



Propaganda, Survival, and Living to Tell the Truth: An Analysis of North Korean Refugee Memoirs

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Recent international events have heightened global interest in the North Korean regime's engagement with the world; however, information about North Korea, known formally as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, remains largely nebulous, due to the continuing secrecy of the regime. Although governmental and non-governmental organizations, journalists, and scholars observing North Korea from the outside have pointed to the regime's use of ruthlessness and deception, we know little about the ground realities of communication and specifically how strategies of deception and truth are perceived and used by individuals in North Korea. The current chapter utilizes North Korean refugee narratives to examine these issues in close detail. Doing so better informs us about the regime's ubiquitous strategies of human control, works toward highlighting the voices of those who have lived under oppressive conditions, and advocates for further attention and action that must be directed to issues of human rights.

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We begin by providing a brief historical context before describing the conditions in North Korea that precipitated the two-decade-long refugee crisis that emerged around the time of the *Great Famine* or *Arduous March*, and which has remained largely beyond the reach of the international community due to complex regional geopolitical factors. We then discuss the impact of the long and perilous journey from North to South in terms of identity formation and the consequent need to recount the story of that journey in different settings, including in the form of memoirs for public dissemination. Following on from this, we provide a thematic analysis of North Korean refugee accounts and call for purposeful research and action pertaining to North Korean human rights and North Korean refugee adjustment and advancement.

BACKGROUND: A NATION DIVIDED AND OPPRESSED

Few geographical spaces have experienced as much turmoil, dispossession, conflict, and tragedy as the Korean Peninsula during the twentieth century. Although South Korea has seen remarkable achievements in the form of its rapid economic development and subsequent democratization, North Korea continues to maintain a reputation as the most closed state on earth, as well as the world's worst violator of human rights. How did a region that enjoyed millennia of political unity under successive domestic royal dynasties reach this point? Numerous compelling accounts of twentieth-century Korean history document in detail the events of this period, emphasizing the damage done as a consequence of Japan's 35-year colonial occupation of the Peninsula beginning in 1910 (Cumings, 2005; Oberdorfer, 2001; Shin, 2018). Japan's heavy-handed rule led to a Korean resistance movement that was divided in ideological orientation (Robinson, 1982). When the Japanese surrendered to the allies in August 1945, the US and the Soviet Union found themselves in a contest for control of the Peninsula, resulting in the hurried division of North and South. Officers in Washington, "...[w]orking in haste and under great pressure, and using a *National Geographic* map for reference...proposed that U.S. troops occupy the area south of the thirty-eighth parallel...and that Soviet troops occupy the area north of the parallel" (Oberdorfer, 2001, p. 6). It was intended that this situation would only be temporary; however, the plan to unite the two regions never came to fruition. Continuous negotiations failed, resulting in the eventual conversion of the former colonial resistance movements into the formation of two separate governments by 1948—one built on a socialist model backed by the Soviets and the Chinese in the North, and a US-backed capitalist regime in the South (Hassig & Oh, 2015; Lankov, 2013).

The North Korean leader, Kim Il-Sung¹ (grandfather of the current leader, Kim Jong-Un), had a stated goal to extend his control over the southern half of the peninsula (Hassig & Oh, 2015, p. 16). And so his forces invaded

South Korea in June 1950, initiating a devastating three-year war that ended where it started, roughly along the 38th Parallel—today the location of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The DMZ is often referred to as one of the most heavily guarded areas in the world, and no unauthorized movement is permitted across it. Although both Koreas began an earnest effort to rebuild in the years following the war according to their respective economic models, the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet bloc had a grave impact on North Korea economically. Without its former communist allies to continue contributing economic support, the North Korean public distribution system (PDS) began to collapse, having been in gradual decline for some time (Lankov, 2013, pp. 78–79). By the early 1990s, bad weather and poor harvests had drained almost all resources from the system, and widespread famine ravaged the country, hitting rural areas especially hard. North Korean defectors to South Korea have told of schools emptying, factories closing and falling into disrepair, blackouts becoming common, and health care declining into obscurity. While starving citizens foraged for wild plants and small animals to feed themselves, thousands of others began to flee across the northern border to China in search of a way out of their misery (Demick, 2010; Lankov, 2013, pp. 88–90). With them, these famine refugees brought the first real accounts of the extraordinary brutality of a regime which had maintained a system of extraordinary social control to ensure its survival, even while its people starved. Twenty-five years on, the regime continues to exert many of the same methods of control.

The North Korean regime, according to Kirkpatrick (2014), fears two things:

the outflow of its citizens and the inflow of information. Pyongyang's crackdown on citizens who try to leave reflects the essential insecurity at the core of every totalitarian regime. So, too, does its suppression of information coming from any source other than itself. It is the response of the government that understands just how subversive the truth can be if a significant segment of its population is exposed to it. The regime knows that information, if spread, threatens the very essence of its power. This gives it a powerful incentive to keep its citizens from encountering any and all unauthorized information. (p. 298; italics added)

The need to isolate its people from knowledge and understanding of the outside world has led to abuses of human rights on a scale that places North Korea consistently at the top of the list of countries worldwide engaging in systematic rights violations. In 2014, The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (UN COI) reported the following:

Systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, its institutions and officials. In many instances, the violations of human rights found by the

commission constitute crimes against humanity. These are not mere excesses of the State; they are essential components of a political system that has moved far from the ideals on which it claims to be founded. The gravity, scale and nature of these violations reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world. Political scientists of the twentieth century characterized this type of political organization as a totalitarian State: a State that does not content itself with ensuring the authoritarian rule of a small group of people, but seeks to dominate every aspect of its citizens' lives and terrorizes them from within. (p. 365)

The report also addresses the DPRK's indoctrination of citizens from childhood, "suppressing all political and religious expression that questions the official ideology, and tightly controlling citizens' physical movement and their means of communication with each other and with those in other countries" (p. 365). Regarding the right to food, "The State's monopolization of access to food has been used as an important means to enforce political loyalty. The distribution of food has prioritized those who are useful to the survival of the current political system at the expense of those deemed to be expendable. Citizens' complete dependence on the State led to one of the worst cases of famine in recent history" (p. 366). The famine of the mid-1990s killed up to one million people according to some reports (Haggard & Noland, 2011).² Further, the COI found that "The keystone to the political system is the vast political and security apparatus that strategically uses surveillance, coercion, fear and punishment to preclude the expression of any dissent. Public executions and enforced disappearance to political prison camps serve as the ultimate means to terrorize the population into submission" (p. 366). The UN COI was by no means the first report to expose such facts: Human rights groups in South Korea and internationally have been investigating and publishing such data for over two decades. However, the COI report's conclusion that North Korea's behavior constitutes crimes against humanity in international law, and its consequent recommendation that North Korea's leadership, including Kim Jong-Un, be referred to the International Criminal Court, pointed to the seriousness of the situation under which North Koreans continue to suffer (Son, 2018).

Escaping North Korea

Given the grave conditions described above, it is not surprising that tens of thousands of North Koreans have attempted to escape the country, primarily since the mid- to late-1990s when the *Great Famine* was biting in earnest. Prior to that time, only a handful of North Koreans had left and sought refuge elsewhere. Refugees, defined as "people who are forced to flee for safety reasons from their country of origin due to war, fear of persecution, or famine" (Sorrells, 2012, p. 132), report various reasons for leaving North Korea. Although responses differ depending on factors such as when one defected, motivations have included hunger and the search for food (Fahy, 2015), loss

of status, frustration over lack of opportunities, political persecution due to one's family history, a desire to live in better conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2002), following another who had already left the country (Lee, 2006), economic conditions, lack of political and religious freedom, and fear (Fahy, 2015; Haggard & Noland, 2011). Although it is impossible to determine accurately, various sources place the number of North Korean refugees at around 100,000 (e.g., Haggard & Noland, 2011) or higher (Kim, 2008), including those hiding in China,³ as well as those who have found refuge in countries that have allowed them to apply for asylum or, in South Korea's case, given them citizenship. Although accurate demographic information on the refugee population in China is hard to come by, the vast majority of those who reach South Korea are women. Of the 32,467 total arrivals to South Korea (as projected to the end of 2018), 72% are women, and that proportion is rising (Ministry of Unification, 2018).⁴ High-level defections also occur; loyalists, including upper class and senior officials, may defect because of purge fears (which can include prison, torture, and death), being accused of crimes, reduced political enthusiasm, and concern over national prospects (Lankov, 2017). These high-level defections can happen abroad in the case of diplomats or overseas workers, as was the case with Thae Yong Ho—a high-level diplomat who defected with his family from the North Korean embassy in London in 2016.

