It is different for us with the War Powers Act” (*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume E–12, Documents on East and Southeast Asia, 1973–1976, Document 286). There are public testimonies that confirm ROK military operations across the DMZ. In a 2011 interview, for example, Lee Jin-sam revealed that in 1967 he was involved in retaliation raids across the DMZ, raids that killed 33 North Korean soldiers. At the time Lee was a captain and head of an Army intelligence unit (T. Lee 2011).

8. See Szalontai (2012, 122–166).

It is against this backdrop that we have to understand how North Korea has been constituted as a rogue state, a threatening outlaw. For scholars more removed from US policy-making institutions and networks, the challenge has been how to be critical of North Korea's authoritarian state, for example, without simply reinforcing the crime-and-punishment approach where North Korea is posed as a problem, a problem that *we must solve*. It may come as a surprise to non-specialists that it is not just North Korea that is a problem, and even when North Korea is the problem, there are immense differences in how the problem is understood: for example, what North Korea did or did not do (*historia*) is itself a terrain of contestation. As for what should be done or not done, that is a question that carries immense consequences for not only the people of both Koreas but the Northeast Asia region as a whole. For such reasons, scholars committed to critical scholarship have had to think deeply about questions of epistemology, indeed how and what becomes visible (recognized, misrecognized) in relation to North Korea.

In spite of the oft-repeated claim that North Korea is inscrutable, a now sizable body of scholarly writing renders North Korea's history, culture, and political economy knowable, as a field of study with immensely interesting, and intense, debates. What I have chosen to do in this essay is to bring together an admittedly subjective selection of scholarship on North Korea, limited to just a number of works in IR, history, cultural studies, and political economy published in the past thirty years.⁹ In terms of an affinity between them, the scholarship discussed in this essay variously situate North Korea in broad historical movements and trends, to reveal comparabilities, in a theoretically informed, self-reflexive way. Some explicitly make the point that North Korea's faults are more universal than usually acknowledged. Taken together, this review of critical scholarship on North Korea addresses overtly political questions like defector testimonies and human rights, regime type and famine in the 1990s, *historia* of the first nuclear crisis (June 1994) and post-mortem of the Agreed Framework (October 1994), as well

9. In the past three decades, English-language scholarship on North Korea has advanced tremendously. It would be quite difficult to provide a comprehensive overview of the field.

as more academic (but no less political) topics like revolution and socialist modernity after liberation, life, labor, and ideology in postwar North Korea. The first problem to be addressed, however, is knowledge, focusing on how commonsense knowledge about North Korea is produced and disseminated in Europe and North America.

North Korea, Seen and Unseen

An analytical concept like visibility is relatively novel to international relations theory. But visibility, visual regimes, and organization of vision are the points of departure for David Shim's *Visual Politics and North Korea*, published in 2014. This book raised a fundamental question of how North Korea becomes visible and legible to *us*. In the humanities, discussion of visuality has a much longer history. But as a social scientist trained in IR, Shim's work drew attention to ubiquitous images of North Korea in the media: for example, soldiers marching in a military parade, and photos of human suffering, especially children, each photo functioning as a synecdoche to represent the real North Korea. Shim shows how such images both reflect and help sustain the irresolution of the Korean War, and the everyday practice of enmity toward North Korea.¹⁰ In the Introduction, Shim quotes Ansel Adams (1902–1984), photographer of the American West whose black-and-white photos of Yosemite National Park became iconic: "You don't take a photograph, you make it." A photograph cannot be separated from the photographer's construal of reality, and in that sense, Shim is able to show how photos of North Korea are *made*.

10. In 2000, after the first summit between the leaders of South and North Korea (Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il), there were striking changes in South Korea in representation and reception of images about North Korea: The Kim Jong-il who appeared on South Korean television seemed "warm and cute," "unexpectedly humorous," and "shockingly likable." "Kim Jong-il shokeu, eundunja-eseo supeoseuta-ro" (The Kim Jong-il Shock: From Recluse to Superstar), *Sindonga* (New East Asia) 490 (July 1, 2000): 76–89, as quoted in Ryu (2015). After the 2018 meeting between the leaders of the US and DPRK (Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un), more varied images of North Korea also appeared in the global media.

Similar to museums or exhibitions, which are spatial organizations of seeing, Shim shows how images, including documentary photo essays, embed sight into a predefined context. North Korea is presented as a problem that we must pay attention to, if not solve. In this visual/epistemological regime, we cannot imagine North Korea as a home for North Koreans.

We expect people from North Korea to be awaiting liberation because North Korea is imag(in)ed as a site that can only be abandoned; it exists outside of the modern world, even outside of time, and is incapable of change and entrapped in an eternal past. Represented in this way, it becomes clear what North Korea is not: home. (Shim 2014, 78)

As an IR scholar, Shim is at home talking about issues of war and peace, regime change, and human rights as a terrain of great power contestation. But he gets at those issues by considering how photos, including satellite photos, constitute viewers as “witnesses.” Shim’s work called attention to how images of North Korea are created and circulated within visual regimes that place North Korea and North Koreans within a system of relations, constituting the viewer as a subject in the system—I as someone who can (and should) become a rescuer, and them as victims awaiting rescue. Thus, with moral indignation, we contemplate another military intervention to save those who are suffering.

