

# How North Koreans Experienced Famine

North Korean Society  
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# Famine

- Widespread scarcity of food
  - Malnutrition, starvation, epidemics, and increased mortality
  - Most people in famines don't starve to death, but die of dehydration, hypothermia, and diseases because of weakened bodies
  - The old and the young die first, and males seem more vulnerable to starvation than females
  - Newborn sex ratios skew toward female babies during famines

# Recent Socialist Famines

- Ukraine 1931-3 (Holodomor)
  - Drastic fall in harvest 1931 following collectivization and a policy of rapid industrialization, but authorities blamed it on “kulaks” and peasant hoarding
  - PDS not able to supply cities and urban populations began starving in the spring of 1933
  - 2.4-7.5 million Ukrainians died
  - There have been charges that the famine was deliberately induced to kill Ukrainian nationalism
- China’s Great Leap Forward 1958-61
  - Associated with rapid collectivization, exaggerated reports of productivity leading to too-high consumption of grains, and lax control of communal supplies
  - 18-42 million people are thought to have died, mostly in rural areas that had no government guarantee of supplies (urbanites were guaranteed supplies by the PDS)

# Korea has had famines in the past

- Concept is well-known to Koreans
  - Starvation 굶주림
  - Die of starvation 굶어죽다
  - Famine (academic) 기근, 기아
- During my fieldwork in rural South Korea in the 1970s old people all could talk about times of hunger, and knew about famine foods like kudzu 칩, bark, and foraged greens like dandelions 민들레
- Chosŏn Dynasty had system of government granaries designed to supply the people during times of crop failure

# PDS System

- Supplied most urbanites since 1957
  - Local commissaries where could buy one's distribution cheaply twice a month
  - Army and party had separate systems
  - Collective farmers consumed part of their harvest with the rest going to the PDS
- Notable features
  - People fixed in place—could not travel without special permits, and could not get distribution outside official place of residence
  - Food entitlements are not equal, but linked to status and location (notice five levels p29-30)
    - In Ch'ŏngjin, Jong-Ok ate maize (kangnaengi) while *inminbanjang* Youngmin Park ate rice pp24-5

# Social Constituents (Sŏngbun)

- Social constituents 社会成分
  - Based on occupational origin and social life course which will influence ideological viewpoint
  - Tends to correspond with current occupation
- Origin constituents 出身成分
  - Classification according to those one's family faced when one was born
  - Those of South Korean origin, or bad class background are considered “tainted” 불순분자 (Demick p28, but note the term is also used in South Korea for leftists)
- Best jobs and positions in party and military reserved for those who come from good social and origin constituents
- Core, wavering, and antagonistic (핵심, 동요, 적대)
  - Groupings of sŏngbun rather than primary classifications
  - People of unreliable background were moved out of P'yŏngyang to North Hamgyŏng and Yanggang Provinces in the late fifties and early sixties
- People don't necessarily know their exact sŏngbun so it can become a convenient excuse for failure

# Famine Uneven and Slow Moving

- After 1989 Russian aid to North Korea stopped
  - 10% reduction in PDS distribution in 1992 (“let’s eat two meals a day”)
  - Distributions became irregular in the Northeast after 1989, with complete stoppage in 1994
  - Shortages reached P’yŏngyang only about 1997 and only lasted a year
- December 1993 announced 3<sup>rd</sup> 7-year plan not achieved, and by 1995 North Koreans were getting  $\frac{3}{4}$  of their food from markets
- Summer 1995 floods
  - KJI recognizes crisis in “status of anarchy speech” in which he blames ineffective cadres and praises the military
  - Period 1995-1998 christened the “Arduous March” 고난의 행군 likening it to the hardships of KIS’s guerilla army in the 1930s
  - DPRK asked for international help blaming the crisis on the floods

# Changes as a result of famine

- Authorities tolerated more trading in markets
  - Informal markets (changmadang) had appeared in the 1980s
    - “grasshopper markets” (mettugi sijang)—that kept moving to avoid authorities—appeared near train stations, alongside roads, around schools
  - Buying and selling of grain and manufactured goods (which had previously be prohibited) was allowed during the famine
- Allowed geographical movement for those seeking food
- Appealed to international community for aid and announced establishment of Special Economic Zones (Najin-Sŏnbong, Kŭmgang, Kaesŏng)
- Decentralized state planning making regional governments responsible for for finding food and consumer goods