But how do ordinary North Korean refugees make it out of North Korea without getting caught and repatriated? Nearly all of those who attempt to escape do so via the Sino-North Korean border, which spans 1420 kilometers (880 miles). Haggard and Noland's (2011) survey of North Korean refugees in China and South Korea provides insight on the "mechanics of escape." They found that three-quarters of respondents in their China survey indicated receiving help, and half of respondents indicated paying for assistance. Haggard and Noland (2011) suggest "bribery of officials and/or the emergence of a group of brokers or 'coyotes' plays a large role in their escape" (p. 32). Other responses point to family or friends and non-governmental organizations aiding in the escapes. Although periodic crackdowns by both the Chinese and North Korean authorities can alter the patterns and means of escape, the primary networks that ultimately lead to safe passage continue to involve key players including "governments, missionaries, brokers and diplomatic missions from Ulaan Bataar to Rangoon" (International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 1), as well as NGOs such as Liberty in North Korea, which fund-raises internationally to support safer passage of refugees "without cost or condition" (Liberty in North Korea, n.d.). Fieldwork studies, often involving observation and interviews, corroborate and extend these findings (see International Crisis Group, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2014). However, this body of work has not yet examined what specific communicative strategies refugees report using as they flee North Korea, live on the margins in China, and ultimately attempt to exit in order to permanently resettle elsewhere.

As indicated previously, leaving North Korea without permission is considered a serious crime, with passage through China presenting severe obstacles. The 1986 Border Area Affairs Agreement and the 1960 Escaped Criminals Extradition Treaty between North Korea and China enable repatriation of any North Koreans caught in Chinese territory (International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 2), where they are branded “illegal economic migrants” (Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2009). Those who are caught and accused of defecting or attempting to receive asylum in a third country have faced lengthy prison sentences, forced labor, torture, confiscation of property, or death (Haggard & Noland, 2011). Sungju Lee (2016) sums up the issue:

China views North Korean defectors not as refugees fleeing severe human rights abuses but as illegal work migrants. North Koreans caught in China are still deported to Joseon [North Korea], where they are imprisoned. North Koreans in China live perilous lives, flirting in an underground work economy and suffering abuse, poverty, and depraved living conditions. All they want is freedom. (p. 307)

North Koreans entering China do not necessarily have immediate plans to try to reach South Korea. Some end up in precarity while trading across the North Korea–China border, finding themselves unable or unwilling to return. Others are unsure where to move to next, and it can be a matter of sheer chance as to if and how they proceed onwards. Once in China, they often face three perilous paths—attempting to return to North Korea, surviving on the margins in China, or attempting to exit China via Mongolia or Southeast Asia to permanently resettle in South Korea or other countries that will accept them. While remaining in China, North Koreans are still highly vulnerable to continued human rights abuses, including imprisonment, being sold into prostitution or forced marriages with Chinese men, or forced to work in undesirable or dangerous conditions for little to no pay (International Crisis Group, 2006). If caught and forced back to North Korea, refugees are interrogated, labeled criminals and traitors, and can receive punishment in the form of incarceration in labor camps or the death penalty (Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2009). North Korean refugees are therefore in “an extraordinarily vulnerable population, and their current status and future prospects constitute a first-order humanitarian problem for the international community” (Haggard & Noland, 2011, pp. 1, 3).

The analysis in this chapter helps us better understand the experiences of North Korean defectors—all of whom have had their voices silenced while in North Korea and often thereafter on the run or even while adapting to their new place of legal citizenship. This analysis also provides voice for the realities, challenges, losses, and advances that North Korean defectors have experienced, and brings awareness to the many human rights violations that have occurred and continue to occur in North Korea. Speaking about North

Korean refugees, Kim (2008) urges, “It is also necessary for society to recognize and understand the testimonies of trauma victims” (p. 94).

North Korean Refugees/Defectors and Identity

The extraordinary and often traumatic experiences conferred upon North Korean refugees during their journeys are certainly life-altering, but the experience of turmoil does not necessarily end on arrival in a country where they are granted protection. It is at this point that a new struggle begins: finding a new identity in a new society. This is particularly true for those who end up in South Korea, given the highly politicized nature of their presence there. On arrival in South Korea, defectors are questioned at length by intelligence services to ensure their origin and the accuracy of their story, before spending several months in a closed facility (*Hanawon*) for debriefing, counseling, necessary medical treatment, and training in life skills for release into society. North Koreans in South Korea often comment on the struggles they face integrating into what is a highly homogenous society, due to differences in spoken accent and vocabulary, style, and even their physical features on account of the malnutrition many have experienced. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, and physical disabilities from injuries or poor medical care. Many come with a lack of marketable education and find themselves underemployed and suffering from financial hardship as a consequence. They also experience discrimination in the job market, despite the support provided by the government’s defector settlement system (see Chung, 2008; Chung & Seo, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2011; Suh, 2013). All of this can lead to a sense of “identity crisis,” whereby they feel that the North Korean aspect of their identity is inferior, or only of worth in certain, externally prescribed settings such as when invited to give testimonies by government ministries, NGOs, or churches—each of which may be using defector testimony for a certain instrumental end (International Crisis Group, 2011; Son, 2016). This experience is not unique to those who end up in South Korea: Once in America, Joseph Kim (2015) writes about being “desperate to fit in,” feeling “like an alien” (p. 260), and the adjustment progress being “painful and slow” (p. 263). Multiple refugees speak of experiencing “survivors guilt” (e.g., J. Kim, 2015, p. 265). The experience of identity crisis is remarked upon by a number of the memoirists included in this study, and their comments also provide first-person insight regarding the perennially contentious issue of terminology regarding defectors/refugees from North Korea.⁵

When briefly discussing her identity in her introduction to her memoir, Hyeonseo Lee (2015) states, “I have come to accept that as a North Korean defector I am an outsider in the world. An exile” (p. xii). Further, she states, “The simple solution to my problem of identity is to say I am Korean, but there is no such nation. The single Korea does not exist” (p. xiii). Later, she

also uses the phrase, “North Koreans in the South” (p. 281). Similarly, Sungju Lee (2017) has publically discussed his identity and settled on the term “Korean.” In his memoir, Sungju Lee (2016) refers to himself as “a North Korean defector with South Korean citizenship” (p. 300) and generally uses the terms “North Korean defectors” or simply “defectors.” In her memoir, Yeonmi Park (2015) mentions, “Many of us who have escaped call ourselves ‘defectors’ because by refusing to accept our fate and die for the Leader, we have deserted our duty. The regime calls us traitors. If I tried to return, I would be executed” (p. 4). In his memoir, Chol-hwan Kang (2001) uses the terms “North Korean renegade” and “refugee” (pp. 223–233). Joseph Kim (2015) uses the term “refugee” when referring to himself and other North Koreans on the run in China (p. 230) and once he finds freedom in the US (p. 261).

Eunsun Kim (2015) uses various terms: “North Korean escapees” (pp. 125, 199), “defectors from North Korea” (p. 160), “defectors” (p. 178), and “my fellow North Koreans” (p. 213). Yet later, once settled in South Korea with her mother she states, “We were now ‘normal’ South Koreans” (p. 182), and when planning a trip to China to visit Eunsun Kim’s sister, she mentions, “It was possible now because we were true South Koreans, and no longer illegal migrants” (p. 191). At the end of her book, Eunsun Kim (2015) states, “As for me, I simply consider myself, above all, Korean” (p. 224). These many labels speak to the multi-faceted and complicated identities of individuals who have left the North and resettled elsewhere.⁶ Perhaps more important is that individuals who permanently leave North Korea must deal with identity politics surrounding their status in their new society, where it can be difficult to find a voice to represent their experience. This is particularly true in South Korea where the political divide over North Korea runs deep, and where North Korean defectors are often positioned as a litmus test of a long-hoped-for inter-Korean unification process, an expectation which some find burdensome (Son, 2015). This perhaps lends to the appeal of writing and publishing a memoir, especially if done so in both Korean and English, to allow the memoirist to present a version of events that he or she has crafted independently of any state or official discourse, as well as a measure of detailed story-telling impossible in most other situations or forms of media.⁷ Further, “narratives not only serve as a means to assert agency for persons whose control has been diminished but also provide ‘wounded’ storytellers with a means to reshape their identities” (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003, p. 21).

