

**The Interview**  
**An Ethnographic Approach**

**Edited by**  
**Jonathan Skinner**

**B L O O M S B U R Y**  
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**This volume is dedicated to  
my mother  
who always asked a question or two**

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## Recalling What Was Unspeakable: Hunger in North Korea

*Sandra Fahy*

Anthropologists have explored the topic of silence in a variety of contexts (Basso 1970; Tamen and Saville Troike 1985; Tyler 1987). A consistent theme is that silence is powerful because of its inherent ambiguity; an ambiguity widely accepted as a 'form of withholding' (Achino-Loeb 2006b). In contrast, the 'breaking' of silence, where the trauma narrative for example finds voice, is seen as a departure from the original violence and an act against perpetrators both for those who listen and those who speak (Herman 1992; McKinney 2007). However, theories of analysis for silence are as yet unfixd (Sheriff 2000). In recent years, perhaps because scholars have lost their fear of acknowledging that informants go quiet, the topic of silence in interviews has received a lot of attention (Angrosino 2002; Bernard 2002; Cuéllar 2010; Ervin 2000; Fernandez 2006; Jaworski 1997); it has been viewed as an aspect of the cultural frame in which it emerges (Randall and Koppenhaver 2004), as something both imposed and embraced (Allison 2011). The silence of informants is not necessarily a pure silence, but can take many forms. In a similar way, the unspeakable also takes different manifestations such as the nonverbal utterance, the word left incomplete or the phrase that trails off. Some informants may testify to the inability for words to carry forth accurate communication about the experience, particularly in cases of trauma (Desjarlais et al. 1995: 175; Jenkins 1998: 187); while some trauma is so complete as to render the experience fully unspeakable (Engdahl 2002: 10), some informants speak vociferously *no matter how I tell you, you will not understand*, signifying an effective silencing on the topic.

To my imagination, such vocalized silences are like curtains behind which the experience under discussion unfolded. I use this metaphor of curtains deliberately because it evokes another key topic under consideration here: the capacity of censorship to veil communication.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the informant has pulled the curtain deliberately, or she had the curtain pulled on her. Perhaps she wants to pull it back, but cannot find the opening, the start or end to the fabric. Sometimes it is not the right time, perhaps the audience is inappropriate and unresponsive. In this chapter I will

explore not only what is silenced or unspeakable at the time of the interview, but also what was unspeakable at the time of the experience and how these relate to each other. Do sites of suffering which limit articulation also limit articulation after the fact?

The example under consideration here is collective social suffering in the form of protracted hunger which occurred in North Korea in the 1990s. The oral accounts I collected from survivors of the famine, resettled in Seoul and Tokyo in 2006, demonstrate a complex relationship to silence and the unspeakable.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this examination is to demonstrate how contexts shape articulation during as well as after the fact. Let us bear in mind that for atrocity to come into being, whether it is famine, genocide, the Shoah or other types of rights violations, for these acts to come into being and for them to continue, there must also exist a sociopolitical discourse that generates, reproduces and reinforces the truths upon which the atrocity is justified. Thus, it is natural that articulation 'after the fact' about experience from that time and place will bear the print of that discourse within itself. This leads to the question of whether silence is a consequence of atrocity or evidence of its mechanisms of manufacture. Silence and the unspeakable in interviews are useful for understanding how silence and the unspeakable functioned at the time of the experience.

\* \* \*

Contexts of famine invariably involve violence, whether between individuals, non-state actors or governments. One of the operational features of violence is its ability to censor, to obfuscate, to play with meaning, to make ambiguous while simultaneously destroying lives. Indeed, connections between famine and censorship have long been historically observed (Article 19 1990; Devereux 1993; Leshuk 2000; Sen and Drèze 1999). Therefore, it is not amiss to recognize several levels of silencing which occur on national, collective and individual levels long before the stage when the informant and researcher sit down together. It is clear that the language of informants can tell us a great deal about those former stages of silencing and this can reveal aspects of the social environment where the violence took place. The language used by North Korean famine survivors in their oral accounts demonstrates consistent patterns in speech that I classify as ambiguous because they require context to achieve full meaning. These expressions can be understood as 'silencing' and making 'unspeakable' their experiences in the North because that original context is so impenetrable, both physically and somewhat ideologically, for many listeners. Indeed, it could be argued that these expressions continue to make experiences unspeakable after survival, in South Korea or Japan, because truly accurate communication could endanger family members and friends still living at home.