In an earlier study, Hazel Smith had written about the problem of misrecognition. In her essay “Bad, Mad, Sad or Rational Actor?” published in 2000, two years before George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech, Smith noted how the securitization paradigm permeates writings on North Korea. The securitization paradigm portrays North Korean politics as “mad” in the sense of irrationality and unknowability and “bad” in the sense of the motivation and impetus for policy being ascribed to normatively unacceptable characteristics of the state and its leadership. (Smith 2000) Established media outlets in Europe and North America were eager to run stories about North Korea, and lurid stories were par for the course. Indeed, after 9/11, the assumption that the DPRK is motivated by malevolence and belligerence, and that its leadership’s foreign and domestic policies are evil

in intent, made it possible to imagine that North Korea is ready to attack the United States.

There are structural and financial reasons for the way North Korea's leaders and the people's everyday life are represented. Some stories about North Korea are "too good to check." A paper presented at an academic conference organized by Hazel Smith in 2014, by a journalist who wished to remain anonymous, made these points:¹¹ 1) With the growth of the Internet and social media, and decreasing demand for traditional print and broadcast media, there is less money available to maintain foreign bureaus, editorial staff, and journalists with deep knowledge. 2) Relying on click-based advertising systems to generate revenue, there is more incentive for journalists to generate stories that have the potential to go viral. There is great demand for stories about North Korea, and thus, there is a financial motive behind stories with headlines like "Kim Jong Un's executed uncle was eaten alive by 120 hungry dogs: report."¹² 3) Standard practice requires two independent sources to verify a story. But this standard is usually ignored for reports on North Korea. Moreover, by citing a third-party source, with wording such as "sources say," the editors of mainstream press avoid responsibility. Pyongyang does not bother to correct even the most outrageous stories, and there is little to no repercussion or penalty for false, pack journalism.¹³

11. The conference took place at the University of Central Lancashire, October 16–17, 2014.

12. "Kim Jong Un's executed uncle was eaten alive by 120 hungry dogs: report," *NBC News*, January 4, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/kim-jong-uns-executed-uncle-was-eaten-alive-120-hungry-flna2D11847017>. This story first appeared at the Chinese social media site Tencent Weibo as a satirical joke the day Jang was executed. For unknown reasons, the Hong Kong-based *Wen Wei Po* republished the satirical posting as a legitimate news story. Twelve days later, the story was picked up by Singapore's *Straits Times*. After that, media sources everywhere reported the story, citing the *Straits Times* and *Wen Wei Po*, without any additional research. Cited in paper presented (anonymous).

13. This created a situation where those who want factual information and informed analysis about North Korea have turned to sites like *38 North* (<https://www.38north.org/>).

What Happened?

In 2017, the editor of *38 North* pointed out that the media's frequent misrecognition or misrepresentation of events in North Korea is matched by misrecognition and misrepresentation by US government officials, experts, and even academics. "This failure (or refusal) to understand history has led the US down the wrong path more than once in trying to cope with the North and still could, in the future, with potentially disastrous consequences for the US as well as our close allies, South Korea and Japan."¹⁴ Understanding the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework is an important case in point. The standard (wrong) narrative should be familiar to many readers: "North Korea accepted the carrots offered by the (Clinton) administration in the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework—two multi-billion dollar reactors and heavy fuel oil shipments—then cheated when it was supposed to be denuclearizing and learned the lesson that it could profit by provoking the West."¹⁵ In contrast, Leon Sigal's 1997 book, *Disarming Strangers*, provided what is arguably the most accurate account available. With insight into the processes and context of policy formation in Washington, Seoul, and at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Sigal provides a detailed account of why the Clinton administration took the "crime-and-punishment" approach (when dealing with a rogue state, the stick is better than the carrot, any compromise or inducement is appeasement), why the Kim Young-sam government did not embrace rapprochement, why the IAEA wanted total compliance, and how all this brought Korea to the brink of war in early 1994.

Sanctions might have spurred North Korean bomb-making; they could not prevent it. Even a total trade embargo could not have kept North Korea from making nuclear arms since it already had whatever it needed to make them. Denying it oil might eventually have caused its economy to

14. "The Danger of Fake History," *38 North*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/08/editor081817/>.

15. "The Danger of Fake History," *38 North*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/08/editor081817/>.

collapse, but this prospect worried South Korea, Japan, and China, which would have to suffer the consequences—mass migration, instability, and possibly war...

The threat of military force was no more credible than sanctions. If North Korea had nuclear arms or enough plutonium to make them, U.S. intelligence had no idea where they were, and air strikes could not target what could not be found. Even striking the reactor at Yŏngbyŏn risked spewing radiation on Japan. That left the option of conquering North Korea, but for good reason, neither the United States nor South Korea wanted to take that risk, especially with a potentially nuclear-armed North. Economic sanctions and military force were empty threats. (Sigal 1997, 9)

The breakthrough came via Track II diplomacy, when former President Jimmy Carter, with support from several NGOs, visited Pyongyang, undercutting the sanctions strategy and overturning US policy. In comparison to the Clinton administration's claim (the standard narrative) that its coercive diplomacy induced North Korea to sign the 1994 Agreed Framework, Sigal's account is more compelling. Needless to say, the difference in historical interpretation has huge implications for formulating policy in the present. In his 1999 review of *Disarming Strangers*, Victor Cha, who would later become the top North Korea advisor in the George W. Bush administration, actually praised Sigal's book for providing "a comprehensive account that undercuts the conventional and largely uninformed wisdom of this complicated crisis." Sigal's account showed that, vis-a-vis North Korea, 1) engagement is not appeasement, but a proactive strategy by the strong, 2) engagement is a long-term policy that requires "unrequited rounds of cooperation," 3) Inducements are initially more expensive than threats, but if the United States has to make good on those threats, then engagement is cheaper than coercion, 4) inducements have to be robust, if they are to transform North Korea's preferences, and 5) transforming North Korea's preferences is better than imposing material constraints on behavior (Cha 1999, 148–149).