Narrative and Deception in the Context of North Korea

The use of narratives extends across all contexts of communication—from government-produced stories about national heroes, to memoir writing, and to the stories we tell family and friends, for example. Likewise, as we’ve learned throughout much of the current handbook, deception also cuts

across virtually all contexts of human interaction. North Korea in particular has built “a strong track record of seeking to deceive both its people and the wider international community” (Murphy, 2014, p. 49) and has used narrative as one of the principal vehicles to do so (Byman & Lind, 2010). The use of deception in North Korea has emerged through various forms, including propaganda via state-controlled media to promote nationalism, cover-ups of human rights violations, and scapegoating of external opposition. Governmental and non-governmental organizations, journalists, and scholars observing North Korea from the outside have pointed to deception primarily in public and mass contexts. Further, there is a dearth of understanding about how deception emerges in the daily lives of individuals living in North Korea, as well as how communication is used by individuals who decide to escape the country and resettle elsewhere. For the purpose of clarity, we define deception as any message that conceals or misrepresents the truth, and contend that it is a powerful force often used to control individuals’ thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Investigating the nature of deception in various contexts is important for a multitude of reasons. In particular, “Exploring the manifestation of deception in different contexts provides an overall understanding of the concept in its myriad forms, as a deliberate tool directed toward the accomplishment of a specific outcome, an unintentional product of a situation, or an object of analytic inquiry” (Carter, 2014, p. 265). Further, studying deception in contexts that involve humanitarian issues has the potential to give voice to those who have been oppressed and muted, and may work toward further illuminating the nature and effects of human rights abuses. Thus, we endeavor in the current chapter to examine narrative and deception in the context of North Korea, but from the specific perspective of North Korean refugees.

North Korean Refugee Memoirs

A memoir, according to Bailey and Hancock (2014), “is a category of autobiography that focuses on an author’s experience rather than his or her entire life” (p. 654). Memoirs of any subgenre (e.g., athletic, travel, addiction) are of course for public consumption and therefore rely on having an interesting, engaging story to tell. Naturally, then, the question of the accuracy in memoir writing is a valid concern. Regarding the subgenre of memoirs written by North Korean refugees, Cussen (2016) outlines various arguments made about their validity and ultimately attests to their value “for what these memoirs tell us of North Korean ground realities, of the horrors of sex and bride trafficking in China’s northeast, of the psychological challenges faced by North Koreans who succeed in escaping into the free world—as well as for what they tell us of human pluck, determination, and resilience” (p. 150). In a similar vein, Lankov’s (2015) point on North Korean refugee testimony and memoirs is summed up in the article’s subheading: “Past treatment of

Soviet, Cambodian atrocity survivors highlights dangers of disregarding defectors' stories." Haggard and Noland (2011) illuminate that "North Korea is a notoriously closed society that not only seeks to control the flow of information into the country, but exercises tight control over information flowing out as well. It is nearly impossible to conduct direct research on any aspect of North Korea" (pp. 3–4). They provide a concise conclusion on the matter—although there are natural disadvantages to self-reported data, the use of "Memoirs...and interviews with refugees provide an important window into life in North Korea" (p. 4).

Lastly, memoirs are part of popular culture, which in and of itself has merit in analyzing and understanding. In her discussion of globalization and social justice, Sorrells (2012) remarks, "Popular culture can function as a platform for discussion or as an initiating force for social change" (p. 156). In the case of the current study, these memoirs serve as an initial platform for understanding how refugees manage their lives in North Korea and navigate their escapes using various forms of deception and truth telling. Doing so helps us better understand the lived experiences, or truths, of some of the world's most repressed populations and is an invitation for others to work for social change. North Korean refugee memoirist Jin-sung Jang (2014) remarks:

North Korean exiles are a living testament that there does exist a difference between freedom and tyranny. Their stories are not merely a vehicle to evoke pity. They cry for justice on behalf of all those who have died without a voice and who have been buried alive with the world as their dumb witness. Their insistent voices are the triumph of humanity, having survived a brutal struggle with a despot. (p. 313)

Memoirs written by North Korean refugees commonly attest to life in North Korea, escape, and re-settlement. Docan-Morgan (2018a) remarks that there is a "growing genre of memoirs written by North Korean refugees" (p. 120). Beyond traditional paperback and hardcover availability, their popularity is seen via sales as unabridged audio downloads (e.g., via iTunes) and eBooks (e.g., via Kindle). Some memoirs, including Jin-sung Jang's (2014) *Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea*, have received notable attention as "international best sellers." Others, for example, Hyeonsoo Lee's (2015) *The Girl with Seven Names: Escape from North Korea*, made the *New York Times* Best Seller List, which many consider as the preeminent list of best-selling books in the US. Several have been translated into multiple languages, further reaching international audiences—soon after Yeonmi Park's (2015) publication of *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom*, it was "translated into 15 different languages and was released in 18 different countries" (Park, 2016). North Korean defector memoirs have gained such popularity no doubt because of the extraordinary and shocking—yet true—nature

of the stories they tell, opening a window to the everyday lives so vastly different from what the majority of readers might have known or imagined could exist anywhere in today's world.

Shirly Lee, a notable author, as well as translator for Jin-sung Jang's (2014) memoir, illuminates in the translator's note at the end of Jang's memoir an all too forgotten point about outsiders' collective knowledge of North Korea, reminding us that "in order to make sense of North Korea's present, you have to know its past" (p. 320). She goes on to say,

Particularly, you have to recognize its persistent dualities—between words and deeds, propaganda and reality, and the manner in which these dualities work for the outsider versus the insider. Without appreciating this, North Korea will remain inscrutable and our exchanges cyclical. (p. 320)

The North Korean regime's doublespeak and opacity are two of its crucial pillars of power. Regardless of whether the world could not see through those façades, or was reluctant to do so, Mr. Jang's memoir reveals that understanding North Korea's past and its persistent dualities is both the key to clarifying its present and to unlocking changes to come. (p. 321)

A further consideration to bear in mind is that many North Korean refugee memoirists address issues of accuracy in their accounts. Early in her memoir, Eunsun Kim (2015), states: "Everything recounted in this book is true. However, to protect the members of my family who will remain in North Korea, I am writing under a pseudonym, and other names and details have changed" (no page number indicated). Other memoirists make similar statements early on in their memoirs. Sungju Lee (2016) offers his readers important context: "*Every Falling Star* is my childhood story based on my memories of events as they occurred at that time. Please note that these were my childhood memories when I was a street boy, suffering from trauma, malnutrition, and starvation as well as sleep deprivation...This is my story as I remember it" (p. 309). Kim Suk-Young, who served as transcriber and translator for Yong Kim's (2009) memoir, states in the preface, "The result is a narrative told in a straightforward but honest voice, interwoven with infrequent emotional reflections, that recounts the events as they happened to a man who suffered the unimaginable." In providing context for her memoir, Yeonmi Park (2015) makes a useful statement that pertains to the majority of memoirs analyzed for the current study:

The country I grew up in was not like the one my parents had known as children in the 1960s and 1970s. When they were young, the state took care of everyone's basic needs: clothes, medical care, food. After the Cold War ended, the Communist countries that had been propping up the North Korean regime all but abandoned it, and our state-controlled economy collapsed. North Koreans were suddenly on their own. (p. 15)

These reflections point to the admission that the traumatic nature of events experienced by a large number of North Koreans, including many of the memoirists, as well as the passing of time and a need to protect individuals remaining in the country can result in discrepancies. However, the sheer volume of testimonies about life in North Korea which has now come to light affirms patterns of daily life, as well as patterns of abuse that are now so well known as to be irrefutable.

The use of self-reports from North Korean refugees is common in academic research. Refugees are frequently the primary source of data in studies across fields including anthropology, sociology, political science, and social psychology, among others (see Chung, 2008; Jeong & Kim, 2016; Ko, Chung, & Oh, 2004; Song & Bell, 2018). Further, the United Nations Human Rights Council, which established the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK, discussed in our introduction, relied largely on self-reported refugee accounts (their full report, including methods, findings, and recommendations, is available online; see Commission of Inquiry, 2014). Human rights documentation groups in South Korea, as well as the newly established Human Rights Record Center within the South Korean Ministry of Unification and the Seoul United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights work with North Korean defectors to gather testimonies covering a wide range of information relevant to the regime's functioning and the human rights abuses suffered by the people. In the absence of direct access to the country without extreme restrictions on movement, the knowledge of North Korean refugees is therefore our best resource in uncovering life in the country, including information the regime would rather keep hidden.

