

NORTH KOREA: MEGALOMANIA, GENOCIDE, AND PROPAGANDA

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The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is a nation that has recently been in the spotlight due to international fear that its government may be manufacturing and planning to use weapons of mass destruction. However, because the government is extremely secretive, most people are not aware that the massive humanitarian crisis currently occurring in North Korea may be something just as dangerous. The government of North Korea is guilty of deliberately torturing, starving, and executing its own citizens; in "Crimes, Terror, and Secrecy in North Korea," Pierre Rigoulet states that the death toll over the past few decades is estimated to be about three million (564). Criticizing and intimidating the North Korean leaders for their actions could perpetuate, or even worsen, the problem; a new solution must be sought. Devising new policies to approach the North Korean government requires that we understand exactly why these leaders feel the need to murder their own people, because without knowing how they think, we cannot possibly solve the problem. Owing to the secrecy of the government, we only have defector testimonies, official statements given by the government, and secretly obtained information in order to make judgments about how the leaders think. However, it is absolutely necessary to analyze these sources before taking further measures to approach the problem, because the situation in the DPRK is a unique one and requires a plan that is specifically tailored to it

First, we should recognize how great a problem exists. North Korea is a nation with an oppressive totalitarian government led by Kim Jong Il that allows its people no basic rights such as "freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of movement" (Rigoulet 563). The government also inflicts tremendous suffering upon a large portion of its people in the form of torture, execution, and intentional starvation. For example, as Christophe Reltien discusses in "Humanitarian Action in North Korea: Ostrich Politics," there are over a dozen concentration camps that bear a striking resemblance to those of the Holocaust, and it has been estimated that over a hundred thousand prisoners are housed there (162). These prisoners are North Korean citizens who have committed "crimes" such as having Chinese or South Korean relatives, uttering words that have offended the government, having family members who have defected, or attempting to escape the country. The authorities

use inhumane torture and execution methods; one way of executing prisoners is to use them as moving targets for shooting practice (Rigoulet 556), and a defector has said that sometimes “prisoners were forced to fight each other to the death and tear each other up with their bare hands” (556). Nanchu, a native of China who visited North Korea and witnessed some of the horrors firsthand, gives statistics and tells her story in her book *In North Korea: An American Travels through an Imprisoned Nation* (2003). In 2002, she reports, the United Nations World Food Program reported that about four million North Korean children are nearing death from malnutrition, yet the government is highly reluctant to accept foreign food aid (26). Some of the North Korean victims are placed under house-arrest in deportation zones due to the fact that their family members have escaped to South Korea (Rigoulet 554). Others become victims solely because of their physical characteristics. “The handicapped are not allowed to live in Pyongyang [and] are exiled to remote mountainous regions or to islands in the Yellow Sea... Kim Jong Il himself has said that ‘the race of dwarves must disappear’” (Rigoulet 560). Pyongyang is the nation's capital, where “food, housing, health, and general living conditions are superior to those in the rest of the country,” and also where only the government trustees are allowed to live (Nanchu 76). Not surprisingly, it is the only area in North Korea that foreigners generally have access to; the government goes to great lengths to hide its “problems” in other places in the country. The extreme violence and injustice that Kim and his party have inflicted upon the North Korean people can be perceived as genocide. Christian Scherrer, author of *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Violence*, believes genocide to be the most barbaric crime, one that should be “clearly distinguished from warfare... [because] its victims are civilians, including old people, children, and even babies” (69). Although genocide usually describes one ethnic group murdering members of another, here the term will be applied to the North Korean government’s massacre of its own people. We as a global community have the responsibility to stop this humanitarian crisis. However, this is a unique situation; before we can intervene, we must understand the causes for the genocide and the North Korean leaders’ motives behind it.

