

Food from the Enemy: The Representation of Western Humanitarian Aid in the North Korean Media 1990-2010

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Some observers hope foreign humanitarian aid might undermine the DPRK's legitimizing ideology. However, a detailed analysis of two official DPRK media outlets shows that the authorities have put in place a sophisticated strategy of damage control through their propaganda apparatus in order to justify the distribution of assistance by supposedly hostile countries. This official discourse describes food problems as a capitalist plot and Western aid as a neocolonialist tool serving a variety of sinister purposes. These efforts became more conspicuous as the information blockade began to disintegrate. As a result of this surprisingly elaborate response, the majority of North Koreans are primed and given a lens through which to interpret contact with foreign aid workers and the receipt of international aid, thereby partially negating its capacity to undermine the official doctrine. Therefore, aid should be distributed on purely humanitarian grounds, with no misguided hopes of automatically winning hearts and minds.

Keywords: North Korea, DPRK, aid, humanitarian assistance, North Korean media, propaganda

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I. Introduction

The inflow of humanitarian aid to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has fallen considerably over recent years. International aid organizations based in Pyongyang have faced a persistent lack of funding, even though humanitarian needs remain significant.¹ Aid to the DPRK has been subject to intense debate ever since the start of Western humanitarian involvement in 1995: The risk of diversion to the military, a lack of direct access to beneficiaries, and challenging monitoring conditions have led many organizations to believe their assistance supports the regime rather than the population, and prompted their departure. Since the North Korean economy has been showing signs of recovery, donors have grown increasingly reluctant to assist a country that is prioritizing its nuclear and ballistic missile programs over the basic needs of its population.

¹ World Food Program, Protracted Relief And Recovery Operation (PRRO) 200532 "Nutrition Support For Children And Women" In DPR Korea, 2014.

For the North Korean regime, foreign aid is useful. It provides basic commodities and services to its population for free, allowing for expenditure elsewhere, effectively outsourcing the fulfillment of state obligations to humanitarian agencies. Yet this heavy dependence on foreign assistance contradicts the official Party ideology of *Juche* that prescribes self-reliance and rejects outside intervention in internal affairs. The receipt of aid poses a formidable threat to the ultranationalist narrative found in the state's wider discourse—the country is portrayed as proud and successful, valiantly resisting imperialist enemies hell-bent on its annihilation—particularly if that aid comes from countries depicted as sworn enemies. In addition, seemingly altruistic assistance from foreigners conflicts with a distinctly xenophobic narrative that paints the outside world as an unforgiving place and the West as a cruel enemy. Finally, international aid efforts are a blow to the pervasive personality cults surrounding the Kim family, which are crucial for their legitimacy and the internal stability of the regime. It raises the question—if our leaders are as adoring and infallible as the media claims, why do we need to rely on food from the enemy to survive?

What is more, assistance from Russia and China—typically in the forms of debt relief, subsidized imports, and shipments of industrial goods and agricultural inputs—was relatively discreet. In contrast, Western aid projects are markedly conspicuous: they entail ethnically diverse teams, sporting international fashions, travelling around the countryside in white Toyota trucks, meeting people directly to distribute food and medicines from sacks, which are emblazoned with explicit indications of their origin. The regime therefore tries to maximize the influx of assistance, while minimizing its visibility and controlling the interactions between foreign staff and its citizens. To this end, the authorities impose tight restrictions on the UN agencies and international NGOs resident in Pyongyang, by means of travel controls, short visa validities, curbed personal freedoms and, until 2008, a ban on Korean-speaking expatriates. Scott Snyder remarks that the state “often seemed

to be reaching out with an open hand, while wrapping itself up to protect its people from external influence.”²

Critics use this restrictive environment and the regime’s resistance to change to argue that foreign assistance serves to prop up a regime considered responsible for the suffering of its own population, thereby preventing its collapse. The former American ambassador to South Korea, Christopher Hill, wondered “whether the short-term cost in human lives is worth the potential long-term benefits (also in terms of human lives) that a famine-induced collapse of North Korea could bring.”³