One of the reasons ambiguous expressions appeared in the oral accounts is due to the fact that sociopolitical structures in North Korea necessitated and prescribed precisely this type of communication. Perhaps through habit, or because it struck them as the most suitable way to express themselves, these terms, metaphors and

expressions emerged again and again in interviews producing an aggregate trend across a host of informants demonstrating that it was not mere coincidence. In the North, this type of speech meant that individuals could maintain fairly accurate communication about their immediate conditions while at the same time remaining safely within an ambiguous cloak of language that did not directly criticize the country, the leadership, the food shortage or even hunger itself. Consequently, once they were safely resettled in South Korea or Japan, the interview became a space where linguistic traces of acceptable speech inside the North emerged and bore evidence to how the government shaped interpretation of the food shortage through discourse. The curtain was pulled back on the famine.

\* \* \*

In North Korea, in the 1990s, at the tail end of long-term vulnerability a famine emerged claiming upwards of nearly two million lives.<sup>3</sup> Poor agricultural decision making, loss of Soviet bloc trade partners and poor policy choices left the country vulnerable to natural disasters (Lee 2000: 23; Woo-Cummings 2002: 27–9). In addition to these factors, the failure to allow the population the means by which to alter its entitlement to food access (Haggard et al. 2007: 22) resulted in many years of famine and over a decade of food shortages in many parts of the country (Schloms 2004: 127). Preexisting inequalities such as nutritional discrimination according to family background and regional access to food meant that those in the northernmost regions were worst affected (Cha 2004; Haggard et al. 2007: 16). Concern over too much involvement with the international community led to strict limits on aid activities within the country, which severely hampered efforts to provide aid to the most vulnerable population groups (Schloms 2004). Inside North Korea, throughout the 1990s and well into the present day, the famine and food shortages were euphemistically phrased in the media and public discourse. The famine was not in fact a *famine*, but a ‘March of Suffering’—the official term most often used. ‘Famine’, I was told, ‘was something related to South Korea, or Africa’ (Lee (F) interview 2006) and did not have any association with North Korea. Being incongruous politically, ideologically and socially, it did not make sense to use the term. In other ways, which I will explore in this chapter, whole bodies of language grew up in the space left behind in the absence of accurate expression.

When I embarked on this research I presumed many informants would be shy, reluctant and maybe even a bit embarrassed to tell me about their personal experiences of surviving the famine. Instead, it was nothing like that. Every person I asked said that they would be happy to share their experience, adding ‘no one has ever asked me to talk about it’—which surprised me as much as their abundant willingness to share their stories with me. Their only insistence was that they remain anonymous, so as not to implicate family and friends back home. They let me record our discussions, asking whatever question I wished. Only once was I refused an answer, when I asked a young man what factors precipitated his departure from the North. My interviews

were unstructured, open. I was intentionally vague. I always started with a request to hear about their home town before things got bad. That usually set the oral account in motion. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, and I tried to encourage a monologue narrative with as little interruption as possible. It was not perfect though. There were awkward moments and embarrassments. Sometimes I found a banquet of food waiting for me at an informant's house and over this great mass of food we discussed the famine.<sup>4</sup> I tried to keep an accurate population distribution among the group of informants. Some came from the capital, Pyongyang, while others came from the more northern remote regions of Musan or Chongjin. Their ages ranged from seventeen to seventy, and there were equal numbers of men and women. One-fifth of my informants resided in Tokyo, the rest in Seoul. The Tokyo group were ethnic Koreans who had family in Japan, but had gone to North Korea during the 1960s and 1970s during an ethno-nationalist campaign by North Korea.

