

Sonia Ryang

The humanity of individuals who become mass murderers like Duch is a repulsive notion to many people. I can assure you that the predominant reaction, regardless of social and educational background, is to say that they are not one of us. In fact, many people do not even understand how someone can go and defend them in court. When Duch's lawyer, François Roux, chose to defend an accused man before the Rwanda tribunal, his many friends within human-rights organizations first took it as a betrayal.

At the genocide museum in Phnom Penh, Duch's victims are presented as victims, which they certainly were. But eighty per cent of them were themselves Khmer Rouge, and if they instead had been asked to be perpetrators the overwhelming majority would have obeyed. To accept that Duch tells us something about ourselves doesn't mean we accept his crimes, and it doesn't mean we risk showing him sympathy. It makes us think in more realistic terms about how mass murder operates and how it relies on people like us. (Cruvellier in Gourevitch 2014)

These are tough paragraphs to swallow. How can we even begin to accept that such a meticulous and cold-blooded torturer and executioner may have something in common with us? How can we fail to distinguish between victims and torturers? And, if the limits of our humanity are so fragile, how are we ever to know the truth—about S-21 as well as about other sites at which crimes against humanity have been perpetrated—including in the context of the current international understanding of North Korea?

At first glance, it would seem considerably easier to identify the human qualities of North Koreans than those of a mass murderer such as Duch. To begin with, we view most North Koreans as victims of a tyrannical dictatorship, rather than as perpetrators, as in the case of Duch. Attempts to humanize the North Korean *people* normally locate them in opposition to and contradistinction from the North Korean ruling elite, with Kim Jong Un at the apex. The presumed divide between the ruling and the ruled, therefore, constitutes the limits of humanity. This posits a conundrum. If, indeed, North Koreans are the victims of tyranny, how can they tell us the truth about their society? For, the victimhood that North Koreans are subjected to, in the eyes of the world, is often manifested in the form of mass brainwashing, culminating in the kind of national hysteria and grief that was witnessed, for example, in the immediate aftermath of the death of Kim Jong Il. The world, as it were, is made to witness the tears of people that are so deprived of the truth that they have no idea how far removed they are from the global reality.

Often, it is only after individuals have ceased to be victims that they are seen as conveyers of the truth, as can be seen in the case of defectors: after their defection, in the eyes of South Koreans and Americans, North Korean defectors are viewed as having emerged from darkness into the light of truth, finally understanding how bad things are back in North Korea and who is responsible. This type of understanding makes it almost impossible to posit North Koreans in North Korea as knowers or conveyers of the truth. In large measure, therefore, attempts to humanize North Koreans go hand in hand with a line of inquiry assessing the whereabouts of truth in North Korea and the extent to which North Koreans have access to the truth—how little they know and to what extent they are removed from it. True humans must know the truth, or at least, must have access to the truth. Thus, it is only after they get out of North Korea, as defectors in most cases, that they can testify to the world about the truly dehumanizing reality of North Korea. The absence of the access to the truth, as it were, spares us from the burden of having to make North Korea look like us, that is to say, having to humanize that society.

With the foregoing in mind, I would like to look at attempts to humanize North Koreans in a selection of recently published books on North Korea, and explore the relationship between this type of activity and the notion of the location of truth. I hope to show, borrowing Cruvellier's phrase, that this very exercise procures us "peace of mind" while at the same time leaving unsolved problems in relation to furthering our understanding of the mechanisms of North

Korean society, a society in which, like it or not, the masses are willing and often enthusiastic participants.

Hazel Smith on the one hand, and Daniel Tudor and James Pearson on the other, do a wonderful job in humanizing North Koreans by placing them beyond the framework of victimhood in their respective books, *North Korea: Markets and Military Rule* (Smith 2015) and *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors* (Tudor and Pearson 2015). Providing a thorough account of the entire history of North Korea, Smith relies mainly on archival research related to scholarly, statistical, and policy-related documents and, to a lesser degree, yet more significantly, insights gained through her work as a World Food Program field officer in North Korea for many years in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Her book touches upon just about every aspect of state-level policy-making in North Korea, ranging from the distribution of infant formula to care of the elderly, from mortality and birth rates to school dropout rates, from a region-specific analysis of food supplies in North Korea to an exploration of the delicate power balance within the military. Demonstrating a similar zeal for detail, Tudor and Pearson lay bare the specialized mechanisms involved in sending money in and out of North Korea, smuggling people across the border, and greasing the palms of officials (the latter being only too happy to take bribes), in addition to providing details regarding many of the daily transactions that keep the society going.