In this context, some pro-aid advocates put forward the argument that, in addition to the direct benefits to the wellbeing of the population, foreign assistance has the capacity to be a Trojan horse. That is, aid workers, through their personal interactions with ordinary citizens, can become a communication channel, a way to expose the population to outside information that challenges the official propaganda. Implicit to this argument is that aid workers will carry a subversive message that undermines the official ideology and, by extension, the regime. Many in the small expatriate community of Pyongyang share the belief that they are “worms in the fruit.”⁴

In his insightful report on the famine, Andrew Natsios writes: “Foreigners introduced new ideas that conflicted directly with *Juche* [...] In those areas suffering most from the famine, where aid workers reported that local and provincial officials were much more accommodating and less rigid and ideological, these new ideas likely fell on fertile ground.”⁵ Hazel Smith has expressed similar hopes:

² L. Gordon Flake, “The Experience of U.S. NGOs in North Korea,” in *Paved with Good Intentions*, ed. L. Gordon Flake and Scott Snyder (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 16.

³ Christopher Hill, “Food for Thought in North Korea,” *Project Syndicate*, February 22, 2011.

⁴ Personal testimonies to one of the authors.

⁵ Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace

“[Humanitarians] [...] were also responding [...] to a different type of hunger—the population’s hunger for peace.”⁶ Aid is also thought to have the potential to promote change in the regime’s economic management: “The invisible impact of individual encounters with the outside world on North Koreans, [...] mostly in the context of assistance, is hard to measure; but they may have higher and deeper long-term significance than any of the visible changes,” writes Rüdiger Frank.⁷

These hopes are shared by some donors, sometimes publicly. Dorothy Stuehmke, former representative of USAID for the DPRK, claimed:

The food aid program also offered an incredible opportunity to engage with regular North Korean citizens [...] Visits to homes, schools, orphanages and public distribution centers gave these North Koreans an unforgettable experience: contact with foreigners and Americans. It gave them a window on the outside world and perhaps a different perspective of the U.S. Through my interaction with them, I was able to confirm how much they appreciated our help [...] and that they clearly knew the food aid was coming from the U.S.⁸

The problem with these assertions is their disregard for the other side of the story: how the official propaganda represents Western aid and aid workers, and how this discourse might serve to inculcate views in the domestic population. North Korean propaganda is more efficient than most observers acknowledge. Despite the devastating famine of the 1990s, the regime did not collapse, a comparatively low number of North

Press, 2002), 224.

⁶ Hazel Smith, *Hungry for Peace* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2005), 12.

⁷ Rüdiger Frank, “The Political Economy of Sanctions against North Korea,” *Asian Perspective* 30, no. 3 (2006): 5-36.

⁸ Dorothy Stuehmke, “Should we feed North Korea?” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 2011.

Koreans fled the country, and Kim Il Sung still enjoys a highly positive image to this day, including amongst refugees in the South. In this light, the efficacy of state output in forming immutable perceptions should not be underappreciated.⁹

According to a 2011 survey, sixty percent of DPRK defectors said they were aware of the existence of foreign aid efforts while in the country.¹⁰ The majority of refugees come from the northeastern areas that have been excluded from international aid efforts by authorities, so this figure is likely to be even higher in areas receiving aid. This high awareness of foreign assistance would not be tolerable for the authorities, whose very survival rests on ideology, without a comprehensive strategy of damage control. The regime's complete domination of the media environment enables it to take discursive counteraction to this effect.

Contrary to a common assumption, the question of aid is widely discussed in the North Korean media. These discussions predate the arrival of Western humanitarian agencies by many decades. From the earliest days of the regime, the official discourse downplayed the contributions of the Soviet Union, China and other communist allies. Nevertheless, Western aid brought with it new challenges: demands for assessment and monitoring visits, daily interactions with locals, and transparency in line with international standards. From the regime's perspective, it became crucial to provide a coherent and convincing explanation to the population.