# Northeast Hit Hard

- Ch'ŏngjin shortages appeared in 1988
  - Deliveries to the PDS were erratic
  - Line up and get 3 days food instead of 15
  - Complete collapse of PDS in 1994
- Official beginning of Konan ūi haenggun (苦难之行军) 1995
- P'yŏngyang didn't see serious shortages until 1997
- Most defectors are from North Hamgyŏng (65%), with South Hamgyŏng, Ryanggang, and North P'yŏngan also well represented

# Initial Response

- Government at first switched lower quality food for rations
  - Central government devolved responsibility for feeding population on lower administrative levels
- People
  - People did not have access to news of countrywide shortages
  - Couldn't get angry at officials for fear of punishment
  - Irregular distributions weren't unusual, so people hoped they would get food next time
  - People in P'yŏngyang didn't see unless they traveled
- Indirect evidence
  - Children falling asleep in school
  - Return of fire field farming to hillsides

# Survival Strategies

- Switch to corn, barley, millet and potatoes
- Cut down trees to grow corn
- Buy direct from collective farms in countryside
- Cultivate a secret plot (illegal)
- Trade

# Government Response

- Government
  - Strengthen ideological messages of solidarity
  - Promote hillside farming and foraging
  - Punish unorthodox economic and social behavior with imprisonment or death
    - Buying, selling, or trading in markets
    - Treason (defecting, stealing)

# DPRK Explanations

- Hardships after 1990s due to America's blockade
- Only method of survival is to build the military
- That's why resources go to the military
  - “military first policy” 선군정책 (先军政策)
- Reality
  - US was putting pressure on North Korea due to its nuclear program, but the US also gave substantial food aid
  - South Korea from 1998 to 2008 was giving extensive aid to North Korea
  - Russia in economic difficulties asked for hard currency, but China was able to give some aid

# Did People Recognize the Famine?

- Gradually they realized what they had thought of as temporary 일시적 was going to continue
  - Began selling household goods, and starting small-scale businesses
- Government prohibited ordinary coping behaviors
  - Irregular cropping of land suppressed
- Government promoted ersatz food 대용식료품 (代用食料品) and endurance 참을성

# Did the Kim's Know?

- Initially not
  - (see page 57 about temporary supplies in preparation for a Kim Jong Il visit)
  - But by 1995 he knew
  - 1996 coup attempt?
- Show time for outside inspectors, too? p61

# Coping Behavior

- Black market activity
- Wandering urchin beggars (kkotchebi) 꽃제비
  - Swallow a metaphor for wandering, flower for gathering nectar where you can
  - Orphans and abandoned children
- 8.3 payment (팔삼자금) to company for privilege of not coming to work (in order to engage in private economic activity)
- Notice nostalgia for old times when people worked cooperatively



# Formal and Informal Economy

- Formal economy
  - State administrative and educational organizations
  - State-owned enterprises
  - Urban cooperatives
  - Collective farms
- Informal household-based economy
  - Kitchen gardens, reselling, smuggling, food kiosk, knitting, informal production of food, alcohol, or clothes
  - Informal marketplaces (changmadang), mettugi changsa
  - Government market fees (jangse) for those with trading tables (maedae) in chonghap sijang after 2005
- Gender differences, because women more easily absent from factories while male attendance is compulsory

# Byung-Yeon Kim

- 2006-9 based on refugee interviews
  - Total household income \$870 to \$1450 (based on black market exchange rates)
  - 58 to 74% of total income came from informal economic activity
  - 14.1% from financial aid from friends and relatives in China, Japan, or South Korea
- Notice Gini coefficient in Table 2.14 on page 109
  - This is a measure of inequality (1 is perfectly unequal, and as you get amounts below 1 you get more equality, but figures of 0.6 or 0.7 are highly unequal compared to most countries—US 0.42, France, Japan, ROK 0.32)

# Rural Coping

- Partial return to family farming
  - Intensive crop production in small personal gardens
  - Raising livestock (rabbits, pigs, chickens, goats)
  - Barter
  - Fishing in coastal areas (also collecting seaweed and mollusks)
  - Foraging in forested areas