At the end of their very different yet equally comprehensive accounts of North Korea, the final sections of each of their works are respectively entitled: “North Koreans as agents of change” (Smith 2015: 327ff.) and “Will North Korea Collapse?” (Tudor and Pearson 2015: 177ff.). By the time the reader arrives at these sections, his or her mind is filled with anticipation of change, either through the collapse of the regime, an uprising, or perhaps both. And, for such a change to take place, one might assume that agents of change are required. It is not victims that take action in bringing about change, but positive subjects who believe in the future. And indeed, both books deliver a picture of North Koreans as strong and resilient humans.

While each book delivers a very different reading experience—Tudor and Pearson through animated prose and Smith via a scholarly and, at times, dry tone—both works share similar subtexts, presenting modern-day North Korea as “capitalist” (Smith 2015: 289; Tudor and Pearson 2015: 143). Smith anchors her discussion in the reality of “marketisation,” where buying and selling occur both within and outside the sphere of state-sponsored regulation, the latter often occurring in spontaneous situations, such as in the case of street vending. The prime movers in these activities are women. This is because, according to Smith, due to the sexist assumptions of North Korean society, women are not expected to lead, which in turn results in lower expectation, thus making them less constrained than men in having to report to their places of work and generally better able to operate under the radar of the state. Tudor and Pearson also attribute a similar level of importance to spontaneous and state-driven market activities, but are

also emphatic about the corruption of state entities, pointing to the fact that what used to be revolutionary organizations now enjoy a lion's share of both legal and illegal markets. In fact, one can infer from these books that the line between legal and illegal activities is becoming increasingly blurred, a state of affairs implied in their frequent references to the "gray" economy.

Smith, as well as Tudor and Pearson, trace the origins of these so-called gray economic activities to the famine in the late 1990s, when the state failed to adequately cater to people's needs via the regular rationing system, leaving people to fend themselves. The government is aware that this new "bottom-up" market economy poses a potential threat to political stability and the hegemony of the ruling regime, but is unable to do anything to stop it, since the market is almost the only mechanism left that allows the North Korean state to survive. Or perhaps not survive, as, according to Tudor and Pearson:

The DPRK [North Korean] government is basically bankrupt. The Public Distribution System is dead to the vast majority of North Koreans. Marketization is the only thing keeping North Korea from suffering a fresh catastrophe [as in the 1990s famine], and as such, the government needs to accept it at a minimum level in order to stave off collapse. But now the ball has started rolling, who knows where it will end up? (Tudor and Pearson 2015: 178)

New forms of economic relations are creating new forms of inequality among North Koreans, although the network of privilege has not been fundamentally disrupted, with cadres benefiting more from the economic gains of market participation than ordinary citizens. As far as the "nouveau riche" goes, the dominant ethos is "greed is good" (Smith 2015: 289). New players are also emerging, especially in the northeastern provinces bordering China, according to Tudor and Pearson, where transactions between citizens of North Korea and China are rapidly transforming the socialist work ethic into a capitalist one, i.e. one in which anything is justified in the pursuit of profit (Tudor and Pearson 2015: 162, 173ff.).

Where the two books diverge is in their respective readings of the process by which alliances are formed among the North Korean populace. Tudor and Pearson hold the view that the "rising capitalist class generally seeks to *join* the existing elite through marriage and business ties, rather than undermine it" (Tudor and Pearson 2015: 178; emphasis original). By contrast, Smith claims that while "there was a sense that 'we are all in this together'" during what she calls the "Kim Il Sungist period," the prevailing mood in what she terms "the period of marketisation and military rule" is one of 'us against them' (Smith 2015: 331), with "us" being the population and "them" being the government.

The most significant achievement of both books is in the success of their respective authors in turning North Koreans into human beings, individuals, and real people. As Smith writes:

North Koreans, like people everywhere, have multiple social and personal interests, shaped by age, gender, occupation, class, geographical provenance – and many other factors. North Koreans are neither brainwashed nor stupid and are as capable as any other people of analyzing their own problems.

[...]