The genocide in North Korea is a result of the combination of three factors that affect the way the leaders rule: *juche*, perceived “structural violence,” and utilitarianism. *Juche* is a ubiquitous ideology that serves as the basis for all of the government's beliefs and policies, and is perhaps the most important of the three. In

Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: How to Deal with a Nuclear North Korea, Michael E. O'Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki define *juche* as national self-reliance and self-control to be achieved by a state by any means necessary (28). The ideology of *juche* stresses power, wealth, and military prowess, but the problem is that North Korean leaders have not been able to attain that autonomy and, as a result, cannot proudly display their power to the rest of the world. However, admitting that they themselves are responsible for their problems might show that the leaders have failed to keep up the high standards of *juche*, and because the ideology of *juche* plays such an important role in North Korean affairs, the feeling of failure naturally must be extremely stressful for the leaders. In order to minimize those feelings of inadequacy and to have at least some sense of power, it seems that the leaders of the DPRK have altered their interpretation of *juche*. The regime is now more focused on showing to other nations that they are not having any problems and is attempting to hold onto at least some pride by flaunting control over their own people. However, understanding why violence against others results from these feelings of inferiority requires us to explore James Gilligan's concept of "structural violence."

The leaders of the DPRK suffer from perceived structural violence, which is an altered form of actual structural violence, a concept discussed by Gilligan in *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes*. Structural violence is defined as a nonphysical violence similar to oppression that results from rigid class structure. It is "suffered by those who occupy the bottom rungs of society...operates more or less independently of individual acts [and] is normally invisible" (Gilligan 192). It is caused by the gap or disparity between the wealth and income of those at the top and those at the bottom of the social hierarchy (201), and usually instills shame in the victims. Being ashamed of their inferiority often causes anger and leads to the victims' use of behavioral violence, "the non-natural deaths and injuries that are caused by specific behavioral actions of individuals against individuals, such as the deaths we attribute to homicide, suicide, soldiers in warfare, capital punishment, and so on" (Gilligan 192). The North Korean leaders believe that their problems are caused by capitalist countries that have exploited and oppressed their nation. Because North Korea is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in the world, not because of some inevitable hierarchy but due to the government's own ineffective policies, the North Korean leadership experience what can be called "perceived" structural violence. The end results of actual structural violence and

perceived structural violence are the same; when others are believed to be the cause of one's misfortune, one "would primarily blame and punish others, and would thus be more likely to commit homicide than suicide" (Gilligan 207). However, making the distinction between the actual structural violence described by Gilligan and the perceived structural violence experienced by North Korean leaders is very important. Victims of structural violence suffer due to the social hierarchy that keeps them at the bottom, and their problems are a direct result of this oppression. This kind of structural violence can be minimized if efforts are made to lessen the gap between the wealthy and the poor; Gilligan gives Sweden as an example of a country "that [has] come closest to eliminating structural violence" by decreasing the inequity in income and living standards (195). This feat was possible because the source of the problem was an inequity among the classes. However, the poverty experienced by victims of perceived structural violence, such as the leaders of North Korea, result from the victims' own mistakes. North Korean leaders' efforts to strengthen their economy have not been successful, and North Korea remains one of the poorest countries in the world today. Nevertheless, as John Feffer writes in *North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis*, the North Korean government appears to "shift the blame for all its problems onto U.S. intransigence" (115). The North Korean government perpetuates its victim mentality by shifting the blame for its own failures onto the stubborn and uncompromising policies of the United States government. Gavan McCormack, author of *Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe*, adds that the regime feels "an aggrieved sense of injustice...as the weaker party" when it compares its own nation to other much more powerful and developed ones such as the United States or neighboring South Korea (11). And, in accordance with the concept of structural violence, with that "sense of injustice" from being a "victim" comes the need to lash out in violence at others.

The leaders of the DPRK are motivated to commit violent acts due to the structural violence of which they perceive themselves to be victims, but it may be hard to believe that they are capable of committing tremendous violence upon such a large number of their own people. Even though the perceived structural violence theory helps to explain why the violence occurs, it fails to explain just how it is possible for a government to so completely disregard morals in its treatment of its own people. Here, we can refer to C.A.J. Coady's concept of utilitarianism presented in "The Morality of Terrorism." North Korea's leaders hold a utilitarian perspective

toward morality that "assess[es] the violence solely in terms of its efficiency in contributing to the achievement of the good ends" (Coady 50). In order to achieve the "good end" of *juche*, the government feels justified in torturing and executing millions of its own people. Clearly, doing those things do not help to achieve *juche*, but since *juche* seems far out of reach, the North Korean government does whatever it can to appear powerful. O'Hanlon and Mochizuki write that "Kim Jong Il [is] a leader who sees his country falling apart and wants to hold it together to protect his own power and privilege" (28). If Kim cared about the fact that his people were starving to death and acknowledged that he was doing things wrong, then he would be willing to do what it takes to help them survive even if he was worried that the regime's image might suffer a bit. However, due to the fact that the North Korean government holds the utilitarian perspective with regards to violence, it seems that *juche* can justify any act, no matter how violent.