# Linguistic coping

- Can't say famine, or starve
  - Not 굶어죽었다 but 앞서 돌아갔다
  - Not 배고파 but 배아파
- Later “food shock” 식량타격 or “food problem” 식량문제  
OK
- Make a mistake?
  - Secret police come and say, “Why should anybody be dying of hunger in a socialist society? 말 똑똑히 하라오” p88
  - You never knew who was listening p90
    - Public speech versus private speech

# Linguistic Humor

- Department Store = 백화점
- Open air market 장마당 = 노동자의 백화점
- Black market = 메뚜기 시장
  - “grasshopper market” (because people leapt away like grasshoppers when the authorities came)
  - (more recently 진드기 시장 because traders stick to their spots like ticks)
- The Secret Police eat secretly—shows awareness of ambiguity of their position (unlike, say, P’yöngyang cadres who might not be aware of the famine)
- Dog joke 97-8
  - Dog named Haein—해인아 초콜릿 먹어라! Girl named Haein should change her name.
  - Haerim’s mutt (똥개)— named Kim Chŭlbim 김줄빔아 똥 먹어라!

# Language and Truth

- Vaclav Havel (Czechoslovakia), Marcelle M. Suarez-Orozco (Argentina)
- Havel “The Power of the Powerless”
  - Belief in ideology is not an essential requirement because the locus of power and of truth are the same
  - People internalize expected “truth-norms” and don’t question them because of repression p101
- N.B. if this true, then disillusion with the system will not cause people to necessarily rebel

# Changing Sexual Division of Labor

- Men under closer surveillance than women, and had to show up at work even if they got no pay and had nothing to do
- Women had the option of being stay-at-home housewives, and were less supervised
  - They could go into marketing
  - Their activities were tolerated as family survival tactics rather than a challenge to the system
  - “Women knew how to talk to sell stuff.” p100
- Men like daytime light bulbs (because no longer useful) 낮 전구 p100

# From Periphery to Center

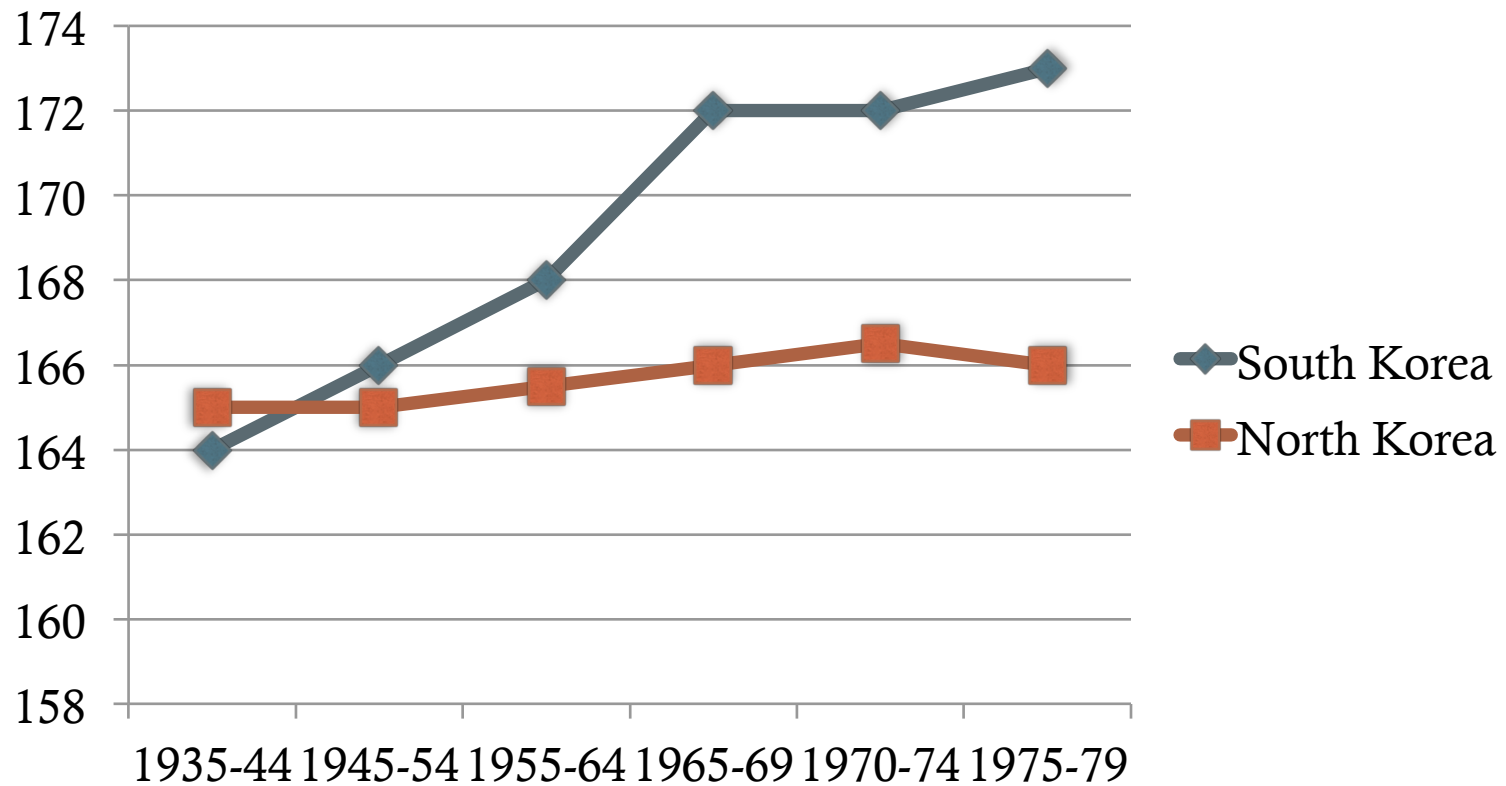
- If the famine began in the northeast around 1994, it spread and reached P'yŏngyang around 1997
  - Upper level cadre didn't even know about widespread deaths until somebody froze to death in front of his complex in an upper class location in P'yŏngyang and the authorities couldn't remove the body right away p109 (굶어죽다 = 얼어죽다)
- Organic analogy
  - The hands freeze before the heart, so Hamgyŏng dies before P'yŏngyang (i.e. it is natural to sacrifice the periphery for the center) 111 “one national body suffering in concert”