II. Methodology

This research focuses on two of the North Korean regime's major written

⁹ Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh, *North Korea Through the Looking Glass* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 129.

¹⁰ Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation* (Washington DC: PIIE Press, 2011), 40.

outlets: the Rodong Sinmun and the Korean Central News Agency (*KCNA*). The Rodong Sinmun is the official newspaper of the Workers' Party of Korea and enjoys daily distribution across the country. Lankov notes that the editorials receive explicit approval from the highest ranks of the regime and, as such, "are seen as the voice of the Party in its purest form."¹¹ Meanwhile, the *KCNA* is the official press agency for the country and publishes articles in Korean, English, Russian and Spanish. Accordingly, some of the *KCNA*'s work is intended for consumption by the outside world, but the two regularly cite one another as an authoritative source¹² and translations are largely faithful.

The rationale for selecting the Rodong Sinmun and the *KCNA* is four-fold. Firstly, they represent the dominant written news sources in the country and thus those to which most people have access. Other papers target specific subsets of the population—such as the military (*Joseoninmingun*) and the Party (*Minjujoseon*)—but their content and style are largely similar to the Rodong Sinmun. Secondly, the regularity of their publication allows for the consideration of their output as being responsive to contemporary developments, e.g. specific aid shipments and the activities of foreigners within the country. Thirdly, as mentioned above, the two sources seem intertwined at times, with each outlet publishing articles from the other. Fourthly, the ready availability of these sources outside the country, relative to others, permitted a much broader assessment. Since there is significant uniformity across the North Korean media landscape, such practical concerns seemed defensible.

This study analyzed articles regarding aid from donors portrayed as hostile in the official discourse: the United States, South Korea, Japan and, to a lesser extent, the European Union (EU). News stories were sourced using keyword searches of the digitized archive at the

¹¹ Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 55.

¹² See, for example, "S. Korean Authorities Should Lift 'May 24 Step': Rodong Sinmun," *KCNA*, May 11, 2014.

Information Center on North Korea in the National Library of Korea, Seoul. The research concentrated principally on the period from the mid-1990s onwards, since 1995 marked the arrival of the first international aid agencies in Pyongyang, until 2014, the most recent year for which material was available.

III. Findings

1. The evolution of aid coverage and stylistic features

The topic of aid has featured in the North Korean media ever since the country's foundation. Through the 1960s to early 1980s, the *Rodong Sinmun* made frequent calls for the South to stop accepting aid from both the US and Japan, describing this assistance as “degrading.”¹³ The newspaper wrote how American aid “stopped [South Korea] from standing on its own two feet,”¹⁴ while headlines declared, “South Korea's core industries are bankrupt and enslaved by American aid.”¹⁵ The discussion of aid was used to rally support against foreign powers and was tailored to appeal to an ethnonationalist sentiment. Also common were articles that praised likeminded countries for turning down offers of aid from Western powers. This, too, has continued to the present day, with headlines pronouncing, “Cuba rejects American conditional ‘aid,’”¹⁶ and articles urging countries “to see the wicked goals that underlie American aid, and develop from their own efforts.”¹⁷

¹³ “미국의 원조는 굴욕적인것이다” [American aid is humiliating], *Rodong Sinmun*, July 30, 1964.

¹⁴ “자립을 방해한 원조” [Aid that hinders self-reliance], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 24, 1963.

¹⁵ “미국 <원조>에 의한 남조선 기간 공업의 파탄과 예측” [Breakdown and subjugation of South Korean key industries by American “aid”], *Rodong Sinmun*, November 20, 1961.

¹⁶ “쿠바 미국의 조건부적인 <원조> 제의를 배격” [Cuba rejects American offer of conditional “aid”], *Rodong Sinmun*, September 13, 2008.