To be clear, the scholarship on North Korea that I include under the category of “critical scholarship” does not present North Korea as a peace-loving democracy. These writers are not naive. They know very well that the North Korean regime maintains a repressive system. But they are scholars whose work is meant to be read as a much needed corrective to war politics,¹⁶ and narratives that depend on (Cold War) cognitive practices. Critical scholarship is essential because portrayals of North Korea that depend on Cold War epistemology are replicated by political leaders at pivotal moments: for example, by the President of the United States, as in George W. Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address:

Some of these regimes [regimes that sponsor terror] have been pretty quiet since September 11, but *we know their true nature*. North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens.¹⁷

The Famine

In what sense did the North Korean regime “starve its own citizens”? Meredith Woo-Cumings’ analysis, published in 2002, compared North Korea’s famine in the 1990s to the history of famines in modern times. She reminds us that under colonial rule or foreign occupations, malign neglect brought about famine. In 1900, in the U.S.-occupied Philippines, there was massive starvation in the rebel-held areas. Under Japanese occupation in Tonkin, 1944–1945, people starved. So too in British occupied India, including the 1877 famine in the Indian Deccan, as well as Great Bengal Famine of 1943. People starved also during wars and revolutions: for example, during the Paris Commune, in Germany during the last stages of World War I, or during armed sieges, the most famous being the siege of Stalingrad in 1942–1943. Finally, famine sometimes occurred

16. Regarding the term “war politics,” see Em, et al. (2015, 838).

17. “Text of President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address,” *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2002, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm>.

because of ideological politics, like poor central planning, failed or violent agricultural reforms, and ethnic cleansing. Infamous examples include Stalin's collectivization schemes and the ensuing famine in the Ukraine, and in Cambodia, from 1975 when the Lon Nol government collapsed and Pol Pot came to power, to 1979 when the Vietnamese invaded and overthrew the Khmer Rouge, the famine that occurred there combined war with ideological criminality (Woo-Cumings 2002, 4).

With that historical backdrop, Woo-Cumings showed why the famine in North Korea was an anomaly. 1) The famine occurred forty years after collectivization; (2) by the 1980s, according to the CIA and other outside observers, North Korea had achieved food self-sufficiency; (3) by the 1990s, North Korea was an urban and industrial, if not fully industrialized, country; and (4) the public distribution system had functioned well, was highly egalitarian, and had years of experience in shifting food between regions to relieve shortages. So what happened? Here, the work of Amartya Sen would have to be considered. Sen argued that *famine is rarely if ever about insufficient stocks of food*; it is about the politics of food distribution. "Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat (Sen 1983, 1; emphasis in original). That is to say, according to Sen, the cause of famine has to do with political regime type. In democracies (such as India), while there may be people who go to bed hungry, a free press and competing political parties will prevent the situation from reaching a point where you have mass starvation. While that may be true, Woo-Cumings asked, is the absence of an open press and adversarial politics sufficient to cause famine? In other words, was the North Korean government's (presumed) immunity to public pressure one of the causes of mass death from starvation?

Woo-Cumings points out that Sen's definition locates famine at the far end of a spectrum of poverty and deprivation. Sen does not conceive of famine as a cataclysmic breakdown of an entire economic and social system, which is what happened in North Korea. In 1991, the North Korean economy was primarily industrial and highly energy-intensive. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, so too did trade between the Soviet Union and North Korea. The Soviet Union had exported oil to North Korea at

prices substantially lower than world market prices. The end of subsidies and demand for hard currency led to a collapse of North Korea's energy regime, which greatly impacted the industrial sector. Heavily dependent on industrial inputs—tractors, fuel, fertilizer, and electricity (needed for irrigation)—when the industrial sector collapsed North Korea's agriculture also collapsed. That is to say, North Korea's agricultural crisis occurred *after* the industrial crisis. Then, natural calamities (primarily floods, which also damaged coalmines and hydroelectric production, followed by drought) in 1995 and 1996 pushed North Korea into full-fledged famine. As its food distribution system collapsed, North Korea pleaded for the world to come to its aid. To say the least, George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address ignored or misrepresented the circumstances that brought about famine in mid-1990s North Korea.

The Testimonial

In *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea*, Sandra Fahy reveals how the North Korean state prevented its citizens from using direct language to refer to the famine experience. Drawing on interviews with famine survivors living in Seoul and Tokyo, Fahy lists government-sanctioned ways of speaking about hunger, food shortage, and death. According to one interviewee,

If someone had died of hunger you couldn't say that they were so hungry they died. You would 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 hungry, so I can't do it." "I'm in pain," you could say. "I'm hungry," you couldn't say that.¹⁸ (Fahy 2018, 86–87)

18. Yoon Jae-young (age 45), quoted in Fahy (2018, 86–87).

From these interviews Fahy learned that state-sanctioned ways of speaking about the famine experience were reinforced through threats and violence. More distressing, without opportunities to share frank opinions, suspicions, and doubts, and in a situation where “even the most minor of frustrations could, if voiced, result in life-or-death punishments,” the population is “preemptively disarmed and dissidence squashed before it could be imagined” (Fahy 2018, 130).

A question that Fahy then asks is “Why did some people stay rather than leave?” Her conclusion is that many couldn’t because of geography and other practical reasons. At the same time, she notes that the most common refrain was, “I never would have left if I had not been so hungry or so ill” (Fahy 2018, 128). She writes that “for many interviewees leaving North Korea was not an intentionally political or legal gesture; it was not necessarily defection but rather a way of making ends meet” (Fahy 2018, 139). While the majority of defectors had every intention of returning, in some cases the decision not to go back to North Korea but continue on to third countries “came only after learning about the difficulties to be had in staying in China or upon trying to reenter the North” (Fahy 2018, 138–139).