North Koreans know that the North Korean government is both inept and anachronistic, and that South Koreans and Chinese are prosperous and they are not, and yet maintain a sense of national pride that is founded within a specific history and identity. (Smith 2015: 330)

Far from being a faceless monolith, North Korea begins, in the case of both books, to look like a human society, just like the rest of the world. North Koreans are tough, calculating, rational, shrewd, and profit-driven, but also caring, warm, and funny—just like Americans and Britons. This message is captured succinctly in one of the subheadings of Smith’s work: “North Korea is not unique” (Smith 2015: 329).

In contrast with the above two works, Suki Kim’s *Without You, There Is Not Us* (Kim 2014) permits readers a very personal encounter with North Korea. In this book, subtitled *My Time with the Sons of North Korea’s Elite: A Memoir*, Kim recounts the two terms that she spent teaching English at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology on the outskirts of Pyongyang in 2011. While her memoir is similar to the two works discussed above in its inclusion of detailed accounts of diverse personalities encountered by the author in North Korea, hers is more dialogical in form, in that the North Korean personalities she introduces are captured through their interactions with the author herself. Throughout her work, everyone—from the vigilant North Korean minders to the zealously Christian university staff who engage in secretive proselytizing—is humanized, all exhibiting expression and emotion. One feels as though one is traveling alongside Kim as one makes one’s way through the almost three hundred pages of this book, thanks to her well-measured yet free-spirited prose. Beautifully written, the book can be considered a masterpiece, due to its remarkable capacity for bringing the reader into what feels like direct human contact with individual North Koreans, despite all of the constraints that the author had to deal with during her assignment.

What lends particular authenticity to Kim’s memoir is the way in which the story of her interactions with young North Korean men is interspersed with the history of her own family: the tragic separation of family members on both parents’ sides due to the partition of Korea and the subsequent Korean War, the loss of the family fortune in the volatile South Korean economy, the abrupt emigration of family members from Seoul to the United States to escape bankruptcy and, to a lesser degree, the author’s current romantic involvement with “a lover” in Brooklyn. Her story also contains details of her interactions with colleagues and university administration staff,

all of whom are Christian missionaries. The university in question is funded and operated by Christian missions on condition that there be no proselytizing. Accordingly, while all teaching and administrative staff members are Christians committed to their mission, no one is allowed to engage in activities aimed at the conversion of North Koreans to their faith. Kim, however, is not a missionary, and it is the multiple layers of pretenses that she hides behind that weave suspense into her recollections.

In North Korea, according to Kim, freedom of any kind is severely limited. Her students watch each other and never deviate from the rules. They live in a blissful state of ignorance, not even remotely aware of how ignorant they are and how backward North Korea is. Even though they are supposed to be science and technology students majoring in computer informatics, they have had no exposure to the Internet or the World Wide Web. They are unaware of what e-mail is in any real sense and have never heard of Google or iPhone. All they know is the intranet, the network that connects a limited number of institutions in Pyongyang. Worse still, they show no desire to know about the outside world. They believe that North Korea is the greatest nation on earth. They boast that just about everything North Korea has is unprecedented in the history of humanity. Things are sugarcoated and people live in a state of obliviousness and myth, or an acquired willingness, supported by a lack of choice, to believe that they live in the best of all possible worlds. Their material deprivation, technological backwardness, and utter lack of access to the information that is available in the rest of the world are beautifully justified in the name of the Great Leader, as Kim tells us.

Although, as Kim repeatedly points out, the fundamental principle in North Korea is that everything is about, for, and of the Great Leader, there is room for improvisation and creativity, as it is not possible to provide predetermined scripts for all of life's contingencies. Kim uses the term "slip" in her references to such moments, as in "so and so slipped." Slips also occur among the Christian missionary teachers, with their hidden agenda of proselytizing. While some are eager to insert lines from the Bible into class materials, others look for opportunities to enlighten North Korean students in relation to what they consider the right things to believe. Indeed, it becomes a clash of two deities, Christ versus Kim Il Sung. Students also slip, for example, when showing inadvertent eagerness to know about the outside world or an interest in the background of individual teachers. Kim herself slips, referring more than once to her constant concern about "blowing her cover" because she feels she is a spy—secretively gathering information for the book she is planning to write, the publication of which she knows will be seen as betrayal, both by the missionaries and by the North Koreans.