¹⁷ “미국의 원조는 세계제패를 노린 침략의 도구” [American aid is a tool of aggression aimed at world domination], *Rodong Sinmun*, June 6, 2014.

During the 1960s, the comradery between North Korea and the Soviet Union and China was celebrated with lavish spreads in the *Rodong Sinmun*, with detailed reports of the meetings and banquets attended by leaders, accompanied by photos and promises of “cooperation and assistance.” Even North Korea’s practice of maintaining an equidistant relationship between its two patrons is apparent within the newspaper: one country would receive coverage one day, followed by the other shortly after. In more recent years, however, the amount of attention afforded to China’s pledges of aid has dwindled, often to no more than a couple of sentences.

Humanitarian aid has been represented as harmful and deserving of suspicion with remarkable consistency through the decades, seemingly as a conscious effort to inculcate the readership with a critical perspective. To this end, the neutral word for “aid” (*wonjo*) is rarely written in isolation; it is normally enclosed in angle brackets—the Korean equivalent of scare quotes—or prefaced by “so-called” (*sowi* or *ireunba*) to convey cynicism. Aid is described as “two-faced”¹⁸ and “reactionary,”¹⁹ and decried as “racist.”²⁰ Furthermore, a limited number of metaphors are used time and time again—aid is a “poison” (*dogyak*), a means of “plunder” (*ryeoktal*), a “trap” (*olgami*), a “decoy” (*mikki*), or a “tool” (*dogu*) for “subordination” (*yesok*) and “domination” (*jibae*). Likewise, headlines are recycled, whole paragraphs repeated word-for-word a couple of years apart, and similar stories published in close succession, as if to drive the point home in an almost Pavlovian fashion. The graphic imagery used in headlines has also varied little over the years, serving to accentuate the perceived threats. For instance, headlines in the post-

¹⁸ “불순한 목적으로부터 출발한 위선적인 <원조외교>” [Hypocritical “aid diplomacy” that starts from an impure purpose], *Rodong Sinmun*, May 22, 2006.

¹⁹ “미국의 <원조>에 각성을 높여야 한다” [We must wake up to American “aid”], *Rodong Sinmun*, June 4, 2004.

²⁰ “인종멸시적 <원조>” [Racist “aid”], *Rodong Sinmun*, January 18, 2003.

famine era—“Aid diplomacy with embedded thorns”²¹ and “Within aid lies a hidden dagger”²²—have clear origins in those published in the 1960s—“American aid: pressured by the threat of a bayonet”²³ and “American aid is opium.”²⁴ This uniformity extends even to the positioning of aid-related stories on the page in the *Rodong Sinmun*; they are generally found in the lower half of the back page.

2. Causes of the famine and general food scarcity in DPRK propaganda

The historic causes of the 1990s famine, and of more recent chronic malnutrition, are manifold, and include the collapse of the Soviet bloc, a rigid command economy, dilapidated industrial infrastructure, a failure to prioritize the problem, and an unwavering adherence to ideologically motivated policy. External shocks in the early 1990s in the termination of economic assistance from allies and a series of climatic disasters served to aggravate an already degrading situation and precipitated the collapse of the Public Distribution System.²⁵ These hardships posed a challenge for DRPK propagandists, who had to account for the famine, while leaving the personality cult intact.

Initially, food shortages were explained by blaming sanctions imposed by the US and natural disasters, namely the floods of 1995 and 1996, and the severe drought of 1997. Tellingly, the North Korean entity tasked with liaising with the first humanitarian agencies coming to the

²¹ “가시박힌 <원조>외교” [“Aid diplomacy” with embedded thorns], *Rodong Sinmun*, August 8, 2008.

²² “<원조> 속에 감추어진 비수” [Within “aid” lies a hidden dagger], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 29, 1999.

²³ “총검의 위협으로 강매되는 미국 <원조> 물자” [American “aid” pressured by the threat of a bayonet], *Rodong Sinmun*, November 30, 1961.