Some North Korean migrants who continued on to third countries have become human rights activists. Given recognition as victims, it would seem unethical to question the truthfulness of stories that North Koreans who left North Korea tell about themselves and their experiences. Thus, journalists and most academics find it difficult to question or cast doubt on testimony given by North Korean migrants/defectors. But Jiyoung (Jay) Song, a scholar with experience as a consultant for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Geneva), points to the necessity of asking, to what degree are the voices of North Korean defectors an accurate reflection of North Korean society as a whole? Regarding various transnational networks that have been formed, how have such networks sought to use defector testimony to advance their own agendas?

How are defectors treated within the international activist community?
Are their testimonies honored, or are there instances when defector-activists have been undermined, selectively chosen to further particular

causes, or, alternatively, abandoned when the claims do not fit a particular narrative? Whose voices do we hear, what broader political, ideological or personal agenda do these voices reflect, and which narratives are missing? (Song 2018, 202)

In her book, Fahy points out that the formation of an injustice frame (a cognitive/ narrative frame that views the North Korean system as fundamentally malign) is necessary but not sufficient for a North Korean migrant to make the decision to once and for all abandon their country (Fahy 2018, 139). In a review essay, Fahy also noted how the “contemporary geopolitical context on the peninsula shapes what kinds of stories get told on both sides of the 38th parallel” (Fahy 2016, 849). Jay Song, however, has been more willing to actually consider that geopolitical context. Song has shown that North Korean defectors who become human rights activists become activists via networks that are politically conservative, economically libertarian, ideologically anti-communist, and religiously Christian (Song 2021, 49).

In addition, Song points out that many stories told by North Koreans were later found to be fabrications. The list includes parts of testimony by well-known defectors like Shin Dong-hyuk, Lee Soonok, and Kwon Hyuk.

Shin Dong-hyuk met George W. Bush, and his story became an international best seller. But many prominent North Koreans, including Kang Myongdo, whose uncle used to be the head of Camp 14, and others, all said that Shin’s stories were lies. In 2015 Shin confessed that some of the stories in his book were not true, raising serious questions about the veracity of his testimony.

Lee Soonok offered testimony to the US House of Representatives in 2004 about torture and burning Christians to death in hot iron liquid in a North Korean political prison. Lee was, however, later found not to be a political prisoner but a petty economic criminal.

Kwon Hyuk gave accounts to the U.S. Congress that he was an intelligence officer at the DPRK Embassy in Beijing and witnessed human

experiments in political prisons, which became a critical factor for passing the U.S. North Korea Human Rights Act in 2004. Kwon's identity, however, was questioned by South Korea's Yonhap News Agency, which argued that he never had access to such information.¹⁹ (Song 2015)

Song has identified a number of problems, and ethical dilemmas, involving methodologies used in investigating North Korean human rights. These include, 1) Cash payments for interviewing North Korean refugees: According to Song, in the late 1990s when she first began interviewing North Korean refugees in China and South Korea, payment was to cover the meals and local transport for interviewees, which at the time was approximately US\$30. However, by May 2014, the fees were up to US\$200 per hour. Today, depending on the quality of information fees can range from US\$50 to US\$500 per hour. 2) One-on-one interviews: These often generate exaggerated stories and inaccurate information. Double or triple cross-examination, and checking multiple sources requires a great deal of time, time that researchers often do not have. 3) Use of false identities and identity laundering: Changing names and even identity laundering are common among North Koreans who have escaped their home country. Lee Hyeonseo, for example, author of *The Girl with Seven Names*, talks about her experiences in China and South Korea, using different names or pretending to be Chinese to survive in harsh new environments. Song asks, to what extent can or should a researcher believe the stories of those who keep changing their identities?

For Song, "There is no doubt the North Korean regime has violated serious human rights." At the same time, she writes, "There is also a fundamental question about heavily relying on defector's testimonies as credible evidence."

North Korean refugees are well aware of what the interviewer wants to hear. Whether it is the UN COI [Commission of Inquiry], the U.S. Congress or the Western media, the question has been consistent: why

19. See also Jiyoung Song's blog, <https://songjiyoung.wordpress.com/2015/07/23/in-the-making-of-north-korean-defector-activists/>.

did you leave North Korea and how terrible is it? The more terrible their stories are, the more attention they receive. The more international invitations they receive, the more cash comes in... In my 16 years of studying North Korean refugees, I have experienced numerous inconsistent stories, intentional omission and lies. I have also witnessed some involved in fraud and other illicit activities. In one case the breach of trust was so significant that I could not continue research. It affected my professional capacity to analyze and deliver credible stories in an ethical manner but also had a deep impact on personal trust I invested in the human subjects I sincerely cared about. (Song 2015)

Critique of Human Rights

In 2015, when Jiyoung (Jay) Song pointed out how false testimonies are detrimental to both activists and researchers who work on North Korean human rights, she was doing so in a situation where, for over two decades, influential thinkers, legal theorists, and activists had raised fundamental questions about the politics of human rights and its conceptualization. Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights*, for example, published in 2007, began by quoting two revolutionary documents from the late 18th century that galvanized opinion around the world about rights. In the Declaration of Independence (1776), certain truths were claimed to be self-evident: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights..." In the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, promulgated in 1789, French revolutionaries proclaimed the "natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man." As a core statement of the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man had a huge impact. One of its key authors was the Marquis de Lafayette, an aristocrat. Thomas Jefferson, who authored the American Declaration, was a slave owner.