### Erasing Famine, Hunger and Starvation

The *Konan ūi Haenggun*, or March of Suffering, originally referred to Kim Il Sung's 1938 historic march to Manchuria with his anti-Japanese guerrilla troops in 1938–9 (Choson Ensik'lip'edia 1995: 179–81). But in the 1990s, the same term was used to identify the famine. In a few instances the famine was also referred to as 'the Red Banner Spirit'<sup>5</sup> and for a short time in 1997 it was called 'the Forced March to Final Victory' (Oh and Hassig 2000: 32), but the March of Suffering was most common. Survivors reported that if these official terms were not used, 'economic downturn' and 'food downturn' took their place. It was unheard of to refer to the *Konan ūi Haenggun* as a famine. Miss Lee explained, "They did not use the expression "famine" nor did they use the expression "hunger" rather they used the term *shingnyang t'agyok*, food ration downturn. Starvation was a term we really didn't use. I had been taught that starvation was happening to the beggars in South Korea, and in that instance we used the term a lot. But for the situation we were going through with the food, we didn't use that term' (Lee (F) interview 2006).

The terminology used to express the situation needed to be inaccurate—it needed to transpose the imaginary onto the real. Accurate articulation of lived experience would dissolve this imaginary; those who articulated lived experience accurately were not heard from again. The built structure of ideology required constant maintenance under conditions which tested its declarations; without this maintenance the structure would crumble. Control of speech necessitated physical control of the population to reinforce correct ways of speaking. Informants reported disappearances during the famine and there was an awareness that this could happen to them if they did not speak carefully. There was an awareness of the link between these—the act of speaking and disappearance. Appearing as antecedent and subsequent events in the sentence, the act of speaking and disappearing are correlated and identified as



relevant to each other: the one creates the probability of the other (after Ochs 2004: 271). As Mr Kim explained to me: '...I could not say that my grandfather died of hunger, because if we say that they'll take us away. The party will have my family and close acquaintances banished' (Kim interview 2006). Another North Korean, Mr Om, described the behaviour of a senior woman in his community who spoke openly, out of doors and in public, about her frustration with the food shortages. The antecedent event of speaking openly and outdoors is established as the cause of the subsequent event, her disappearance:

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

Hunger and starvation were words which could not be spoken. Starvation deaths were said to result from food poisoning, high blood pressure and, most ambiguously, pain. Mr Yoon shared a similar observation:

In North Korea there is no term called *famine*. At the moment there is nothing they would call a famine. *Refugee* is another word they don't have; there is no starvation-death. First of all they don't declare it that way. North Korean correspondence, intelligence, newspapers, magazines—if you look at these it'll say the North Korean economy is having difficulties. 'The people are dying of hunger, the people are escaping into foreign countries...' there aren't scholars or workers who have ever seen such things written, I know. There is no word for famine, in North Korean society tens of thousands can die of hunger, but there is no word starvation-death, in the media that truth is absent. (Yoon interview 2006)

These awkward metonyms are in keeping with cultural norms that enabled articulation without directly implicating the government. 'Hunger' was inconsistent with the metaphor established through the terminology of the *Konan ūi Haenggun*; pain on the other hand was not. This type of conversion occurred throughout several survivor accounts. In fact, some used such deep metaphoric descriptions as to nearly lose the topic of famine altogether. Consider the following explanation from Mr Kim:

When a person is cold, the freezing starts at the end of their fingers and then their feet freeze, later it comes to about here. Why? They are far from the heart, the heart is far away so the blood that comes out at first is hot, but it cools as it goes out. It gets colder. So the fingers freeze. In North Korea, likewise, we call Pyongyang the heart. Near to Pyongyang they are giving out the PDS.<sup>6</sup> Then, further away at the tips of the fingers far away in Hamgyongbukdo, Yanggangdo and so on from 1991, 1992 they weren't giving PDS. Then by February of 1996 little by little they weren't even able to give out any PDS in Pyongyang, the blood was starting to freeze... So if you think of it as a person,

if they are frozen up to here, to the heart, then they are going to die. Then at that time the warehouses were nearly run empty and Kim Jong Il took a countermeasure against it. From that time on, Kim Jong Il was telling the population, 'Yeah, because of our natural enemy, the bastard Americans, we are unable to farm and so there is no food, so it is difficult to give the PDS.' (Kim (M) interview 2006)