²⁴ “미국의 <원조>는 아편이다” [American “aid” is opium], *Rodong Sinmun*, October 2, 1964.

²⁵ Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea. Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

country was called the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee. These two ideas are often invoked in tandem as a convenient and politically safe excuse: “Our people well know that the food shortage has been caused entirely by devastating natural disasters, particularly by foreign hostile forces’ protracted economic sanctions and blockade.”²⁶

In official discourse the famine of the 1990s is euphemistically referred to as the Arduous March (*gonanui haenggun*). This name serves to meld it with the mythology surrounding Kim Il Sung’s days in the anti-Japanese resistance, and alludes to an embellished story in which he heroically leads a group of guerrilla fighters in the Manchurian hinterland, enduring hunger, cold and attacks by the enemy. Duly rechristened, the famine has been discursively transformed from a gruesome humanitarian disaster to a patriotic act of defiance and struggle against an external enemy. Indeed, the name circumvents the idea of government failure, even demanding respect for the Kim family. The rebranding of the famine by association with other national hardships is a powerful tool, since it elicits a whole set of preexisting responses instilled in every DPRK citizen from childhood.

Over the years, excuses of sanctions and adverse weather began to wear thin so the regime began to use more diverse and elaborate reasons behind the food crisis, such as global warming, Western agricultural export subsidies, and the international financial crisis.

The number of food shortage-related articles suddenly surged in the summer of 2008, coinciding with the conclusion of a denuclearization agreement between the North and the US, which included the shipment of 500,000 tons of food. This brought about one of the largest food distribution campaigns ever in DPRK history, and one for which the WFP had negotiated unprecedented levels of access and transparency. From July 2008, the initial shipments of American corn and wheat (in

²⁶ “Food aid, ‘quad talks’ are different things,” *KCNA*, April 12, 1997.

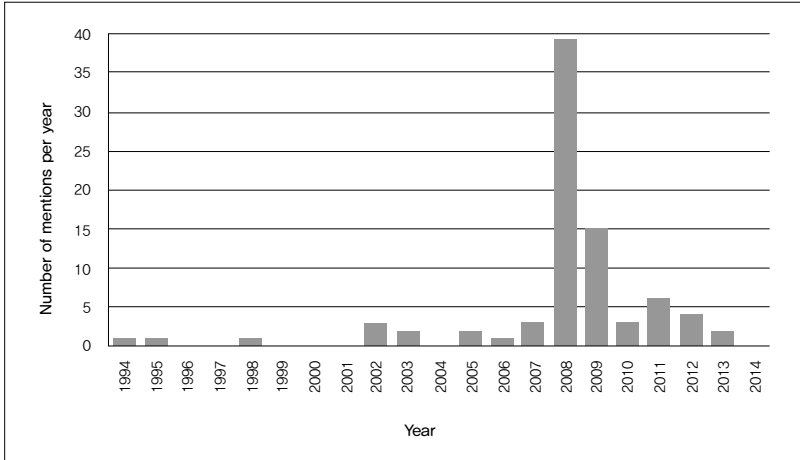


Fig. 1. The number of appearances of the most common terms relating to food shortages used in the media—“food problem” (*singnyang munje*), “food crisis” (*singnyang wigi*), “food shortage” (*singnyang bujok*) and “food difficulty” (*singnyangnan*)—to be found in Rodong Sinmun headlines through 1994-2014, showing a pronounced spike in 2008.

bags stamped with “*migugeseo bonae on seonmul*” on one side, and “USAID—from the American people” on the other, along with a US flag) began to pour into the country, to be distributed by the WFP and five American NGOs. With a nearly six-fold increase in WFP personnel and access to previously forbidden counties,²⁷ foreign aid workers began visiting countryside hospitals, nurseries, schools, distribution centers, warehouses and even family homes, sometimes without having to provide advance warning.²⁸ This summer also saw a relaxation of the ban on hiring Korean-speaking foreigners.