It becomes all the more curious, then, when Suki Kim becomes indignant and frustrated in relation to North Korean students not telling the truth or cheating (in her judgment), sometimes almost as a reflex, at other times by means of deliberate calculation. The entire class cheats in competitions, students pretend that they have gone skiing before when they have no idea what

skiing is, while others make unsubstantiated and false assertions, arguing, for example, that a North Korean soccer player has been accepted to play for Manchester United when there is no truth whatsoever to the story. But, Kim herself is not immune to the practice of making deliberate falsifications on numerous occasions. On one outing to a church in Pyongyang (most likely a fake one), Kim receives communion, accepting the body and blood of Christ. Aware that Kim is not a believer, one of her colleagues gets upset with her. Kim somehow manages to get through situations such as this one where her “cover” is nearly blown. At the same time, she ironically observes that each individual has his or her own version of the truth. She is therefore surprised to find the same missionary teacher who expressed incredulity at the gullibility of North Korean students who believed that Kim Il Sung had accidentally discovered the burial place of Dangun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation, herself spending time looking for a bell from the first Christian church in Pyongyang that was supposed to have been accidentally found somewhere on campus. Such almost comical or pathetic discrepancies are presented repeatedly throughout the book, on each occasion Kim acting as judge.

On another level, Kim has her own mission, one that conforms neither to those of the North Koreans or the Christians. Evidently, she ranks her own mission as her top priority, as evidenced by the statement that she includes on the very last page of her book:

I have written this book with the knowledge that it will anger the DPRK regime, the president of PUST [Pyongyang University of Science and Technology], and my former colleagues there. Although I am sorry to cause the president and faculty of PUST distress, I feel a greater obligation, both as a writer and as someone deeply concerned about the future of Korea, to tell the stark truth about the DPRK, in hopes that the lives of average North Koreans, including my beloved students, will one day improve. (Kim 2014: 291)

Did she succeed, then, in her attempt to uncover the stark truth of life in North Korea while posing as an English teacher at a university? How is it possible that only she is able to see such a truth while others cannot? Or, conversely, how is it that she can be so certain that she knows that North Koreans are cheating and being untruthful? Here is the contradiction. If one is to lie, one has to know that one is lying. When her missionary teaching colleague gets upset at Kim, a non-believer, receiving the body of Christ at communion, this missionary teacher is being truthful. That, of course, is a strange situation in itself, given that the church that North Korea has established for the missionaries is most likely a fake one, staffed by actors. But, for the teacher, Kim’s act of participation in the communion is based on a lie. Things become twisted, given that this teacher herself is trying to evangelize North Koreans, while pretending that she is not. Nevertheless, according to this teacher’s own firm beliefs, she is being sincere, guiding the North Koreans out of the Dark Ages into the Lord’s Kingdom—if not in this life, then in the next. The North Korean students, for their part, are living their lives according to principles that they have been disciplined into believing. Doing otherwise, for example, not “lying” to Kim, trying to get

to know Kim, or even liking Kim, may well be not only not right but also untruthful in their eyes. As such, neither the North Koreans nor the missionaries are lying: The only liar here is Suki Kim. Kim is aware of this, and that is perhaps why she willingly reveals her own vulnerability in her references to her own personal emotions, the fragility of her attachments, her tender feelings directed for the North Korean students and her colleagues, and her sense of longing for her oft-mentioned Brooklyn lover.

Despite such efforts to acknowledge her own emotions, Kim's ethnocentric judgment of young North Korean men takes its toll. In one section, Kim recounts an episode in which she handed students an essay containing a reference to a statement by Bill Clinton emphasizing the importance of all schools being wired. By making this material available to her students, Kim "hoped that they would grasp how behind they were (Kim 2014: 246)." Additionally, she circulated four recent articles from *The Princeton Review*, *The New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, and *Harvard Magazine* that mentioned Mark Zuckerberg and his success and noting that he had earned \$100 billion from a project that he had tinkered with in his college dorm room. The following day, students came back to the class armed with criticisms of American capitalism. Kim reflects:

Their collective decision to switch their essay topics to condemn America seemed to have been compelled by the articles about Zuckerberg. What I had intended as inspirational, they must have viewed as boasting and felt slighted. The nationalism that had been instilled in them for so many generations had produced a citizenry whose ego was so fragile that they refused to acknowledge the rest of the world. (Kim 2014: 248)