The progression of the famine is narrated through the metaphor of a body (the nation) gradually overtaken by chilblains (the famine), where only the heart is saved (to save the whole, as a consequence, unnecessary extremities must be sacrificed). On one level, we have the associated articulation of the national experience of suffering. On another, significantly, we have the articulation of individual suffering. Both of these pain expressions are separate from the starvation experience. Chilblains is selected as a metaphorical carrier perhaps because it provides the convenience of drawing a relatively clear image of gradual, fatal and inevitable exposure to the 'natural' elements without directly implicating the individual body in hunger. In this metaphor, the question of the body (the nation) causing chilblains is absurd. The starving individual is extracted from the metaphor entirely, reference to the famine is only hinted at in the cessation of food ration deliveries and then this is draped in the metaphor of blood flowing from the heart. The choice of metaphor was not incidental but rather culturally contingent. The analogy of the human anatomy had long been used to educate the population about the leading ideological framework of the country, known as the *Juche* Idea (Lee 2003: 111).<sup>7</sup> The brain makes decisions (the Great Leader), the nervous system carries out those decisions (the Party) and the bones and muscle execute the orders (the People). The body and the nervous system are the population, while the head is the leadership (Oberdorfer 1997: 20). Within this analogy, sacrifice of less vital parts is really not too much to ask. The metaphor, and the message carried within it, is consistent with the ideas historically put forth by the government.

Through this type of metaphor, the famine is established as an inevitable experience and as such culpability fell on the natural environment, not on the government. This is consistent with the ideas put forward in North Korea's leading newspaper, the *Rodong Sinmun*, where revolutionary agricultural methods are a means of lifting the country out of the food shortage (see Gabroussenko 2009). Quasi-scientific methods used to bolster agriculture and food production—such as irrigation, electrification and mechanization of agriculture—were not amiss, but they were not sufficient to the task (Hwang 1997: 59; Scott 1998: 5). However, science offered a kind of logic where nature did not.<sup>8</sup> It also reinforced the idea that the government's treatment of the famine was logical and that it could be trusted.

Ambiguity operated on a wide scale in the North. It extended beyond attributing the famine to nature and its solution to science, beyond that of simply omitting questionable nouns and verbs such as 'I am hungry' and 'I'm hungry because of X.' The tendency to camouflage information is part of the country's ideological apparatus,

an apparatus noted in other socialist states (Todorov 2003: 44; Watson 1994: 1). It is not at all surprising that this same tendency to speak behind veils would appear in the language of those who lived under such ideology. Whether intentionally or not, the language communicates the mentality prevalent at the time of the famine: government inaction was obfuscated and the countless lives lost were an inevitable price. The government provided the population with language that helped to prop up its perspective on the famine and this language circulated widely, but not without ordinary North Koreans putting their own twist on it. This enabled them to speak at different levels simultaneously. This type of communication has been observed in other socialist states (Humphrey 1994: 23–7), but also in nonsocialist contexts. Working with an understanding of the dynamics of power in colonial and class struggles, James Scott (1998) put forward the idea of the ‘hidden transcript’ as a means whereby historical memory—which was not officially sanctioned—could be transmitted in spite of forces which dictated otherwise. These hidden transcripts could be exchanged during social gatherings where certain categories of people could express themselves to one another.

\* \* \*

During the famine, state-sanctioned discourses were enforced and the population largely adopted these though they effaced accurate description of events. What emerges in interviews then is a blend of different types of ambiguity, which were highly useful while in the North because they enabled individuals to communicate vital information—about black market selling or famine foods, for example—where direct communication would endanger individuals. The expressions of survivors (articulate or otherwise) go some way to describing the overarching sociopolitical structures which gave them shape. Scholars working with survivors of collective social suffering have encountered the silence of informants. In fact, many survivors find themselves forced to encounter their own silence too; there are no words to describe what I experienced is a common refrain. ‘No matter what I say, you will not understand what it was like’, Mr Yoon told me. This came at the end of the interview, after two hours of discussing his life in North Korea. Was he saying this to establish its validity? As Todorov has explained, ‘understanding’ can make something seem ordinary (2003: 123). Perhaps Mr Yoon was trying to impress upon me how extraordinary the experience was—how beyond normal. Perhaps if I achieve understanding, particularly as someone who has not experienced the famine, that understanding will lead to justification. Where social suffering is concerned, understanding as a goal is said to lead to justification (Primo Levi, in Scheper-Hughes 1992: 83) and to suggest that such things can be justified is like siding with those who generated the suffering in the first place. Whether or not one can *understand* is an issue beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, here, I consider those two hours where Mr Yoon, and many other informants, used language to render life in North Korea. What do their word choices reveal about the impact of the external social environment on shaping their articulation and possibly their memory of the experience?