This intensification of mitigation activity by the Rodong Sinmun overlapped precisely with this new aid operation, with greater visibility, invasiveness and geographical reach. The newspaper started to publish,

²⁷ “World Food Program, EMOP 10757.0, “Emergency Assistance to Population Groups Affected by Floods and Rising Food and Fuel Prices,” 2008.

²⁸ “Personal experience of an author.

on an almost daily basis, articles describing a horrendous hunger crisis unfolding across all developing countries. For instance, “At least 300 million people in Africa are facing a food crisis [...] 800 million people do not have enough food”²⁹ and “every day, 8000 children die of hunger and malnutrition.”³⁰



심각한 식량위기로 하여 기아에 시달리는 아프리카인들

Fig. 2. These articles were often accompanied by undated photographs showing emaciated persons from unspecified African countries, suggesting the global nature of the food crisis, and, by extension, the relative food security of the DPRK.³¹

These articles invariably held the West, with the US in particular, to be ultimately responsible. Initially, they blamed a rise in worldwide food

²⁹ “세계를 휩쓰는 심각한 식량위기 더욱 높아 가는 우리의 목소리” [A severe food crisis sweeping the world, voices of concern louder], *Rodong Sinmun*, July 22, 2008.

³⁰ “식량문제로 인하 전세계적인 비상사태” [Worldwide state of emergency caused by food problems], *Rodong Sinmun*, July 29, 2008.

³¹ “세계적인 식량위기의 연쇄적후과” [Chain reaction from the worldwide food crisis], *Rodong Sinmun*, July 26, 2008.

prices on increased biofuel production by the US,³² then on the intentional restriction of exports by Western governments in order to inflate prices³³ and realize “excessive profits.”³⁴ Developed countries were subsequently accused of using “subsidies to protect their own agricultural markets,” thus crippling “developing countries, which do not have enough food.”³⁵

The media gradually shifted towards more sinister reasons behind the catastrophe: “Imperialists are scheming to put developing countries under their control again, and are using food as a weapon.”³⁶ Three days later, the Rodong Sinmun furthered these neocolonialist allegations: “In the past century, Western countries used food as a political weapon to annihilate the spirit of independence of other countries and make them into new colonies. Now [...] it is even worse.”³⁷ Despite its significant donation, the US was by far the main target of the newspaper’s tirades. The Rodong Sinmun wrote, “The world food crisis—exacerbated by the West, foremost by America—and food itself is being used as the new century’s weapon of domination, and is a cunning trick to control other countries and people, and lure them into their sphere of influence.”³⁸ The same accusation was repeated often until the end of the year, when the US decided to end its contributions to the WFP.

³² “심각한 식량문제와 위한 노력” [Efforts for the severe food crisis], *Rodong Sinmun*, April 29, 2008.
³³ “세계식량가격 최고기록, 인류를 위협하는 식량위기” [Record-high world food prices, a food crisis that threatens humanity], *Rodong Sinmun*, May 5, 2008.
³⁴ “세계적인 난문제로 되고있는 식량문제” [A food problem that is becoming a terrible problem worldwide], *Rodong Sinmun*, May 13, 2008.
³⁵ “식량문제로 인하여 전세계적인 비상사태,” *Rodong Sinmun*.
³⁶ “식량문제해결은 발전도상나라들앞에 나선 절박한 과제” [Solving the food problem, a pressing task facing developing countries], *Rodong Sinmun*, August 1, 2008.
³⁷ “식량문제와 자주적인 삶” [Food problem and independent life], *Rodong Sinmun*, August 4, 2008.
³⁸ “식량문제와 자주적인 삶,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