The violence in North Korea does not appear to be even close to ending because as long as the country remains poor and weak in comparison to the rest of the world, its government will resort to violence against its own people in order to make up for its lack of power. The leaders need to feel powerful and also appear powerful to other countries; committing violent acts against the population of North Korea can enhance their sense of pride because it may be the only way to exert some kind of power. The North Korean leaders can be seen as analogous to Gilligan's example of the lowest-class whites in America during the days of slavery, who could count on African Americans to always be there "to occupy a position lower in the social scale than even the poorest whites" (199). Knowing that they had some authority over the African Americans at the time gave the whites a sense of power and pride they otherwise would not have had. Likewise, the North Korean regime's treatment of its people seems to stem from the fact that those people are the only ones "lower in the social scale" than the leaders.

In addition to needing a sense of power, the North Korean regime also seems to find it necessary to make its country appear stronger and wealthier than it is. The leaders of the DPRK have made great efforts to make Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, an ideal place to show off to foreigners how successful the nation is. A visitor may be fooled at first glance because he or she is only permitted to stay in Pyongyang, which has magnificent buildings, murals, and skyscrapers decorating it. But once they take a closer look, visitors such as Nanchu find the view eerie because many of

the buildings are empty, and the streets are completely desolate (50). Nanchu noted that there was a huge and beautiful subway station that no one used, which seems to indicate that it was built just for show. Furthermore, the population of Pyongyang consists only of those people who have been pre-approved to live there:

The residents who live in Pyongyang... must be politically reliable. Those who have foreign liaisons, including Chinese relatives, can only live outside the city. The government strictly controls who can and who cannot live in the capital. (Nanchu 76)

It is not surprising that visitors are not allowed to see what life is like outside of Pyongyang; the leaders planned it especially this way so that they could show only their "good" side. Their isolation of the "handicapped" and the "dwarved" in mountainous regions of the country emphasizes their desire to create a society that has only people with physically desirable characteristics. In his persecution of the North Korean people, Kim Jong Il believes that "construction of the perfect world requires removal of the 'imperfect'" (McCormack 71). The government justifies the suffering endured by these "imperfect" people when they are removed from Pyongyang because of its utilitarian views on the morality of violence.

One can only be suspicious of a government that takes such extreme measures to keep inside information in and keep outside information out. North Korean leaders are so concerned with how foreigners view them that they take every measure to hide their flaws and to portray themselves as powerful. This involves falsifying information given to foreign organizations and countries, as well as that given to the population, which conveniently decreases the opportunity to be criticized by outsiders while simultaneously preventing a revolution from within. Jasper Becker, author of *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea*, writes that in 1989, the demographic data presented by the North Korean government missed around fifteen percent of deaths and over half of the infant deaths in normal times (210). According to the information that we have about North Korea, it appears that the leaders manipulated these statistics to hide weaknesses, since extremely high death rates would obviously reflect badly on the government. The North Korean regime also takes great care to hide its weaknesses from its citizens in order to keep them from realizing that they are suffering undeservedly. The North Korean media is government-run, and only those articles that encourage public support for the government are published. A 2006 newspaper article published by the Korean

Central News Agency (KCNA) ironically encourages the North Korean people to “stand up against the pressure of great power chauvinist” and proclaims that “[t]he army and people in the DPRK have the pluck and grit to deal a merciless blow at those who dare to invade it, the persevering will to build a more prosperous and powerful country despite any vicious moves of the imperialists” (“All Koreans Called upon to Deepen National Self-Respect”). The citizens of the DPRK are made to believe that North Korea would not have problems if it were not constantly oppressed by the “imperialists,” since there is no outside information to show otherwise. Thus, the government is able to secure its support from the North Korean people; national unity is an important component of *juche* and also a way for the government to maintain absolute control. Any opposition from within is perceived by the government as a threat to its absolute control over North Korea, and propaganda is effectively used to make the citizens completely dependent upon their leaders.