Not unlike other nations that experienced famine throughout history, the North Korean government offered up a picture of the famine that adhered to preexisting nationalist values.<sup>9</sup> Editorials from the most prominent national newspaper of the country, the *Rodong Sinmun*, throughout the 1990s, and particularly during the latter half of that decade, made repeated reference to a collective and revolutionary approach to solving the food shortage. The famine in North Korea was understood according to acceptable cultural parameters and methods for dealing with the crisis fell well within this remit. In the late 1990s, the *Rodong Sinmun* simultaneously acknowledged the food shortage while putting the responsibility for overcoming it squarely on the shoulders of the population through prescriptive calls for revolutionary and collective action (Gabroussenko 2009). Indeed in 1998, the same newspaper called for more loyal adherence to *juche* methods of farming (Gabroussenko 2009), confirming a leading North Korean defector's claim that the media increased ideological messages about solidarity and endurance during the famine (Hwang Jang Yup, in Oh and Hassig 2000: 32). As a result, both how the famine was understood and the behavioural responses by which it should be survived were kept in check. There was a very public obfuscation of the famine, a public remaking of it as something standard, something to be collectively endured. In this way, coping with the 'food shortage' could be framed as collective revolutionary efforts useful to the government. Obfuscation of the famine occurred from the terminology used to refer to it, right down to the nouns and verbs used to describe what survivors experienced on a bodily level.<sup>10</sup>

### **Humour, Ambiguous Speech and Memory**

As a means of gathering deeper descriptions of the experience, I began to ask survivors questions that seemed incongruous to the topic of famine itself. I asked if they could recall any humour from that time, jokes that people shared, sarcasm or witty phrases. It has not missed my attention that asking whether there was any humour that could be recalled from the famine was a provocative and evocative question which may have triggered off memories. This proved more valuable than I could have anticipated. When I asked Mr Yoon if he could remember any humour from his days in North Korea during the famine he insisted he could not remember anything, but then he suddenly remembered the Worker's Department Store:

But it's been many years since I've come over from North Korea, I was in China three years, and here quite a few, it's been seven years now. So a lot of the humour we used is forgotten. A lot of it is gone, and I hate to think about that side, so most of the humour the people used is no longer in my memory. Like the *paekhwachom* [Department Store]. We called the farmer's market the 'Worker's Department Store'. However, the country had made it just a shell operating as a store, and if you went inside there wasn't anything

you could buy. Of course, there were lovely looking bottles of alcohol, cigarettes, crockery and clothes on display, but these were only for show and you certainly couldn't buy them. Labourers and farmers would never have such a fate. The things the farmers and labourers could buy were at the markets, the black markets, they were the only place. So when we talked about the farmer's market we'd call it the 'Worker's Department Store'. (Yoon interview 2006)

In Korean the word for department store has a posh connotation and this contrasts sharply with the image of a black market, highlighting the incongruity clearly. Of course, the fact that the Worker's Department Store was devoid of purchasable goods, juxtaposed with the implicit notion of bounty in the name they gave to it, shows not only the dry and black humour of North Koreans, but the 'evocative transcript' which applies criticism to the country (Humphrey 1994). However, the speaker of such humour is saved by the fact that the Worker's Department Store was in fact that, but in reality not that. Mr Yoon explained that it was a common expression; and because they used language which was totally acceptable to the government and anyone else listening, there was little chance that one would get in trouble for the true meaning embedded in what they had said. Within these 'evocative transcripts' are two messages carried in what is said: First, there is the acceptable message of the speaker referring to where he is going; and second, there is the highly unacceptable message which highlights the incongruity between what exists and what is said to exist.

There were other examples of 'evocative transcripts' occurring among North Koreans in everyday life during the famine. Mr Yoon shared his experience with famine foods.