SYNTHESIS AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This chapter has thus far sought to describe the recent historical context that has resulted in the North Korean refugee phenomenon, highlighting the unique and grave circumstances that surround the creation of the memoirs to be examined. The work of the memoirists, especially if published in English, continues to achieve international popularity, while those who do not publish memoirs nevertheless provide vital information for research and media coverage on the inner workings of the state and society, signifying the importance of defector testimony in the overall narrative on North Korea. The current study provides a rich understanding of North Korean refugee identity and gives voice to individuals who have experienced the oppressive conditions of North Korea, their often dangerous escapes via multiple countries, and nonlinear or frequently difficult times of adjusting to a new society. Stated perhaps most astutely by a North Korean refugee, “if you want to survive in a society like North Korea, you have to be able to deceive yourself and

others” (in Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 26). The purpose of the analysis below is to understand how North Korean refugees discuss the topics of truth and deception in their published memoirs. The intention of this exploration is largely to spread awareness about and give voice to individuals who have experienced the oppressive conditions of North Korea, their perilous escapes, and often challenging times of readjustment.

METHOD

The sample for the current study consisted of memoirs written by North Korean refugees. Inclusion criteria were that the texts had to be firsthand written refugee accounts (i.e., refugee authored), available for public consumption, and published in English between the years 1990 and 2018. The search for published memoirs was conducted using various search engines (e.g., academic and non-academic databases, Amazon.com) and relevant keywords (e.g., “memoir,” “North Korea”). All of the memoirists were born in North Korea and defected or escaped for reasons including hunger, attempting to find family members who had left the country previously, fleeing because of accusations of political wrongdoing, and/or eminent punishment. The search resulted in 11 published memoirs. See Table 51.1 for a complete list.

All language pertaining to or referring to *truth* (e.g., “tell the truth,” “the weapon I wield is truth”), *lying* (“the first time I lied,” “I won’t lie”), and *deception* (e.g., “Everything I learned was a lie to deceive the people,” “North Korea uses dialogue as a tool of deception”) was recorded verbatim from each memoir, noting the book title, page number, and relevant contextual details pertaining to each quotation. After data collection was complete, we utilized thematic analysis (TA), “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through focusing on meaning across a data set, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences...This method, then, is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). We employed TA’s key phases, including reading and rereading the textual data in an immersive, exploratory process to become closely familiar with the authors’ accounts of their lives. After, we worked independently to generate initial codes and search for themes, looking for meaningful patterns. We then worked collaboratively, identifying areas of similarity and overlap, comparing initial codes and themes. This process involved constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), as we compared examples or extracts for similarities and differences while defining, refining, and naming themes. Throughout our coding, analysis, and write-up, we utilized Braun and Clarke’s (2006) “15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis” (p. 96).

Table 51.1 List of North Korean refugee memoirs analyzed in the current study

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Memoir title</i>	<i>Copyright/publi- cation date</i>	<i>Pages</i>	<i>Publisher</i>
Sungju Lee, with Susan Elizabeth McClelland	<i>Every Falling Star: The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea</i>	2016	314	Amulet Books
Yeonmi Park, with Maryanne Vollers	<i>In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom</i>	2015	273	Penguin Books
Joseph Kim, with Stephan Talty	<i>Under the Same Sky: From Starvation in North Korea to Salvation in America</i>	2015	274	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
Eunsun Kim, with Sébastien Fallerti	<i>A Thousand Miles to Freedom: My Escape from North Korea</i>	2015	228	St. Martin's Griffin
Hyonsoo Lee, with David John	<i>The Girl with Seven Names: A North Korean Defector's Story</i>	2015	304	William Collins
Jin-sung Jang	<i>Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea</i>	2014	339	37INK/Atria
Lucia Jang, with Susan McClelland	<i>Stars Between the Sun and Moon: One Woman's Life in North Korea and Escape to Freedom</i>	2014	280	W. W. Norton & Company
Yong Kim, with Suk-Young Kim	<i>Long Road Home: Testimony of a North Korean Camp Survivor</i>	2009	168	Columbia University Press
Hyok Kang, with Philippe Grangereau	<i>This is Paradise! My North Korean Childhood</i>	2007	204	Abacus
Chol-hwan Kang, with Pierre Rigoulot	<i>The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag</i>	2001	238	Basic Books
Soon Ok Lee	<i>Eyes of the Tailless Animals: Prison Memoirs of a North Korean Woman</i>	1999	160	Living Sacrifice Book Company

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our analysis of how truth and deception are discussed in North Korean memoirs yielded 3 overarching themes: (1) discovering and dealing with propaganda, including two subthemes of *worshipping leaders as gods* and *questioning government narratives*; (2) deceiving as a means of survival, including four subthemes of *feigning adherence to propaganda*, *balancing suspicion and secrecy in public contexts*, *balancing suspicion and secrecy in private contexts*, and *deceiving the self*; and (3) finding the truth and living to tell it, comprising the three subthemes of *discovering new realities via foreign media*, *fighting to tell the truth*, and *gaining voice, exposing truth, and advocating for human rights*. Below, we discuss these themes in more detail, include representative examples from the texts, and at times, and within little space, draw links to relevant information and literature.

Discovering and Dealing with Propaganda

The first primary theme focuses on memoirists' discussion of and dealing with government propaganda, a nearly inescapable reality of North Korean society. Propaganda is defined as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 7). Extending this definition of propaganda, Patterson, Milburn, and Monteiro (2014) remark, "deception and lying are used as the means of 'shaping,' 'manipulating,' and 'directing'" (p. 418). We found two subthemes for *discovering and dealing with propaganda*, including *worshipping leaders as gods* and *questioning government narratives*.

Worshipping Leaders as Gods

A common theme memoirists recalled during childhood was that their leaders—the generational lineage of the Kim dynasty—were and continue to be deified as gods. Chol-hwan Kang (2001) remarks about his childhood, "I had been made to believe—and had indeed wanted to believe—that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was the best country in the world. I looked up to Kim Il-Sung as a god" (p. 67). Similarly, reflecting on his learning of Kim Il-Sung, Sungju Lee (2016) shares, "I wanted to be brave and magical, just like him. He was everyone's idol...He was part God too" (pp. 6–7). Hyok Kang (2007) states in his memoir, "To convince us that Kim Junior was a formidable idealist, we were told that as a child he climbed trees in order to catch rainbows, which he finally succeeded in doing...A kind of demigod then! ...And I can assure you that at the time, I swallowed it whole" (p. 58). Memoirists also discussed various rituals: "Like all North Korean families, mine kept a shrine on our wall to the Great Leader and his wife. The first thing my father did in the morning...was to take a cloth and carefully dust both of their portraits...You could be sent to a prison camp for

allowing dirt to gather on Kim Il Sung's portrait, or for putting it behind cracked glass" (J. Kim, 2015, p. 11). Hyeonseo Lee (2015), a child when Kim Il-sung died on July 8, 1994, mentions:

the Great Leader, the father of our nation, was dead...Incredible as it may sound now, it had never occurred to me, or to many North Koreans, that this god-king, so powerful that he could control the weather, might die. He was flawless and almighty. He existed so far above humankind that a part of me didn't want to think he was real. We did not even think he needed to sleep or urinate. (p. 71)

Of course, it was not only children who believed in the demigod nature of the Kim dynasty. In his memoir, for example, Yong Kim (2009) mentions, "I felt like an idiot for having given my life for the Great Leader everyone was brain washed to believe was a living god" (p. 76).