# State Violence

- Public executions 117
  - Theft of grain
  - Stealing state property
- Soldiers guarding fields
- Bullets to the head for thought crimes

# Nutrition and Stature



# Leave?

- Border crossing as a survival strategy
- Initial crossers often planned to return after visiting China
- Many felt nothing can be done
  - Some driven by starvation
  - Some egged on by family members
  - Some sought medicine not available in North Korea
  - If I go I die, if I stay I die so I might as well die trying
- Accounts show acceptance of the system and mostly efforts to survive within it
- Japanese Koreans could go to Japan
- Other Koreans could “defect” to South Korea, but many reluctant to do that until in China several years
  - I was a person who thought like that 그렇게 생각한 사람였다 (identifying her former self as external and other? P136-7

# Falling Away of Social Fabric

- 1994 death of Kim Il Sung and the floods
- Appearance of things that shouldn't happen in a socialist society
- Information about trading in China combined with worry about surviving
  - Learned from traders about foreign donations by 1999 so that messages from government and rumors didn't coincide
  - Saw US trademark on bags in black market

# After Defecting?

- Often (but not always) develop deep hatred for the DPRK regime
  - Japanese Koreans often return to Japan
  - Hatred for the North Korean regime doesn't always translate into love for the south
    - South Koreans tend to treat those from the North as foreigners
    - The northerners still have beloved friends and relatives in the north
    - Northerners and southerners have had different political experiences

# Coops and Marketization

- 1995 work subteams of 7-8 members (rather than 10-25 members) introduced
  - Surplus produce that is marketed sells 65-350 times the official PDS price
  - Farmers extra work often paid in coupons (ration coupons basically) giving them the right to purchase certain goods
- However problem of unrealistic production quotas still remains
  - 1996 contract, for example, set the quota as the average production of the years 1982-92, but those were years in which normal quantities of agricultural inputs were available

# Death Rates

- Goodkind and West (2001) *Population and Development Review* 27: 219-238
  - Based on WFP nutritional surveys and calibrations based on China's Great Leap Forward
  - Deaths 1995-2000 approximately 600,000
- K. S. Park (2012) *Study on Unification Policy* 21: 127-56.
  - 1993 & 2008 Population Censuses
    - 1993-2008 missing 880,000 people
      - 490,000 died of starvation and excess disease
      - 290,000 because of decreased fertility
      - 100,000 migrated (mostly to China)