It was called 'substitute food products' so in place of food we had weeds, the leaves of trees, the bark of trees, lots of different things all mixed together, 'substitute food products' officially. Formally it was called 'substitute food products', but between people when we spoke of it we called it 'substitute fuel'... coal, gas, diesel... use substitute fuel. And when we spoke to each other we'd ask, 'Hey, did you use the substitute today?' Oh, it's kind of funny isn't it? Fuel. Fuelled machines, like cars, trucks, trains this kind of thing. It isn't appropriate to use the term for people. We're living creatures, sentient beings and physical entities, not machines, not equipment. Hmm... so, we used that metaphor, but there is no gas in North Korea. So, in the morning you'd go hungry, lunch you'd just skip, and for dinner you'd sleep. So, between those three meals when would you have time to eat? There wasn't time. So given that, when could you eat? At that time we'd say, 'Hey! How did you manage to get by this morning?' That's the kind of way we talked about it. (Yoon interview 2006)

Mr Yoon's narrative reveals that two objects of discontent could be simultaneously critiqued without too much risk of implication. The difficulty in finding food and fuel, both severely lacking in North Korea, are brought together here for observation.

Food and fuel are synchronized both in terms of their lack and in how they are replaced with other items. Many cars and trucks in North Korea have been converted to run on wood, just as the population was expected to convert their eating habits and adapt to famine foods.

While explaining the changing power dynamics which emerged from people having newly acquired money through the black market, a young informant explained: 'the security police eat securely... there was an expression to refer to it. The secret police eat secretly and the security police eat securely' (Lee (F) interview 2006). She did not elaborate the extent to which such expressions were used, but for a woman who was very young at the time of the famine to remember this is an indication that such expressions had a certain lasting power. These expressions indicate that some North Koreans were not only aware of their circumstances, but also knew that the articulation of that awareness required clandestine and careful means of communication. Perhaps the transcripts also point to a human need, regardless of conditions, to articulate observed incongruities and receive confirmation of what is observed. This negotiation of safety within articulation, this maintenance of preexisting relationships with real or potential perpetrators has been observed in the speech of conflict survivors elsewhere (Argenti-Pillen 2003; Brenneis 1988; Hoffmann and Oliver-Smith 2004).

### **The Shape of Memory**

The social environment in North Korea lends itself to a sustained lack of clarity as regards accurate information on factors which lead up to famine and consequential events such as public execution, disappearance and rumour. This lack of a means by which to access sustained clarity on events—recall that the ambiguous speech of my informants was of necessity brief while in the North—helps to engender uncertainty and doubt within the population as to the validity of explanations and justifications not emerging from the government. Doubt and denial were common expressions used by informants to describe the various stages of the famine. And yet doubt and denial are the very elements which, if present in a listener or audience, are said to hinder a survivor's ability to remember and speak; the need to be believed, the necessity to not face denial and doubt are essential to the maintenance of memory and the desire to speak (Herman 1997). When the anthropologist encounters survivors from contexts like North Korea, there are multiple hurdles to overcome. The language of my informants reveals the control of both word and deed in their home country which ensured adherence to appropriated ways of living during this internal crisis, and yet they managed to develop a highly specialized form of communicating which brought humour, sarcasm and creativity to their experiences, creating enclaves of relative safety.

Within these narrowly circumscribed spaces of safety, what kinds of memory emerge later when living comfortably in Seoul or Tokyo? Do these former coded

and ambiguous ways of speaking help to preserve memory? If the articulation of experience was restricted, surely this might impact the recollection of things after the fact. Caroline Humphrey further developed Scott's idea and made it applicable to socialist cases such as Mongolia where the 'evocative transcript' served to evolve meaning beyond surface meanings while remaining obscure; within state socialism subordination and domination exist in all lives simultaneously (1994: 23–7). In North Korea, Scott's hidden transcript could not safely emerge and thus a more subtle communication developed, the understanding of which occurs when the listener can appreciate the analogy and the precedent embedded within what is said. In other situations of potential volatility, it has been noted that the ambiguous expression of suffering is essential so as not to awaken the sleeping violence which exists between perpetrators and victims in small-scale settings (Argenti-Pillen 2003: 198–9). Perhaps these ambiguous expressions became so rooted in daily life as to remain even after survival and to readily awaken when the topic of famine is discussed again.