Questioning Government Narratives

Memoirists also spoke of the stories they were told during their youth as having dubious veracity or being outright deceptive. Joseph Kim (2015) elaborates on the stories he learned and their truthfulness: "Like every family we knew, we had a copy of Kim Il Sung's memoirs. They came in an eight-volume set...There were many action scenes and battles, and illustrations of Kim Il Sung and his brethren bayonetting the enemy...Whether it's true or not is another story" (p. 76). This questioning of truth was widely evident, especially in memoirists' youth and teenage years. Sungju Lee (2016) mentions, "History—or what I now call propaganda—was often the first, fourth, and final subject of the day, and the lessons almost always began with the same introduction" (p. 6). Later, Lee tells of a conversation, where his close friend Myeongchul mentions, "'Folklore has a funny way of becoming truth. If we didn't have folk stories, we might start to question our lives, our governments, our world...We might start...thinking for ourselves'" (p. 176). Later in Lee's memoir, at the point where he was forced to live on the streets and fend for himself, he recounts the words of a gang leader whom Lee befriended:

My gang and I don't believe in Joseon [North Korea], because it lies to us. It says Joseon is a paradise and children its kings and queens. But children are dying from terrible starvation and diseases. Kings and queens don't die like this. The military are thieves...They don't protect people; they steal. I don't believe in the army, not anymore. (p. 204)

Jin-sung Jang (2014), who grew up in an elite family, received private music education, and enjoyed playing the piano, shares his questioning of government narratives as a teenager:

...our [school] music teacher punished me for my [pianistic] deviation by humiliating me in front of the class, making an example of me as someone who knew nothing whatsoever about music. In my heart, though, I believed it was the school—not me—that lacked an understanding of music...As a result, I could not stop myself from beginning to doubt everything else the school taught us to regard as the most accurate and objective form of knowledge, whether this took the form of the revolutionary history of Kim-Il Sung, linguistics, or any other subject. (p. 31)

Deceiving as a Means of Survival

The second primary theme we address concerns how memoirists discuss deception as a means of survival for living in North Korea, including *feigning adherence to propaganda*, *balancing suspicion and secrecy in public*, *balancing suspicion and secrecy in private*, and *deceiving the self*. Many of these strategies also fall within the realms of life-saving lies (e.g., Akhtar, 2009) and high-stakes deception.

Feigning Adherence to Propaganda

Memoirists commonly wrote of instances of feigning adherence or faking devotion to the North Korean government and particularly to its leadership. Hyeonseo Lee (2015) writes of pretending to be visibly saddened and distressed when her classmates gathered in front of the school building the morning after Kim Il-Sung's death: "If I didn't cry like everyone else, I'd be in trouble. So I rubbed my face in false distress, surreptitiously spat on my fingertips, and dabbed my eyes. I made a gasping noise that I hoped sounded like I was heaving with despair" (p. 72). Feigning adherence was often necessary in the form of public performance. In his memoir, Sungju Lee (2016) reflects: "I realized after spending nearly all my time with Youngbum that when he had chanted for prisoners to be executed, he wasn't doing so because he believed they should be killed. He was putting on a show so the principal and the *so-nyon-dan* manager [a leader of the organization for children that is heavily involved with propaganda] wouldn't think he was a criminal, too" (p. 113).

Balancing Suspicion and Secrecy in Public Contexts

Another common theme memoirists discuss concerns living in a public culture of suspicion and mistrust, which often resulted in careful secrecy and concealment. Hyok Kang (2007) remarks, "In North Korea everyone is suspicious of everyone else, all the time. There are security spies in every work unit, but you never know who they are, or how many" (p. 47). Memoirists commonly discuss their childhood training in writing and orally reciting letters of criticism, illuminating the necessity and ubiquity of suspicion and secrecy. Kang provides a clear illustration:

Every Monday, in fact, we had to hand our teacher a form titled, ‘The Whole of Daily Life’...The form was divided horizontally into three parts. At the top you had to draw up a list of the bad actions committed during the previous week, and repent for them in ready-made formulas. The box that followed was reserved for the good resolutions [e.g., ‘I am going to work seriously to serve society and our fatherland, to become someone useful to our country, a servant worthy of the trust of Generalissimo Comrade Great Leader Kim Il-Sung.’]... The whole last part of the sheet was devoted to the denunciation of fellow pupils...This ritual, into which we were initiated at the age of seven or eight, in the first year of primary school, taught us three cardinal values of adult life: the virtues of mutual suspicion, the tutelary benefits of lying and the advantages of bribes. (pp. 73–75)

Hyeonseo Lee (2015) offers a similar perspective as Hyok Kang and other memoirists. She states, “The [criticism] sessions taught me a survival lesson. I had to be discrete, be cautious about what I said and did, and be very wary of others. Already I was acquiring the mask that the adults wore from long practice” (p. 34).

Balancing Suspicion and Secrecy in Private Contexts

Memoirists commonly wrote of the difficult task of dealing with suspicion and secrecy in their personal lives. One common theme memoirists discuss is the secrecy required to safely consume illegal foreign media. For example, Hyok Kang (2007) remarks, “as a general rule we had to keep all the forbidden things we saw on television strictly to ourselves. The slightest reference, the slightest word could have given us away. If that had happened, our whole family would have risked being deported to the special penal labour colonies, the ones you never come back from” (p. 44). Memoirists also discussed their family’s private conversations, often demonstrating *dialectical tensions*—opposing forces that people experience in their relationships (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter, 2011)—regarding what and how much information to keep secret or reveal to their children about oppositional thoughts they had about the North Korean government.

Regarding suspicion and secrecy in their personal lives, memoirists also wrote about not telling their closest family members about their planned escapes, specifically for family members’ safety. One example comes from Chol-hwan Kang (2001), who, starting at the age of nine, spent 10 years in North Korea’s Yodok concentration camp because his grandfather was accused of treason. Kang was released from Yodok in 1987, and by the early 1990s, he was able to get access to multiple radio receivers. However, he and a friend, An-hyuk, had “gotten wind of the investigation the Security Force was conducting” on individuals suspected of listening to foreign media. Kang remarks:

The time for action had come; it was almost a question of life and death. If they got to us this time, we would be going to a hard-labor camp. If our plan were

to succeed, it would have to remain secret. Even our families would have to be kept in the dark, and telling friends was out of the question. (p. 187)

Jin-sung Jang (2014) recounts a similar situation regarding his escape, utilizing secrecy to avoid suspicion from his parents. Jang's case also serves as an example of the complicated, intertwined nature of suspicion, secrecy, and deception, which are also entangled across contexts (e.g., political level and interpersonal level). Working as a high-level psychological warfare and propaganda officer, he made the mistake of removing a South Korean periodical from his work unit, the United Front Department, which is responsible for establishing pro-North Korean groups in South Korea. Making matters worse, Jang lent the periodical to a close friend who subsequently lost it in short time. The periodical

included a biography of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il written by a South Korean academic who had pieced together their family history, although we were only allowed to know their revolutionary history. It even made mention of the fact that Kim Jong-il had mistresses...it was considered treason of the most serious degree to have shared this information. (p. 70)

Because of the importance of the periodical, Jang and his friend knew authorities would attempt to find and confront them quickly. Thus, they had realized they had to escape the country or would be caught and severely punished, if not executed. The entangled matter of secrecy, suspicion, and having to deceive to survive—even in family contexts—is further illustrated in Jang's departure from his family:

I felt sick that my mother and father must live out their remaining days in a world from which their only son disappeared. Yet I could not say good-bye to them. They would not let me go if they learned my plan. They would kill themselves first. Once I left the country and officially became a missing person, I knew how the Ministry of State Security would interrogate them. If they so much as suspected that my parents had been aware of my intention to escape, they would be convicted of assisting a traitor. It was far better for them to face the authorities in complete innocence. As I walked into the living room, they both questioned me at once. "What are the sunglasses for?" "My eyes are a bit sore." I managed to make up an excuse. ...My father intervened. "Let him alone, he'll be late for work." ...I quickly crossed the living room and made my way towards the front door. Only when I reached the threshold did I steal a look behind me. I longed to see my parents one more time...As soon as I left the house, my tears erupted in bitter sobs, I knew the Worker's Party could take away my right to life, but it had also taken away my right to say good-bye to my family, and I had to deceive them to the end. (pp. 73–75)

Deceiving the Self

The final subtheme of *deceiving as a means of survival* concerns self-deception. One popular definition states in part that self-deception "is a motivated

unawareness of conflicting knowledge in which threatening knowledge is selectively filtered out from consciousness as a psychological defense...” (Starek & Keating, 1991, p. 146). Early in her memoir, Yeonmi Park (2015) states, “I believed that, somehow, if I refused to acknowledge the unspeakable past, it would disappear. I convinced myself that a lot of it never happened; I taught myself to forget the rest” (p. 5). Later, she states bluntly, “...we North Koreans can be experts at lying, even to ourselves” (p. 54). She provides additional context: “North Koreans have two stories running through their heads at all times, like trains on parallel tracks. One is what you are taught to believe; the other is what you see with your own eyes” (p. 53). She goes on to provide various examples, such as “It is how you can recite the motto ‘Children are King’ in school, then walk past the orphanage where children with bloated bellies stare at you with hungry eyes,” and “The frozen babies that starving mothers abandoned in the alleys did not fit into my worldview, so I couldn’t process what I saw. It was normal to see bodies in the trash heaps, bodies floating in the river, normal to just walk by and do nothing when a stranger cried for help” (p. 54). She elaborates on the nature of actively filtering out information and its effects:

There were so many desperate people on the streets crying for help that you had to shut off your heart or the pain would be too much. After a while you can’t care anymore. And that is what hell is like. (p. 55)

While Yeonmi Park’s (2015) example is useful for understanding why one would engage in self-deception due to societal distress, memoirists also wrote repeatedly of deceiving the self in interpersonal and family contexts. Lucia Jang (2014), born in the 1970s, provides a useful example of self-deception. As a young woman, Jang worked in a factory. There, she met Myungin, a man she thought was courting her, but instead raped her. She was forced to marry him when she found herself pregnant and continued to endure his abuse, using self-deception as a psychological defense mechanism:

Myungin could do anything he wanted. As he dealt the blows, I knew I was nothing to him except a pitiful girl whose bride money was needed for his family’s debts. He had never adored me. He had never cared. What hurt me most was that I had known this truth from the beginning. I just didn’t want to see it. (p. 118)

Finding the Truth and Living to Tell It

The final primary theme concerns finding new truths and exposing them to the outside world. Three subthemes include *discovering new realities via foreign media*, *fighting to tell the truth*, and *gaining voice, exposing truth, and advocating for human rights*.

Discovering New Realities via Foreign Media

A common discussion point among memoirists was not only that they consumed foreign, illegal media, but their reflections on how doing so changed their thinking about the reality in and beyond North Korea. Hyok Kang (2007) remarks:

As we were quite close to the Chinese border, we were able to pick up the Beijing channels. That was totally and utterly forbidden but we did it anyway, at night, with the curtains drawn. Chinese television gave us an absolutely incredible view of the world. There were cars everywhere, rich people who ate all the time and delicious-looking food, buildings that looked like mirrors, lovely homes piled high with household appliances and electric gadgets...Chinese television looked a hundred times truer than our one channel... (p. 43)

In a similar vein regarding media and reality, in Yeonmi Park's (2015) discussion of the contradictory narratives North Koreans have running through their heads, she states:

It is how you can believe that North Korea is a socialist paradise, the best country in the world with the happiest people who have nothing to envy, while devouring movies and TV programs in enemy nations enjoying a level of prosperity that you couldn't imagine in your dreams. (p. 54)

Chol-hwan Kang (2001) provides another example: "Listening to South Korean radio had to be done with extreme caution" (p. 185). He recalls listening to Christian programs on the Korean Broadcasting System, as well as the Voice of America, and reflects, "Listening to the radio gave us the words we needed to express our dissatisfaction. Every program, each new discovery, helped us tear a little freer from the enveloping web of deception" (p. 186). Kang's example aligns with Fahy's (2015) notable work with refugees, which in part describes the process of North Koreans' social and psychological strategies for coping with the regime through their personal experiences of suffering, enlightenment, and disappointment.

Although foreign media is illegal and can come with heavy consequences if one is found possessing, consuming, or distributing it (Korea Institute for National Unification, 2016), many analysts and North Korean refugee memoirists who discuss the topic tend to agree with Chol-hwan Kang's (2001) perspective about foreign media having a clear role enabling North Koreans to "tear freer." Numerous authors and advocates argue that the continued inflow of foreign media into North Korea is the primary way to affect the social consciousness of North Koreans, and that foreign media has already generated irreversible changes in the country. Baek (2016), who provides one of the most recent and comprehensive analyses of the topic (Docan-Morgan, 2018b), discusses the ways in which forbidden information is spread through

gossip, freedom balloons, radio, and USBs. She admits that although foreign media does not work as a magic bullet to liberate individuals, it “may be instrumental in someday bringing down one of the most brutal and repressive regimes in modern history” (p. x). She contends, “more information will drive more social and cultural changes” (p. 196).

Fighting to Tell the Truth

Many memoirists wrote about their grueling experiences to stay alive in order to ultimately inform others about their realities in North Korea, as well as their escapes in search of freedom. This subtheme appears in several ways. Some memoirists spoke of their relentless will to stay alive *inside* of North Korea with the sole purpose of escaping and sharing their realities with the rest of the world. Other memoirists spoke of realizing the regime’s lies *during their escape and quest for freedom*, indicating a desire to tell their truths to the world. And numerous memoirists also spoke of an additional fight to tell the truth—the unexpected fight to be believed by others once they found freedom.

Soon Ok Lee (1999), for example, is one memoirist who writes about her drive to remain alive in North Korea, even under brutal conditions, with the singular purpose of escaping and sharing her realities with the rest of the world. She describes her life, working as a well-respected supervisor at a material distribution center; however, because she refused to satisfy the greed of a government officer, she ended up enduring six years of inhumane treatment in prison, starting in 1986. Her experiences align with aforementioned themes (e.g., *discovering and dealing with propaganda*): “Sometimes people see the truth. That happened to me. I saw some of the absurdity of the North Korean government before I was sent to prison, but my childhood training in Kim Il Sung’s doctrine kept me from seeing the truth. It wasn’t until I suffered from the injustice that I began to change my mind. Then my eyes were opened to the system I was living in” (p. 121). In her memoir, she wrote recurrently about her will to survive in order to inform the outside world. For example: “I am disgusted by the lies of the North Korean government. I once truly believed that North Korea was the paradise of the universe, but it is really the den of evil. Everyone in the world will see the reality of hell when the Korean government is torn down” (p. 142). Related to the subtheme of *fighting to tell the truth*, Lee (1999) and multiple memoirists describe a common response to their stories once they find freedom—disbelief in their experiences. In her conclusion, Lee states:

When I first began to testify of the brutality in North Korea, no one believed me. Someone told me, “No way! How could people survive in such an environment!” Perhaps it is natural that people who have not suffered like this think I’m exaggerating, but I am sad to admit that this is true and is happening right now. (p. 154)

Lee's comments point to the reality that some refugees fight to escape to freedom in order to inform the world about life in North Korea, but also experience a continued fight once in freedom—the *fight to tell the truth and be believed*. Hyok Kang (2007), who escaped from North Korea when he was 12 years old, spent four years in China, and arrived in South Korea at the age of 16, reflects on his childhood in the South: "When I tell children of my own age in South Korea what life is like in North Korea, most of the time they don't believe me" (p. xi). Like Soon Ok Lee (1999) and Hyok Kang (2007), Chol-hwan Kang (2001) tells of his doubters, including media:

A month after our arrival, we were brought to the Seoul Press Center to be interviewed by several dozen journalists...I had been through so many awful things, and these people, who had lived their whole lives swaddled in perfect comfort, were looking skeptically down their noses at me!...I found the journalist from the newspaper *Hangyore* particularly irritating. What place did his skepticism leave for the victims? Millions of people were dying or suffering from hunger, an entire population was being deprived of its freedom, and his only concern was our credibility...I decided to speak. "If you don't want to believe us, go to the North! Do you think we risked our lives so we could come here and lie?" (pp. 223–224)

Yeonmi Park (2015) also writes about dealing with skepticism from the media. Once Park (2015) began sharing her story, often in English, she realized that some people were "keeping score" of every detail she shared (p. 263). In her memoir, she writes of having to make crucial decisions about what to share and what to keep private, especially as her story gained intense media interest. Park shares that ultimately, her mother "wanted people to know why we had to escape, and what happened to North Korean women who were sold in China... 'If you don't speak up for them, Yeonmi-ya, who will?' she said. My sister agreed" (p. 264). Park mentions, "I would soon discover that to be completely free, I had to confront the truth of my past" (p. 257). She tells of choosing to disclose more of her experiences, including being trafficked with her mother and seeing her mother being raped by a Chinese broker. As Park's story gained more attention, the North Korean government began watching her closely. She remarks:

In early 2015, the regime uploaded two separate videos calling me a liar and a "human rights propaganda puppet." They had sifted through my interviews and attacked me for supposed inconsistencies in my quotes. When the regime couldn't dispute what I said, they invented lies about me and my family...Worst of all, they paraded my relatives and former friends to denounce me and my family. (pp. 264–265)

Fighting to tell the truth appears to have no boundaries. Eunsun Kim (2015), who grew up in North Korea during the famine remarks: "we in North Korea

did not have any information about the rest of the world, other than what was fed to us through the state's propaganda, which always emphasized that it was far better to live here than in the chaos of the capitalist world. We grew up in one big lie, but I didn't know it then" (p. 50). She elaborates, indicating a desire to share the realities of North Korea: "It was only later, at the end of our perilous journey in search for freedom, that my eyes were opened to the subservience of our lives in North Korea and that I began to understand the horror of that inhumane regime. Today, I can only denounce the regime's crimes, because I am safely in South Korea. And here, at long last, my stomach is full" (p. 51). Now in South Korea, Kim speaks about her experiences living in North Korea, escaping to freedom, and her adjustment (Worrall, 2015).