In the history of "the West" since the late 18th century, a history punctuated by the violence of patriarchy, slavery, racism, exploitation, and genocide that accompanied the establishment of modernity and colonial empires, how, and in what sense, did *equality of rights* become "self-

evident”? In what sense was/is human rights, and international law as well, in fact complicit in that history of violence? For a scholar of jurisprudence like Martti Koskeniemi, international law is not a stable set of normative demands. Instead, *international law is better understood as an aspect of hegemonic contestation*. As a hegemonic technique, international law can be understood as political preferences in the form of legal claims that are not detached from conditions of political contestation (Koskeniemi 2004, 197–218). As the political theorist Wendy Brown has observed about American military intervention around the world, American aggression is legitimated by law and the inviolability of rights and choice, each of which is said to be “universal.” In 2002, almost four months after the United States launched its war in Afghanistan, George W. Bush declared,

We have no intention of imposing our culture. But America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women; private property; free speech, equal justice; and religious tolerance.²⁰ (Brown 2008, 172)

As the 21st-century equivalent of 19th-century civilizational discourse distinguishing the Occident from Orient—today, liberal contrasted to illiberal regimes, *free* contrasted to *unfree* peoples—Bush was again asking the American people to bear the burden of teaching tolerance to an intolerant world.

Whether as liberal tolerance discourse, or as discourse on freedom and human rights, the habitual assertions of American exceptionalism, Western superiority, and of ethical responsibility toward those who need help, work to elide and render invisible the conditions imposed on various peoples, especially women, by global capitalism. What we see, however, is the alleged barbarism of a religion, a native culture, or a political regime that is made the target of “progressive” reform, and not “imperial conquest, colonial political and economic deformation, and contemporary economic exploitation” (Brown 2008, 198). Following 9/11, and in the crucible of

20. The invasion was dubbed “Operation Enduring Freedom.”

the US “War on Terror,” Christine Hong, a scholar in American Studies, has pointed out that “U.S.-based North Korean human rights (NKHR), as a state-level and ‘grassroots’ discourse and politics aimed at regime change, assumed powerful institutional dimensions, political sway, and transnational visibility.” As organizations like Liberation in North Korea (later Liberty in North Korea, or LiNK) formed and gained traction, they sought and circulated images of human suffering circa the 1990s’ famine, especially of emaciated children. Those images were made to speak volumes, as indictments of the alleged genocidal nature of the North Korean government. “[Such] images of precarious life aim[ed] to secure a specific political outcome: the extinction of North Korea’s leadership” (Hong 2013, 565).

Broadly, Hong would have us see contemporary human rights as an ethicopolitical discourse that strives to reassert the dominance of the global North over the global South. In that sense, human rights discourse is relentlessly presentist. Specific to North Korea, the history of American intervention in Korea since 1945 gets elided, the assignment of blame sustains a regime-change agenda, while the human rights framing enables the United States, a perpetrator and beneficiary of past injustices, to assume a moralizing, threatening posture.

Cordoning off North Korea’s alleged crimes for discrete consideration while turning a willfully blind eye to the violence of sanctions, “humanitarian” intervention, and the withholding of humanitarian and developmental aid, the North Korean human rights project has allowed a spectrum of political actors—U.S. soft-power institutions, thinly renovated Cold War defense organizations, hawks of both neoconservative and liberal varieties, conservative evangelicals, anticommunist Koreans in South Korea and the diaspora, and North Korean defectors—to join together in common cause. (Hong 2014, 1)

As for conservative Protestant evangelical networks that link megachurches and mission organizations in the United States and South Korea, Judy Han’s ethnographic studies of safe houses in China has cast new light on South

Korean Protestant evangelical humanitarian efforts in China. In clandestine safe houses, evangelical missionaries act as self-appointed custodians for vulnerable subjects—North Koreans in China who have no papers—who can expect prosecution, and no protection, from the governments of North Korea or China. In these safe houses, these missionaries, working secretly, help the undocumented migrants evade state authorities and facilitate travel for those seeking a better livelihood or asylum status in South Korea. As these missionaries harbor border-crossers in the precarious territory of rapidly changing economies and contentious geopolitics, their intentions, assistance, and pastoral prerogatives are made manifest as Christian faith. Referring to the fundamentally unequal power relations, and to authority and transactions exercised by these South Korean missionaries as “custodial power,” Han shows how North Koreans who sought their protection are disciplined into the mold of proper Christian subjects who would bring the people of North Korea to Christ (Han 2013, 557).

Revolution, and the Everyday

The antagonism between Korean Christians and communists goes back at least a century. In 1920s colonial Korea, Korean leftists denounced religion, especially Christianity, for supporting capitalism and imperialism, and for promoting superstition and an escapist life. After liberation in 1945, although Christians constituted less than 3 percent of the population, foreign (especially American) missionaries, the Roman Catholic Church, and Korean Christians played a pivotal role in establishing South Korea as an anti-communist state—especially Protestants from the northwest region of Korea who had fled south (Em 2020, 16, 25–26). Those who fled to the American zone—Christians, landlords, former colonial officials and police—were fleeing from surveillance and repression in the Soviet zone where Korean communists had come to power. If those who fled south had experienced restrictions on speech and political organizing, and some amount of violence, such repression likely stemmed from efforts to oppose the Trusteeship Agreement (an American proposal that the Soviets had

accepted), or efforts to resist land reform, empowerment of women, and restrictions on religious institutions, or just voicing dislike of communism and atheism. For historians, to describe this revolutionary scene in 1945–1950 North Korea in a positive light is politically fraught, especially in southern/South Korea where the emigres made their new home (S. Kim 2013, 223).²¹