The language of North Koreans demonstrates the dynamics of power during the 1990s, and the sturdy nationalist discourse is carried through it. The interviews describe not only a mental landscape of North Korea, but also these forms of expression give a deeper sense of the structures of power that ordinary people participated with. While this may have resulted in a kind of metaphoric censorship, to use Bourdieu's term (1991: 138), the language shows the mentality through which the suffering was understood. As Althusser has explained, what ideology represents is not 'the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the *imaginary relation* of those individuals to the real relations in which they live' (1971: 166, my emphasis); or in other words, ideology is a manifestation of their imagined reality made 'material' through the actions and practices of those who live within that imaginary relationship to 'truth' (Althusser 1971: 165, 166, 169). The articulations of North Koreans reveal the deeply embedded efforts to maintain this imaginary relationship to the real. While trauma systematically silences people through suffering (see for example Jenkins 1998: 187; Kleinmen and Desjarlais 1995: 175), the government of North Korea provided the population with a nationalist framework by which to understand and interpret its suffering. Bruner, writing on culture and narrative, explains that 'one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life' (1987: 15). So while the government failed to take full action to avoid or remedy the famine in the 1990s, it went to great lengths to ensure the population understood things in ways consistent with established historical models. It was surely never intended to aid North Koreans in recalling details of the famine, yet it did just that.

I began this chapter by asking whether sites of suffering limit articulation after the experience, just as they might have during the experience. The survivors of famine who shared their personal stories with me demonstrate that the limits on communication during the famine years created pockets of site-specific communication that, if questions

were posed in a way to provoke them, revealed a host of memories that not only shared features of the famine itself, but the social and political context of its emergence.

### Notes

1. For a discussion of the impact of censorship on language and its veiling capacity see Sheriff (2000).
2. Over two dozen former North Koreans were interviewed in Seoul and Tokyo from January to November 2006. Interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed in Korean by the author.
3. Reportedly between two hundred thousand and three and a half million people died in the North Korean famine. These figures are clearly very rough estimates. The low estimates represent North Korean government figures while high estimates are those of aid agencies; the former is not transparent in its information gathering, while the latter are restricted by the North Korean government in their in-country information gathering. No source offers a truly accurate picture of famine mortality impact. The North Korean government claims that two hundred twenty thousand died from famine. Good Friends (or *Chungt'o* in Korean) estimates 2.8–3.5 million, while North Korea scholars Andrew Natsios (2002) and Marcus Noland calculate two and a half million and six hundred thousand to one million respectively (Good Friends 1998, 2000, 2004; Goodkind and West 2001; Pomnyun 1998a,b,c; Woo 2004: 65). People who died from famine-related disease, those who died from accidents resulting from failed coping strategies and those who died from punishments for coping strategies considered antithetical to the North Korean government are a significant aggregate not counted among these numbers.
4. Scholars working with Holocaust survivors reported similar tendencies (see Favaro et al. 2000).
5. 'Red Banner Spirit', or 'the Red Flag', *Pulkunki Chaeng Chi'wi Undong*, first appeared in an editorial in the *Rodong Sinmun* on 9 January 1996. Further details are available in Korean at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/calendar/2005/11/11-18/2005-1118-004.html> and at <https://www.dailynk.com/korean/read.php?cataId=n00700&num=7828>, both accessed 6 March 2009.
6. PDS stands for Public Distribution System; this is the means by which food and other items are delivered throughout North Korea.
7. In Kim Il Sung's own words, *Juche* means 'being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one's own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one's own brains, believing in one's own strength, displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance, and thus solving one's own problems for oneself on one's own responsibility under all circumstances' (quoted in Lee 2003: 105).




8. For further discussion on socialism's relationship to science see Todorov (2003: 33).
9. For other examples of this, see de Waal 1989; Sen 1981; Kelleher 1997; Yang 1997.
10. Not to be overlooked is the fact that survivors from other cases of collective social suffering—Russia during the Great Purges and China during the Great Leap Forward—have remarked in their writing on the changes that took place for them on the level of language and explicability (Shalamov 1994: 74; Zhang 1994: 61–2, 82).

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