If we are to make an effort to stop the violence, lies, and propaganda, we need to change misguided perceptions of the government by understanding that North Korea has certain needs that must be taken into account. The North Korean regime needs to be able to maintain its sense of power and pride while we press for reforms, but it seems that “the Bush administration fundamentally misinterprets the North Korean government” (Feffer 100). Bruce Cumings, Ervand Abrahamian, and Moshe Ma’oz, authors of *Inventing the Axis of Evil: The Truth about North Korea, Iran, and Syria*, refer to the time when George W. Bush called Kim Jong Il a “pygmy” and a “spoiled child” (72). Calling any grown man such names would probably elicit a negative response, and certainly would be extremely degrading to a man such as Kim, who holds power and pride as his top priorities, and despises “dwarves.” Moreover, the United States approaches North Korea with unyielding negotiating tactics and intimidation strategies, such as demanding other countries cut off trade with North Korea (Becker 110). This method is one discouraged by Wade L. Huntley, who writes in “Rebels Without a Cause: North Korea, Iran and the NPT,” that “[e]ffective policy will be independent of specific assumptions concerning the nature and disposition of the ruling regime in Pyongyang” (727). The intimidation strategies of the United States are based in misguided “assumptions” about the North Korean regime, and such threats and ridicule could heighten the North Korean government’s perception of structural violence, eventually causing the leaders to use more behavioral violence. Instead, “[r]estraint, and a serious effort to find ways in which

North Korea could preserve some 'face' while proceeding with needed drastic reforms, would be the wise way...to respond" (McCormack 11). If we do not follow this advice, there is no way to make the government stop committing violent acts upon its people. It is natural for us to feel outraged at what is happening, but expressing that anger in the form of threats will only make matters worse.

Using encouraging tactics to enhance the North Korean government's sense of power should result in a regime that is less indignant toward the United States and more willing to make necessary reforms. Prior policies that used intimidation and threats have made the North Korean regime appear weak and shameful. The United States has made the government appear insignificant, and, according to Gilligan, shame is what makes individuals even more concerned about weakness. As he explains, "[t]he emotion that causes the horror of dependency is shame. Men [believe] that they will be subjected to shaming, ridicule, and disrespect if they appear unmanly in the eyes of others" (237). It is reasonable to assume that the North Korean leaders feel shame when they are ridiculed by others, especially by the president of the most powerful country in the world. So, of course, international relations in the form of threats are going to make the North Korean leaders even less willing to make reforms. We need to convince the leaders that "change will not weaken the party's hold on power or harm its security" (O'Hanlon and Mochizuki 128). This requires us to understand that a different route must be taken, even if our indignation makes it difficult to approach this regime with respect and encouragement.

We as a global community have the responsibility to stop the genocide in North Korea. The citizens of North Korea are mostly oblivious to the fact that their government is actually causing the suffering they endure, which makes us even more accountable for finding a solution. In order to prevent the loss of more lives, we must take great care in approaching the North Korean regime and encourage it to make reforms while allowing the leaders to maintain their dignity. Aggressive and confrontational plans for forcing change on North Korea, like those of the Bush administration, will not work. The only way to have any hope for ending the actual violence is to stop the perceived structural violence. To take steps toward ending the genocide in North Korea, we need to abandon the impulse to denounce its leaders, for shaming the leaders provokes the harm of more innocent North Koreans. Instead, international policy should be designed so that it respectfully inspires *juche* and

provides constructive help for North Korea. We worry incessantly about whether North Korea will attack us with its nuclear weapons, but we must first address the government-sponsored massacre that is taking place. If we are to design policies that help the North Korean leaders feel empowered, we can help build a healthy relationship between the North Korean population and the North Korean government. The sense of pride and power that the government will be able to gain by making reforms that we propose supportively rather than threateningly should help to eliminate the need for the North Korean government to “lash out in violence at others.” The people in North Korea will then finally be able to live without the constant fear of being persecuted, and the rest of the world can be at ease knowing that the threat of nuclear warfare has ceased.

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COMMENTARY: Victoria Whitfield

An improper summary of Julie Lee's essay "North Korea: Megalomania, Genocide, and Propaganda" would sound similar to the following: "America sees North Korea on the playground and pushes him in the dirt in front of the other kids, so as a result North Korea goes home and pulls the wings off some flies as he cries by himself." If this is where you have arrived after reading her work, you have completely missed the point. Offering a fresh and revealing perspective, Lee's psychoanalytical work with political theory makes North Korea's complex humanitarian crisis readily accessible and concrete to a Western audience. To do this, Lee relates the inability of Western society to resolve its aggressive and confrontational conventions of social relations with the Eastern social observance of public restraint and hierarchical "face" systems. In effect, America's international relations during our generation have become a problematic mix of gross misunderstandings and ideology-based agendas. Julie Lee's essay proves that at the center of this problem, in the case of North Korea, is the misrepresentation of the North Korean public and the North Korean regime in the media. Yet how does the reality of the North Korean humanitarian crisis get lost in translation?