Similar to Eunsun Kim (2015), Jin-sung Jang (2014) also experienced a turning point during his journey for freedom. After fleeing North Korea, Jang was struggling to survive in China. While there, his close friend with whom he escaped North Korea, Young-min, had died. Jang remarks:

From that moment on, I was no longer a fugitive. I was no longer fleeing out of terror, but fighting for my freedom, so that I could expose the lies of Kim Jong-il. I wasn't afraid to die if I died a free man, and this released me from fear. (p. 293)

Later, Jang remarks:

The North Korean regime has not finished with its persecution of me. It not only makes secret attempts to find and harm me physically, it also threatens me openly through its media. In June 2013, for example, the Ministry of People's Security published an official statement through the North Korean state news organ, KCNA, saying it would "remove my existence from this universe." The tyranny of Kim has now been inherited by a third generation. This is why my peace lies in waging war against despotism, until our people are freed. Without that, my privilege of freedom would be no more than selfishness. (p. 314)

Gaining Voice, Exposing Truth, and Advocating for Human Rights

All texts examined in the current study purposefully expose memoirists' truths or realities about life in and escaping North Korea. They also directly advocate for human rights for North Koreans. Indeed, before and/or after their memoirs were published, the majority of these memoirists are human rights advocates—giving speeches, testimonies, and media interviews. Some have created their own organizations helping refugees or have expressed plans to do so in the future. Within their memoirs—often in the preface, epilogue, or afterword sections—memoirists discuss their activities at the time of writing. At the end of Jin-sung Jang's (2014) memoir, for example, he discusses his journey exposing the truth. He was chosen to represent North Korea in

exile, among several other poets in exile, for the World Poetry Summit at Poetry Parnassus, as part of the Summer Olympics held in London in 2012. He reflects that the event “strengthened my resolve to declare the truth about North Korea through the written word” (p. 311). Notably, Jang also created *New Focus* (www.newfocus.co.kr). In Jang’s words, it is

the first news organization run by North Korean exiles. I named it thus for two main reasons: in the hope that North Korea could pursue a new vision; and to show the outside world that there is a way of understanding North Korea beyond the way that existing frameworks of interpretation or government agendas allowed it. I wanted the knowledge and experience of North Koreans to be taken seriously into account. As I’ve written elsewhere: “[Back home] there are two North Koreas: one real and the other fiction. After my defection, I recognized the existence of a third North Korea: a theoretical one, one constructed by the outside world...” (p. 311) ...our guiding principle from the start has been: “Don’t worry about going faster than those who have had a head start; worry only about being more honest. It may take a long time for the truth to come to light, but it will remain long after the lies have faded.” (p. 316)

Chol-hwan Kang (2001), who spent 10 years in North Korea’s Yodok concentration camp, provides an updated preface for the revised edition of his memoir in 2005. In South Korea, he worked as a staff writer specializing in North Korean affairs for the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper. He reports having “met and reported on approximately 500 North Korean refugees and defectors, those on the run in China and those who found freedom in South Korea” (p. vii). In 2007, he founded the North Korea Strategy Center (NKSC), which is active in South Korea and the US. According their website, “As a defector-led organization, NKSC US believes that North Koreans are leading change in North Korea. We accelerate this people powered change by providing a platform for North Korean voices. Our programs empower North Koreans within the country with access to information, while supporting defectors outside of North Korea with leadership development programs and international support networks” (North Korea Strategy Center, n.d.).

Memoirists have also utilized their voices, exposed truth, and advocated for human rights by partnering with existing organizations. For example, Hyeonseo Lee (2015) and Joseph Kim (2015) write about their experiences spreading awareness by giving TED Talks. Yeonmi Park (2015), who perhaps has received the most international media attention of the 11 memoirists, writes about giving a multitude of speeches and interviews about her experiences. Both Yeonmi Park (2015) and Joseph Kim (2015) praise Liberty in North Korea (LiNK). Park, for example, addresses the LiNK staff: “you taught me what it means to be a spokesperson for the North Korean people... and become a better advocate for freedom” (p. 270).

Certainly, the decision to publish a memoir exposes one’s own truths and, within the current context, advocates for North Korean human rights.

Eunsun Kim (2015) addresses this clearly, as well as her partnership with an existing organization:

I undertook the writing of this book with a mission that I hold dear to my heart: providing witness testimony to the situation in North Korea, and helping to alleviate the burdens of my people, who are oppressed by a totalitarian dictatorship. That's why for now, I work for an NGO based in Seoul. The Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR) tries to mobilize world leaders to change the fate of the Korean peninsula north of the 38th parallel, and to help North Korean defectors who have taken refuge in Seoul. (p. 226)

Refugees have been instrumental to the important work of the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, which advocates internationally to raise awareness of the North Korean human rights problem and was a major contributor to the successful campaign to establish the UN COI. Related, Sungju Lee (2016) writes, "In the spring of 2015, I became the consultant for the rescuing team of Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, a nonprofit group that helps defectors trapped in China. I speak around the world, raising awareness and money to rescue North Koreans in China" (p. 307). Similarly, in the preface of Hyok Kang's (2007) memoir, Philippe Grangereau writes of meeting Kang at an event organized by human rights organizations: Kang "was invited by the People in Need Foundation (PINF), which was holding the fourth conference of the South Korean NGO 'North Korean Human Rights' (NKHR)" (p. xi).

North Korean refugees who have written memoirs, as well as many who have not, have partnered with other existing organizations in varying capacities. Some participate in mentoring programs to support young defectors newly arrived in South Korea, work as reporters for *Daily NK* (a North Korea-focused news site owned by Unification Media Group), or work as researchers and contributors to projects aimed at documenting ongoing human rights abuses in North Korea.

Refugees have also worked with the NGO Now Action & Unity for Human Rights (NAUH). Seong-ho Ji, a North Korean defector and President of NAUH, states the following on their website's welcome message: "We have spearheaded the effort for alerting the public to the reality of North Korea's human rights conditions, organizing campaigns calling for unification, hosting cultural exchanges between South and North Korean young adults, participating in radio broadcasts that relay news of freedom for North Korea, and helping rescue operations of North Korean refugees" (NAUH, n.d.). Further, the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) and the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) both work with North Korean refugees to document human rights abuses for use in future investigations into crimes committed in North Korea, as well as to map patterns of abuses.

A CALL FOR PURPOSEFUL RESEARCH AND ACTION

The findings of the current study align with and extend previous work by scholars and practitioners who have found that the Kim dynasty is deified, propaganda is a dominant form of communication in North Korea, and many North Koreans face countless obstacles within their own state and as refugees (e.g., Byman & Lind, 2010; Cha, 2013; Cumings, 2005; Demick, 2010; Haggard & Noland, 2011; Hassig & Oh, 2015; Lankov, 2013, 2017). However, the current analysis takes us a step further, offering an explanation as to how some North Koreans (i.e., memoirists and perhaps an unidentified number of others) are left with the complicated, highly delicate, and potentially dangerous obstacle of questioning government narratives, feigning adherence to the Kim regime, and fighting to tell the truth. Memoirists also brought to light the complicated psychological and communicative acts of balancing suspicion and secrecy in public contexts *and* balancing suspicion and secrecy in private contexts, as well as the coping mechanism of deceiving the self. These highly complex issues undoubtedly take a toll on individuals' well-being and identity—all of which are ripe topics to be explored in more depth for future studies and potential issues to be addressed in relevant social-psychological services offered to refugees.

As scholar-practitioners engaged with issues of human rights, we focus here on practical application, the extension of scholarly knowledge, and improvement of the human condition. Therefore, we end with a call to action aimed at empowering survivor voices, utilizing information to create change in North Korea, and offering future directions for scholars, practitioners, and human rights advocates.