A number of historians who have looked deeply into the archives of captured North Korean documents describe revolutionary transformations in northern/North Korea during the 1945–1950 period as having mass support and participation.²² In her book *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (2013), Suzy Kim accepts that Soviet occupation authorities wanted to mold the emerging North Korean state, and that they played a decisive role in drafting the Constitution, forming key institutions like the Korean People’s Army, and training party cadres. But in her reading of that archive—letters, diaries, personnel files, minutes of meetings of various organizations, educational materials, newspapers, magazines, court documents, and photographs—she shows that the revolutionary transformations of everyday life of local villages was something “that no Soviet official could have orchestrated” (S. Kim 2013, 6–7).

Indeed, the captured documents give evidence to the transformation of everyday life that was central to the creation of what Suzy Kim calls socialist modernity in North Korea.²³ Her book is rich in documentary evidence

21. After witnessing conditions in southern Korea, it seems some crossed back over the 38th parallel. According to an American intelligence report “refugees coming to south Korea from Manchuria and some few from north Korea, wish to return there after seeing conditions (housing and food prices) in south Korea.” RG 554 Records of General HQ, Far East Command, Supreme Commander Allied Powers and United Nations Command, USAFIK XXIV corps, G-2, Historical Section, box 65, “G-2 Reports and Data on North Korea Pertinent on South Korea” (folder 1 of 2), Foreign Affairs Section (February 22, 1946), quoted in Suzy Kim (2013, 223).

22. These documents were declassified in 1977. They are housed at the National Archives II in College Park, Maryland, under Record Group 242. Bruce Cumings was the historian who dug the deepest and had the most profound impact on our understanding of the liberation period. See his two volumes on the origins of the Korean War.

23. In his 2004 book, Charles Armstrong saw this revolutionary process as resulting in “modernization without modernity” (2004, 7).

of revolutionary change in everyday life. In an essay published in the April 1948 issue of *Joseon yeoseong* (Korean Women), for example, a writer described changes in women's attitudes and bodily practices in the small village of Omokdong in northern Korea.

When I entered this village, the chairwoman of the women's league greeted me, readily putting forth her hand first. When had shaking hands without any awkwardness become a habit for women in their forties in such an isolated village? (S. Kim 2013, 197)

The writer went on to describe "women standing up and speaking in public, shaking hands, and going to school... [This writer wrote about] women campaigning for voter turnout with a baby on their back, going to the polls despite being nine months pregnant, and postponing their wedding day in order to participate fully in the electoral process" (S. Kim 2013, 198). It was a revolutionary time when gender equality was on the political agenda, and considered central to constructing socialist modernity. It was a time when changing the fabric of everyday life seemed full of positive potential.

A work that stands in tension with Suzy Kim's book, Cheehyung Harrison Kim's *Heroes and Toilers: Work as Life in Postwar North Korea, 1953–1961* (2018), also looks at the everyday. But C. Harrison Kim rejects the view that the revolutionary forging of the everyday in the 1945–1950 period ushered in a socialist modernity. He acknowledges that there were momentous transformations in the postliberation period:

1. The land reform of 1946 confiscated land from the Japanese government and nationals, people who had extensively benefited from Japan, landlords with more than 5 *jeongbo* of land (around 12 acres, at 2.45 acres per *jeongbo*, or 5 hectares), absentee landlords, large tenant farmers, and religious organizations... For the 724,522 households receiving land for free, especially the 62.5 percent who had never owned any land, the land reform was the first sweet taste of socialism.
2. [New labor laws that went into effect in June 1946 mandated] (1) the eight-hour workday; (2) the shortening of dangerous work to seven

hours; (3) the ban on labor for people younger than age fourteen; (4) wage and labor contracts; (5) gender equality in wages; (6) paid time off after childbirth; (7) a workers' social welfare system; and (8) collective bargaining.

3. [New laws on gender equality that went into effect in July 1946] legalized gender equality in elections, wages, insurance, education, marriage, divorce, property ownership, and inheritance rights. (C. Kim 2018, 23–24)

However, for C. Harrison Kim, these transformations also began the state's takeover of the everyday, so that the end of revolution came with the Korean War and North Korea's version of war communism.

After the Korean War, the political world came under the control of Kim Il-sung and his faction of former partisans of Manchuria, workers' rights established during the postliberation period were suspended, and trade unions and factory management came under party control. For C. Harrison Kim, a key moment in socialism's dissolution in North Korea was February 1959, when the General Federation of Trade Unions openly accepted the party's goals as the unions' goals. Thus, rather than creating a socialist modernity, the authority of the state in industrial production became permanent, and the exploitative conditions of capitalism came to be re-created in North Korea. In place of the bourgeois class, the state became the mediating agent in the exchange of labor power for wage. To increase production and productivity, and to promote innovations in the workplace, the state organized mass movements. That is to say, Kim Il-sung, his family, and the "ruling class loyal to the family functioned much like the bourgeois class in organizing the accumulation of surplus" (C. Kim 2018, 3–10).