An answer could be found in the confusion that results from the prevailing human tendency to form gendered ideologies in the formation of powerful national identities. In other words, the problem of misrepresentation starts with our perception of the concept of patriarchy. Gayle Rubin, a feminist anthropologist, describes the infinitely problematic ideological gendering of nations in her essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex." She explains the problem of patriarchy: "it is important—even in the face of a depressing history—to maintain a distinction between the human capacity and necessity to create a sexual

world, and the empirically oppressive ways in which sexual worlds have been organized. Patriarchy subsumes both meanings into the same term" (Rubin 168). Here, Rubin illustrates how the concept of patriarchy assigns a nation a "sexual," or moreover "masculine," identity, and that this assignment can become "oppressive" because patriarchy can be perceived to connote domination: a negative and aggressive construction of masculinity. Emphasizing the importance of the ideology of *juche* to the national and cultural identity of North Korea, Lee explores this problem of a government misusing its patriarchal system of government to dominate and oppress, rather than protect and serve, its people. However, Lee pushes this observation further to reveal that the Bush Administration is guilty of striving for the same aggressive patriarchal ideology as well.

The Bush Administration also upholds aggressive American ideologies, similar to the ideology of *juche*, such as the War on Terrorism, at all costs—whether the costs are the economy, the lives of the soldiers, or the lives of countless civilians at home and abroad. Navigating the implications of the ideology of the War on Terrorism in particular, Mary Kaldor in "Beyond Militarism, Arms Races, and Arms Control" describes how in response to the infamous events of September 11, the Bush Administration contributed to the perpetuation of what she terms "new wars," which result in collateral damage and indiscriminate civilian deaths, and are fueled by "an extreme political ideology based on the exclusive claim to state power on the basis of identity—ethnic chauvinism or religious communalism" (163). In this context, Kaldor is discussing the popularization of prejudice against the monolithic "Middle Eastern terrorist" caricature constructed by the Bush Administration to divert popular attention from the abundance of oil—a source of international power (pun intended)—in the targeted countries. Yet we can also apply Kaldor's discussion of the propagation of a political ideology to divert national attention to the humanitarian crisis in North Korea. For Lee shows how the ideology of *juche* has morphed into an "extreme political ideology" by Kim Jong Il and his regime, resulting in the patriarchal system of government in North Korea transforming into an efficient system of aggressive dominance and violent oppression of the North Korean people. Methodically, Lee elucidates how this ideological shift has occurred in response to the international structural violence experienced by North Korea, which is perceived as a shameful loss of power, or "face," before the international community.

Lee's essay concludes with a call for action, yet not in the conventional utopian sense. Her call to action challenges us both as Americans and as members of the world community to acknowledge and work with this prevailing concept of gendered nations, rather than rejecting it completely. Rejection, as Lee argues through her statistical analyses, only results in more lives lost. Instead, Lee proposes the creation of a "bi-sexualized" international policy that encompasses and builds upon more than just the "masculine" aspects of nations. Hélène Cixous, in her feminist essay on reconstructing representations of gender roles, titled "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1980), describes the significance of "this vatic bisexuality which doesn't annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number....By virtue of affirming the primacy of the phallus and of bringing it into play, phallogocentric ideology has claimed more than one victim" (254). Cixous explains that a "bisexual" approach recognizes and makes constructive use of ideological and cultural differences, whereas a "phallogocentric" approach, such as the "masculine" ideology of patriarchy, makes differences restrictive and oppressive. In this sense, Lee's conclusion postulates how a "bi-sexualization" of international policy could conceptually acknowledge fundamental differences between Eastern and Western nations and simultaneously draw attention to how each has its own distinct cultural strengths. Therefore, Lee's essay performs an exceptionally accessible analysis of the North Korean humanitarian crisis through her recognition of the influence of gendered ideologies on international relations.

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