Resistance to the path taken by Zuckerberg or refusing to view the making of \$100 billion as an example of success... I am not certain that such reactions are reflections of a fragile ego, as Kim asserts. Some of the students' criticisms of US society concerned the mechanical application of the IQ system in judging individual ability and potential, "the evils of allowing people to own guns so freely [in America]," the toxicity of biofuels and the fact that the US is its biggest producer, and the horrible nature of McDonald's food. Rather than focusing on the idea of the pursuit and achievement of the American dream—that of the individual getting super-rich super-fast—students took issue with American society in general, challenging its morality. I fail to see what is so disappointing in this type of reaction. The fact that the young men in question were not excited about a man of similar age making \$100 billion overnight may well be a sign that there are alternative approaches to life and to the world at large, rather than simply a sign of hurt pride. It appears that the problem lies within Kim's presumption in the first place—that getting super-rich super-fast while one is young is a wonderful thing and that everyone else should be envious.

A further and more significant criticism of Kim's book that I would like to make relates to her presumption of what constitutes the truth, particularly given that Kim's purpose in publishing her book was to capture "the stark truth about the DPRK" (Kim 2014: 291). From where Kim stands, the real or actual truth in the outside world is placed in opposition to the fake or false world inside North Korea. Kim's conviction is that she herself and, at times, she alone knows what is out there, beyond the ideological walls of North Korea. Kim denounces this concealment of the outside reality from the eyes of the natives. For Kim, "the stark truth" of North Korea is this falsehood played out on the part of the establishment. A similar premise (and form of denunciation that underpins such a premise) is found in the works by Smith and by Tudor and Pearson that were discussed above: Alongside the communist façade, where the North Korean state insists upon a fake truth, i.e. the falsehood of the glorious power of North Korean socialism, "marketisation" (in the case of Smith) and "100 percent capitalism" (in the case of Tudor and Pearson) have subversively penetrated, enabling North Koreans to know exactly how to make use of them, that is to say, delivering the real truth about the world unbeknownst to the regime. In these books, the duality of reality, one truthful and the other false, one outside of North Korea and the other inside it, is at stake.

What lies behind the above suppositions in all three books is the assumption that the North Korean as subject does not know the objective truth that is external to his or her world—only when the truth is injected from the outside (capitalist) world, they can know it. The assumption is that the truth exists outside—external to North Korea and exogenous to the North Korean self. Capitalism is the truth outside of North Korea and it is steadily penetrating this country. As North Koreans gradually learn about this truth, they will be awoken to their true selves.

If we turn to our own society, the partial nature of truth, and by extension, the existence of truths in plural, is more often than not taken for granted. As an example, let us consider the seventh grade Texas History class at my son's public middle school. While events such as the Alamo, for example, are highlighted, with students being required to commit details to memory for future testing, the class does not touch upon the brutal lynching of African Americans in Texas, which frequently happened in the aftermath of the Civil War and in the following decades. This is a powerful example of how the state can and does manipulate the truth. We should hope that students such as my son and the others in his class will eventually learn about other truths through exposure to diverse forms of media and information. (But, of course, there are also millions who do not learn other kinds of truth.) Thus, at least as far as government-driven educational curricula are concerned, Texas may not be so different from North Korea. It is the existence of competing interpretations and prioritizations of truth or truths *outside* the Texas middle school system that sets democracy apart from the form of government found in North Korea. The assumption here is that truth is plural in nature in so-called democratic societies.

This stance does not appear to hold when it comes to attempts to approach the truth in North Korea. It is understood, instead, in an either-or fashion: the truth outside and the falsity inside. Suddenly, the ambiguous and contradicting character of the truth or truths in democratic societies is reduced to *the* truth when dealing with North Korean society. For, in North Korea, a diverse range of media outlets or information sources which could deliver truthful knowledge about the outside world—knowledge that may conflict with the false knowledge delivered by the North Korean government—does not exist. According to the implied logic of the books reviewed above, for North Koreans, the truth either exists outside (which North Koreans such as Kim’s students showing no interest in knowing) or, in a more optimistic tone, has begun to penetrate North Korea from the outside (read: capitalist) world through the mechanisms of the market and individual business transactions, the underlying ethos of which is capitalism (read: truth). The further implication here is that such a process threatens the continued existence of the regime’s propaganda-driven narrative, one that is filled with falsehood and untruths.