Whereas for Suzy Kim the North Korean revolution created a socialist modernity, C. Harrison Kim is arguing that revolution did not establish socialism in North Korea but rather industrialism, a political-economic realm where capital thrives. One cannot deny that both the capitalist and socialist blocs pursued industrialism. But, in spite of similarities in structured processes—labor power compensated by wages, and exploitation

via the seizure of surplus value—I think many readers would balk at seeing past the surface/qualitative differences, as C. Harrison Kim does, between work and ideology in North Korea and South Korea. A reader who finds both books compelling might be able to force a thread of narrative coherence by amplifying a statement in the conclusion of Suzy Kim’s book:

The novel revolutionary organs of self-governance in the form of people’s committees as a platform for a new kind of everyday were in the end subsumed under centralized state power, resulting in the ossification of the everyday as a creative and revolutionary potential in North Korea. (S. Kim 2013, 246)

What then is the significance of revolution in the 1945–1950 period? Is there a legacy or enduring significance to transformations as described in this 1948 handwritten self-narrative by a poor tenant farmer named Seo Yeong-jun?

As a poor peasant family since before my grandparents, we lived as tenant farmers to Mr. Kim Un-pu in Sökhwadong [Seokhwadong] for 13 years and in 1925 lived as Mr. Pak Pyöng-öp’s [Bak Byeong-eup] farmhand in Sökhodong, not only oppressed and exploited but also bitterly suffering a wretched life, not able to go to school... until liberation when we were allotted land, and I was able to farm freely and live a life of freedom. Before liberation, I couldn’t even read, but after liberation in 1946, I started attending Korean School until 1947, learning to read and participate in organizational life... joining the Youth League on May 26, 1946 and the Peasant League on February 10, 1946... and taking charge of the party cell on January 6, 1948... (S. Kim 2013, 16–17)

We do not know whether Seo Yeong-jun survived the Korean War, or whether he was a good man and a kind leader. We do know that a multitude of people with backgrounds similar to Seo Yeong-jun’s took part in a socially transformative revolution. For his part, C. Harrison Kim would have us recognize how the entire world has to change, fundamentally, and what that would entail: “a global structure of reciprocity—of ideas, technologies [intellectual property], and practices of peace” (C. Kim 2018, 205).

North Korea as Neighbor

Much like my reading of the Statue of Brothers outside the War Museum in Seoul, Shine Choi identifies a similar kind of murderous love in films that South Korean viewers welcomed as post-Cold War films. A scholar trained in international relations theory, one of the films Choi analyzed was the 1999 blockbuster action film *Shiri* that revolves around a North Korean female spy who dies to protect the South Korean NIS agent for whom she has fallen in love. *Shiri* presents the figure of the woman-in-love as empowered by that love: that is, empowered to become the woman she *really* is. It is love that pushes the North Korean female spy to undergo transformation, freeing herself from habits, political loyalties, and self-monitoring and self-discipline that had been drilled into her by the North Korean state. It is her falling-into-love that reveals to her North Korea's political structure as an impossible, outdated entity. The South Korean NIS agent, on the other hand, is a man of action who inhabits the stable center from which everything is perceived, and transformed. Choi points out that the story of love in *Shiri* is a two-becomes-one type of love where North Korea, and the barbaric heartless killer that it had molded and trained, is abandoned (Choi 2015, 119–136). Through Choi's feminist reading, *Shiri* emerges as a South Korean male fantasy that desires North Korea in a certain way, as feminine, and "human" by being stripped of its North Koreanness.

What is especially thought-provoking about Shine Choi's feminist reading of *Shiri* is the critique of masculine forms of love that suffused *progressive* South Korean narratives about national reconciliation and reunification as Kim Dae-jung became the first opposition candidate to become president of South Korea. In a different vein, it can be argued that, whether progressive or conservative, national reconciliation delivered by melodramatic love stories and logic of love—*the logic of two becoming one*—rests on the problematic principle of identity. The problem, here, has to be addressed at multiple levels. At the level of narrative, the problem stems in large part from contentious interpretations about the Korean War. As Balazs Szalontai has pointed out, both North and South Korea are "captives of the past." More so than the establishment of ideologically opposed states in

1948, it was the irresolution of the Korean War, and state-sanctioned stories about the cause and conduct of the war, that brought about deep and long-term estrangement and hostility: “Memories of mutual violence created a precedent for renewed acts of hostility, and induced both governments to instinctively question the sincerity of any conciliatory gesture made by the other side” (Szalontai 2013, 165).

Szalontai points out that in South Korea, with the findings of Truth Commissions established during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments, there is public acknowledgement of the fact that during the war both sides committed atrocities. In fact, of the civilians killed *in South Korea* during the war, the vast majority were killed not by leftists and the KPA but by the South Korean police, right-wing groups, and the army. In North Korea, during and immediately after the Korean War, the leadership of the Korean Workers Party admitted to “excesses” and “leftist errors.” But subsequently, having addressed the problem in 1951–1953, North Korea became “increasingly reluctant to allow the re-emergence of any sort of public discourse about the wartime injustices they had committed.” For North Korea, the most serious obstacle to a re-examination of past injustices has to do with:

the fact that in the supreme leadership of the DPRK, political power (and thus, by implication, political responsibility) has been inherited in the most literal sense, first by Kim Jong-il (the eldest son of Kim Il-sung), and then by Kim Jong-un. (Szalontai 2013, 3, 10)

As Youngju Ryu notes, a postcolonial strategy of arriving at transitional justice is to establish a public truth: though not adequate, a public truth is a necessary precondition for achieving reconciliation. However, in her reading of Hwang Seok-yeong’s *The Guest*, Ryu shows that the massacres like those that took place in Sincheon (Hwanghae province, in North Korea) during the Korean War may present instances where the “truth,” as contested personal memories, can make reconciliation impossible. Does (historical) truth really set us free? In some situations, the cost of insisting on truth may be too high. Sincheon was the site of an estimated thirty-five thousand

civilian deaths during some fifty-plus days of US occupation when UN forces had crossed north of the 38th parallel. Ryu writes,

The killings occurred not as a part of some tactical battle maneuver...but as a series of reprisals within a well-established community with a long shared history... Sweeping land reforms that did away with the category of landlord altogether [had] left many Protestant landowners disaffected, as did the persecution of the church. To add insult to injury, representatives of the Interim People's Committee entrusted with the authority to carry out the land reform at the local level were often poor peasants or farmhands from the area, well known to Protestant landowners as their social inferiors. Enmity between the groups thus became personal...It was this group (Protestant men and anticommunists from the South), then, that was primarily responsible for the massacre in Sincheon.