Empowering Survivor Voices

The current study also makes it clear that refugees need more opportunities to gain and express their voices and communicate their realities (if they wish), as they are at a severe disadvantage during and after resettling due to a plethora of documented psychological and cultural challenges. We call upon individuals interested in human rights—whether academics, practitioners, lay persons, clergy, and governmental or non-governmental organizations—to move to action in helping empower survivor voices. This may involve a utilizing a scholar-practitioner model (McClintock, 2004), action research (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Lewin, 1946; Reason & Bradbury, 2008), applied research (e.g., Frey & Cissna, 2009), critical grounded theory (Charmaz, 2013), public scholarship (Stoller, 2016), bridging theory and practice via phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001), community service learning (Bose, Horrigan, Doble, & Shipp, 2014), and/or other practice-based approaches. Direct avenues also include becoming involved with governmental or non-governmental organizations that help refugees gain essential skills, as well as platforms to express their voices, as desired.

Burgeoning research which looks at the issues surrounding transitions from conflict or situations of authoritarian government warns against mistreatment or neglect of survivors of oppressive regimes, drawing attention to key considerations for policy architects, activists, and human rights practitioners who are looking to the future with survivors in mind (Robins, 2011; Robins & Wilson, 2015; McEvoy & McConnachie, 2012). To date, planning in South Korea and internationally for a potential political transition or regime change in North Korea (usually within the framework of inter-Korean unification) has tended to involve North Korean defectors as relatively passive providers of information or witnesses to crimes. Little space is dedicated to refugee agency in the design and planning of institutions and mechanisms that might be created to process what has happened throughout North Korea's difficult history, such as through truth telling, criminal prosecutions, or reparations for victims. Research on rebuilding nations following dramatic transitions finds that institutional approaches led by national elites often marginalize victim constituencies, rather than rooting recovery efforts in an understanding of how mass violations have impacted and transformed affected populations, and what survivors *themselves* perceive will aid most in their recovery from the impact of the violation (Gready & Robins, 2017). Creating opportunities for North Korean defectors to be empowered, if they so desire, will be essential to the success of future peace-building and national restoration, and their active participation can and should be harnessed now. At the time of this writing, research is currently underway on these themes by the Seoul-based Transitional Justice Working Group, in the hope that it will inform current and future engagement with survivors of North Korean human rights abuses as part of the process of dealing with the past.

Information, Communication, and Change in North Korea

The current study also adds to our developing understanding of the importance of information and media that comes into and out of North Korea. In her conclusion on the topic of how the information underground is transforming North Korea, Baek (2016) states, "Civil society organizations and possibly government-agency-powered efforts to increase the flow of information into North Korea may well be the most reasonable, sustainable, cost-effective, and peaceful way of creating positive change inside North Korea" (p. 216). The availability of more information, Baek argues, gives the North Korean people "the agency, self-determination, and knowledge to write their own future and destiny as a nation" (p. 217). Baek invites interested individuals to become involved with organizations that send information into North Korea, and mentions some of the components involved in these processes—"researching best practices from comparative situations, finding and/or creating technologies for dissemination purposes, creating and editing original digital content, fundraising, and more" (p. 225). Although we largely agree with Baek, we would be remiss to not remind readers and practitioners of the

potential consequences for individuals caught with or distributing foreign media in North Korea (see Korea Institute for National Unification, 2016).

Another means of information transmission from the outside into North Korea can occur through international engagement activities such as the delivery of medical and other humanitarian aid, as well as educational initiatives such as the foreign-run and staffed Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, and Choson Exchange, which brings North Koreans to Singapore to study business. Contact with foreign individuals, products, and expertise can have a transformative effect on the view of the outside for the North Koreans who encounter them. The degree to which foreign media and people-to-people contact is transforming North Korea remains to be fully seen, as only time (and additional information) will tell. For practitioners (e.g., NGOs and interlinked networks of actors who push illegal media into North Korea; see Baek, 2016; Docan-Morgan, 2018b), academics, and refugees, we ask: what have been the (verified) effects of people-to-people contact and information flow into North Korea? Has the information flow into North Korea actually created an “underground revolution” as Baek argues, and if so, among whom and how can it safely spread further? Or is it sowing the seeds for change, and what kind of change? In North Korea specifically, (how) can an underground revolution of any type last, and can it lead to more dramatic and wide-reaching change? Will the spread of foreign media in North Korea be a catalyst for an “above ground” revolution, and if so, what exactly is required for this to take place? How, if at all, do history, relevant revolutions, extant research, and theory and practice related to media and diffusion of innovations (see Rogers, 2003) inform us about the best next steps for pursuing reasoned, purposeful, and impactful distribution of information in North Korea? Pragmatically, what types of information and media, technologies, hardware, and diffusion strategies are the most effective and safe?

Future Directions

Experts from a plethora of academic fields can do more to engage with issues faced by North Koreans and refugees. For scholars focused on the areas of deceptive communication, truth, and ethics, we can use our skills and knowledge to confront human rights violations. For example, applied research questions include the following: How can deceptive tactics be used for altruistic purposes (e.g., freeing North Koreans stuck in China)? Regarding a topic nearly absent from the academic literature: What are the more detailed nuances, complications, and successful ways to succeed at life-saving lies? Regarding truth, how can we better understand the experiences of North Korean refugees and help them spread their lived experiences, as they wish? For scholars who are focused on continued theory and research development, there are countless avenues to pursue that will increase our understanding of many of the aforementioned issues—dialectical tensions experienced within personal relationships, identity management, survivor participation, and

decision-making are examples of areas where social scientific, humanistic, and critical approaches will help us better understand the experiences of and challenges endured by refugees.

For scholars dealing with any sort of media, and in any context—marketing, advertising, public relations, propaganda, and politics, for example—what communicative strategies can be created and implemented to better inform the world about human rights violations suffered by North Koreans and the refugee experience? The prominent media narrative on North Korea focuses on nuclear weapons and the political diatribe of state leaders (Kang, 2018), while North Koreans continue to suffer human rights abuses. How can this narrative be amended or refocused on issues of human rights and the realities (i.e., truths) of those who live in North Korea and/or have resettled elsewhere, for example? The potential areas to explore—via research, theory, and practice—are endless and necessary. Our call for purposeful research and action is aptly summed up by Jin-sung Jang (2014), and we believe also applies to North Koreans, refugees, and advocates of human rights: “if the regime has murder, deception and nuclear bombs in its arsenal, the weapon I yield is truth” (p. 314).

NOTES

1. There is no single, agreed-upon English spelling or appearance of Korean names. In Korean, the family name commonly appears first, followed by one or two given names. In the current chapter, we hyphenate first names (e.g., Kim Il-Sung) to make it clear which are family and given names. All direct quotations appear as they were originally written; therefore, there are minor differences in how some names appear throughout this chapter (e.g., Kim Il-Sung, Kim Il Sung, Kim Il-sung). However, the majority of North Korean refugee memoirs written in English place given names first and family names second; therefore, we also use this approach.
2. The exact figures for famine deaths remain unclear today. The lowest estimates are at around 450,000, while the highest credible estimates are closer to 1 million, depending on the source (Lankov, 2013, p. 79).
3. For some North Korean defectors, China is a transit country, while others stay indefinitely (Lee, 2017, pp. 34–35). Kim (2012) remarks, “The exact number of North Korean escapees in China is open to debate. The Chinese government’s conservative estimate is 10,000; Seoul’s calculation is between 10,000 and 30,000; humanitarian organizations put the figure as high as 300,000” (p. 45). Also see Tanaka (2008).
4. The significantly higher percentage of female defectors is due to the greater flexibility women have in leaving the country unnoticed, given that housewives and independent traders (a mainstay of the controlled private markets) will not be missed in the same way as men not turning up for work at government-assigned jobs (Kim, 2013).
5. In this chapter, we use both *defector* and *refugee* synonymously, recognizing the variety of individual preferences expressed by North Koreans themselves in terms of how they choose to identify.

6. In a recent survey of 153 North Koreans defectors living in South Korea on the theme of national identity, the Seoul-based NGO, Transitional Justice Working Group, found that 36.7% of respondents identified themselves as “just Korean,” 30% identified as “North Korean,” and 25.3% identified as “South Korean” (Transitional Justice Working Group, forthcoming).
7. It is worth mentioning that the publication of a memoir, especially in English with the support of a co-author as many have done, can provide a source of additional income and/or leverage with which to engage in North Korean human rights/anti-regime activism, both of which can be difficult to achieve if there is an absence of other professional skills and experience.

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