This leads us to consider the nature of truth and what it means to know the truth in North Korea. In the modern West, the convention has been that truth as an objective entity exists outside of or exogenous to the subject as in the case of scientific truth. Here, the subject devises to know in order to discover, register, and comprehend the truth. For, scientific truth is believed to exist out there, waiting for humans to discover it. By contrast, there are many different traditions of understanding or reaching the truth in different times and places. Michel Foucault’s lectures “on the government of the living” (Foucault 2012) explore this idea through examples drawn from early Christian monastic tradition and, especially, the ritual of confession. In the contemplative practices of monastic life, conducting a reflexive act in relation to truth is sufficient in itself, since by showing its own truth, the soul reaches the truth or itself becomes the truth. Confession is a technology of self-examination that measures how well one is able to contemplate the truth in one’s own self. Paradoxically, then, by telling all, one produces the truth. To clarify: I am not suggesting that the institution of confession approximates the ritual of group criticism and self-criticism, known as *bipangwa jagibipan*, to which every social, economic, and political unit in North Korea is subjected. Nevertheless, the existence of an institution that demands a thorough contemplation of one’s own self—identifying it, examining it, and then publicly presenting one’s own self-judgment—conditions the way in which North Koreans embody self and the truth, and the interrelations therein. That is to say, the search for the true self is the search for the truth itself.

In this exercise, a North Korean journeys into his or her own inner self in order to examine the level of purity, loyalty (toward the Great Leader), and strength that he or she may draw upon in his or her fight against impure elements (Ryang 2012: Ch.3). Just as Christian monastic orders require novices to follow and receive teachings from elders on one hand while diligently consulting canonical texts on the other, North Koreans are also required to be guided by superiors while thoroughly familiarizing themselves with the teachings and ideas of the Great

Leader. As shown by John Cassian and others, a monastic order is one in which no competing doctrines exist. The only debate relates to interpretation and degree—how much more deeply and strongly can we understand, believe in, and be at one with God? (e.g. Cassian 2000) In North Korea's introspective institution of self and group criticism, inquiries follow similar steps in an attempt to determine the extent to which one has correctly understood the Great Leader and how much loyalty one carries in one's heart while going about one's everyday activities.

According to John Peters, the discovery of or encounter with inner truths (including religious truth) is an inward conviction that is synonymous with witnessing or becoming a witness (Peters 2005: 250). Following Peters, one may say that the production of self-truth, therefore, is a process of self- or auto-witnessing. However, historically speaking, witnessing has been inevitably accompanied by the realization of fragility and feelings of suspicion in relation to the reliability of the witness. On a more profound level also, the concept of the witness and the act of witnessing itself both bear an association with the notion of lack. In a renowned account by Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, we find:

I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are [...] the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. (Levi 1989: 83-84)

Read in a direct way, Levi's account shows that the act of witnessing often implies peril—the peril of suffering embarrassment, shame, pain, punishment, or even death. Indeed, Peters, for example, points to torture as one of the most persistent methods used in supposedly extracting the truth from the witnesses in question, found in ancient Greece as well as in the intelligence-gathering activities of present-day security organizations (Peters 2005: 253). The infliction of pain upon the body, when taken to the extreme, means death. Thus, the eternity of truth is often achieved through death, as in the case of martyrdom. For, the dead bear the ultimate truth, precisely as stated by Levi above.

One historical example of a regime of truth that most thoroughly embodies the kind of logic discussed above—enforced to such an extent that its cruelty becomes almost banal—is the one created by Duch and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia during the late 1970s. As stated at the beginning of this article, the institution known as S-21 held a total of more than fourteen thousand prisoners, each repeatedly tortured during their month-long periods of incarceration before being killed. Prisoners were chained together, crammed into small cells, given the bare minimum amount of food, hosed down occasionally to wash off lice, basically afforded no

hygiene, and prohibited from speaking at any time—in summary, subjected to a process of unspeakable and continuous dehumanization until they finally met their deaths in the mass graves of the killing fields. Almost none of them had any idea why they had been arrested. Since individuals were charged with crimes by association, if a distant superior turned out to be guilty, the whole chain of command got arrested, including their families. Between the time of their arrest and their ultimate execution, they were subjected to torture the sole purpose of which was to extract or literally “squeeze” the truth out of each prisoner—by releasing all of the blood from their bodies while they were still alive, by removing their finger and toe nails, by tearing their skin and then their flesh through whipping with electrical cords, or by violently shaking them senseless via electrocution—that is to say, the truth was taken out from inside the bodies of the prisoners. The fact that the mass of documents containing their confessions is filled with irregular and sometimes fallaciously fabricated narratives did not matter. Under this regime, the truth existed in the form of the confession, or indeed, the documentary evidence thereof, and just as soon as the confession was produced and filed, the body, the person, became disposable (Cruvellier 2014).