Hwang Seok-yeong's account highlights the increasingly intimate (rather than impersonal) nature of violence.²⁴ After the war, one of the characters in the novel, An Seongman, a devout Christian, testifies that he became a member of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) to atone for what happened. The wife of Yohan, another character in the novel, declares, "I think, even God was guilty then." Rather than acknowledge that such horrendous violence could have broken out among a population that the North Korean state had governed, the North Korean government chose to blame *all* the killings on US soldiers who were in control of the area when the massacres occurred. It is an instance of "reconciliation" (for Koreans) without the full truth. In the South, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has produced an abundance of truth, but not reconciliation between the descendants (and political successors) of the victims and perpetrators within South Korea. As Dong-Choon Kim has observed, politics in South Korea resembles "war politics"—that is, politics as a continuation of the war (Em et al. 2015, 838).

24. In *After the Korean War*, Heonik Kwon shows how neighbors and family members had to deal with the imperatives of opposing states, armies, and political forces that negated each other. Performing citizenship became impossible, neighborly trust broke down, and people had to carve, and recarve, niches of innocence. See Kwon (2020).

If not truth, followed by reconciliation, then what can be the basis for reconciliation between North and South Korea? Here, Ryu draws on the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, and his work on postpartition Calcutta.

Chakrabarty identifies “identity” and “proximity” as the two principal modes of living with difference in a postconflict society: “By *identity*, I mean a mode of relating to difference in which difference is either congealed or concealed. That is to say, either it is frozen, fixed, or it is erased by some claim of being identical or the same. By *proximity*, I mean the opposite mode, one of relating to difference in which (historical and contingent) difference is neither reified nor erased but negotiated.”²⁵

Ryu’s privileging of proximity over identity signifies a fundamental shift away from the “abstract belonging” that is presumed and compelled in 20th-century national narratives. Identity as the mode of relating does not create sufficient space for the unavoidable necessity of negotiating differences. We know too well that the affirmation of identity (We are one!) will not allow me to live alongside those who had been my victimizer, or those who had been my victim. On the other hand, proximity as the mode of living requires an affective relationship (‘love’) that is forged face to face, in the here and now. In proximity, love is not the two-becomes-one kind of (murderous) love; it is in the encounter with the other face, and recognizing my obligation to that face, that prompts in me the obligation to continuously negotiate difference, so that we may live as neighbors.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

In focusing on critical scholarship on North Korea, this essay did not attempt to be comprehensive. The focus was limited in several ways: to scholarship published since the 1990s, that addressed events involving North Korea before and after the Korean War and since the 1990s, and

25. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 140, as cited in Ryu (2015, 651).

“critical” in the sense of critiques that deepen respect, knowledge, and self-knowledge. Even within those limits, a number of important books were not discussed in this essay: for example, Sonia Ryang’s *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* (2012), published the same year as *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* by Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung. Both books address the question of what sustains the regime’s legitimacy over time, but they do so in very different ways.²⁶ With theoretical rigor, which this essay cannot adequately engage, both books explain the ideological mechanism by which North Koreans remain proud of being North Koreans.

In *The Korean War: A History*, Bruce Cumings pointed out that Americans “never knew their enemy—and they still don’t.” In writing the book, one of his aims was to seek to “uncover truths that most Americans do not know and perhaps don’t want to know, truths sometimes as shocking as they are unpalatable to American self-esteem” (Cumings 2010, 15). Scholarly work discussed in this essay speaks to truths that most South Koreans and North Koreans also do not know, and perhaps do not want to know. To some extent I would agree with C. Harrison Kim when he writes,

I do not subscribe to the view that North Korea possesses a particular ideology more powerful than other ideologies elsewhere. Nor do I think that ideology as it is commonly understood—as a mind-altering device with a corresponding reality of subjugation—possesses much explanatory usefulness...The ideological hold is found not so much in monuments and parades but in wages and apartments. Such a connection has relevance to the mechanism of ideology in general—in all places, not just in North Korea. (C. Kim 2018, 5)

26. Kwon and Chung argue that the art of rule in North Korea has to do with heritage politics in form and substance, and show the mechanisms by which a unity of familial moral solidarity and partisan regimental discipline are reproduced. For Sonia Ryang, the people–leader relationship is not based on (adoptive) kinship. North Korea is not a family state. A direct relationship is created between the North Korean subject and the leader who personifies one’s higher, superior self.

At the same time, the scholarship discussed in this essay makes it easier to understand why the Korean War remains unresolved, and why for so many it remains difficult to see North Korea, as a neighbor.²⁷

27. As of this writing, there are reports that after an extensive review, the Biden administration may ease economy-wide sanctions against countries like Iran and North Korea. Stepping back from sweeping pressure campaigns would lessen “collateral economic damage.” The easing of economy-wide sanctions would be a significant step toward ending the Korean War.

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