The North Korean regime of truth, as I proposed above, must be different from that which is represented by S-21. For, North Korea as a society appears to be able to socio-culturally and historically reproduce itself, rather than imploding in self-destruction as in the case of the Khmer Rouge. During the ritual of self and group criticism, just saying anything at all in order to quickly finish one’s turn would be seen as a crime in itself. This is because this institution insists on thorough and careful self-reflection and introspection. I am not stating that all North Koreans participate in this ritual or that they do so well or sincerely. I am, rather, pointing to the normative existence of the kind of contemplative life that outsiders would either have a hard time imagining or not understand at all. The self in North Korea, in other words, may well not be related to the truth in quite the same manner that it has done in the Western tradition since the Enlightenment. For, the truth is not necessarily located outside of the self, objectively existing and waiting to be harvested, achieved, or understood. At the same time, there is an uncanny similarity in logic between the North Korean regime of truth and the S-21 torture and execution compound. Especially toward the end of the four-year reign of the Khmer Rouge (1975—1979), paranoia set in, S-21 filling up with Khmer Rouge cadre and soldiers, rather than with individuals drawn from more obviously reactionary elements. Duch himself felt, on a day-to-day basis, that he would be next to be arrested, tortured, and executed in his own prison compound. As such, the line between victim and perpetrator was blurred. The only decisive moment was that of death, the end—that is to say, the point at which it is decided who kills and who gets killed.

In North Korea, the direction of introspection in relation to the teachings, virtues, and lofty love of the Great Leader ultimately points to a kind of total self-sacrifice that is akin to martyrdom. For, such a death is seen as being equivalent to achieving eternal life in which one is forever

together with the Great Leader—that is to say, being truthful to oneself and the Leader in an all-encompassing, complete, and permanent manner. In North Korea, this is called *jeongchijeok saengmyeong*, or political life. Giorgio Agamben draws our attention to the fact that the Greek word for witness is *martis*, martyr, also noting that the early Christian Church coined the word martyrdom to indicate the death for their faith suffered by persecuted Christians (Agamben 1999: 26). Seen in this way, death at the hands of a torturer or executioner *after* one has offered one's confession and death for the sacred or for the Great Leader as proof of one's faith begin to look similar. As such, the nature of the regime of truth in North Korea is filled with complexity and warrants thorough investigation. Suffice it to state here that it multi-layered and intricately associated as well as dissociated with scientific and other regimes of truth with which we are familiar.

By trying to posit North Korea's falsity against the truth of the outside world—as has been done by each of authors discussed above—we misunderstand or miss an opportunity to gain an understanding of the whereabouts of the truth or the relationship between the self and the truth in North Korea. At the very least, we need to allow for such a possibility, rather than allowing ourselves to be driven by the assumption that the truth has been expelled from North Korea. No doubt, private commerce exists, capitalism rules, supermarkets are popular, people are becoming increasingly more fashionable, and corruption is rampant. It is possible to find Western gadgets in North Korean homes, and it is not unusual to spot pizzerias and SUVs on a trip through the streets of Pyongyang. Such sights give us “peace of mind,” in Cruvellier's words, in that their existence suggests that the truth, our truth, is penetrating North Korea from the outside and that, before long, North Korea will be just like where we live. At the same time, we must also be prepared to accept the inconvenient fact that a radically different regime of truth continues to assert its existence in this society, operating alongside this process, leaving North Korea, or at least parts thereof, as an enigma. Thinking in this way is unsettling, not only because it means validating a radically different other, but also because it threatens our own truth and perhaps, our liberal sense of fairness. Despite this, we may require a different kind of understanding of the truth, or awareness thereof, when approaching North Korea. As such, we are at a point where we need to move beyond merely humanizing North Koreans and begin seeing them as *different* humans who may not be quite like us. In other words, North Korea *is* unique, and to say so does not dehumanize its people.

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Sonia Ryang is T.T. and W.F. Chao Professor of Asian Studies and the Director of the Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University.