3. Aid explained as a tool of imperialism

Entirely consistent with the country's resolve for self-reliance, the North Korean media views foreign assistance with marked cynicism, and condemns it in damning terms. Decades before the distribution of Western aid began, aid was criticized as “a tool of aggression and plunder,”³⁹ a “method of pillage and subjugation,”⁴⁰ and a vehicle to “support America's strategy in Asia.”⁴¹ Warnings of the malign intentions behind aid have continued through to more recent decades, with its characterization as a form of “psychological warfare” that “abuses the idea of humanitarianism,”⁴² the dangers to which the population must “wake up.”⁴³

The ideological threats posed by humanitarian aid originate not only from the aid itself—Why do we need it? Why do we accept it?—but also the underlying humanitarianism—Why are they giving it to us? This foreign generosity runs counter to the xenophobic principles foisted on the population, and so notions of philanthropism must be neutralized. The media achieves this by suggesting that aid is purely self-serving on the part of the donor. It speaks of “real intentions” (*soksim*) and implies the existence of “ulterior motives” (*sasim*), sanctimoniously remarking: “Generally when we refer to aid, it cannot have ulterior motives. That is

³⁹ “미제의 <원조>는 침략과 약탈의 도구이다” [“Aid” from US imperialists is a tool of aggression and plunder], *Rodong Sinmun*, October 14, 1976.

⁴⁰ “미국 <원조>는 침략과 예속과 약탈의 수단이다” [American “aid” is a means of aggression and subjugation], *Rodong Sinmun*, June 18, 1963.

⁴¹ “미제의 아세아전략을 뒤받침 하기 위한 추악한 <원조> 계획” [Hideous “aid” a plan to support American imperialist strategy in Asia], *Rodong Sinmun*, July 14, 1971.

⁴² “미제의 심리모략전에 각성을 높이자” Let's wake up to US imperialist psychological warfare], *Rodong Sinmun*, August 14, 2003.

⁴³ “서방의 <원조외교>에 각성을 높여야 한다” [We must wake up to Western “aid diplomacy”], *Rodong Sinmun*, November 11, 2010

basic.”⁴⁴ It claims that “Western countries fancy themselves as ‘saviors,’”⁴⁵ asserting that they “are not doing it out of kindness.”⁴⁶ Aid is said to be a “means of survival” for imperialist powers⁴⁷ and “nothing more than a means of realizing selfish goals.”⁴⁸ It supports this by suggesting a fundamental incompatibility between capitalism and selflessness—“In this world capitalism that takes care of others does not exist. When capitalism acts to help others, it is already not capitalism”⁴⁹—and that Westerners are inherently incapable of such a virtue—“Much as a leopard cannot change its spots, the imperialists, greedy by their very nature, can never be philanthropists and therefore they are never acting out of ‘good will’ or ‘mercy’ for others.”⁵⁰

One of the means by which enemy donors are able to further their self-interested goals through aid, according to the North, is the imposition of conditionality. It is argued that donors use aid as leverage to induce in the target country “an American-style political and economic system,” “democratic politics,” “economic opening,” “the guarantee of human rights,” “a multi-party system,” “free markets,” and “reform of the economic and political systems,” conditions which are dismissed as “costly” to the country.⁵¹ It is suggested that such interference causes “political and economic turmoil,” which directly leads to “terrorism, international crime and illegal migration.” In 2009, an editorial entitled

⁴⁴ “원조기구인가, 모략기구인가” [Is it an aid agency? Or a scheming agency?], *Rodong Sinmun*, April 6, 2011.

⁴⁵ “서방의 <원조>란 어떤것인가” [What is Western “aid”?], *Rodong Sinmun*, September 23, 1997.

⁴⁶ “가시박힌 <원조>외교,” *Rodong Sinmun*

⁴⁷ “제국주의 <원조>는 독약과 같다” [Imperialist “aid” is poison], *Rodong Sinmun*, October 4, 2000.

⁴⁸ “미국의 원조는 세계체제를 노린 침략의 도구,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁴⁹ “서방의 <원조>란 어떤것인가,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁵⁰ “제국주의 <원조>에는 독약이 들어있다” [Imperialist “aid” contains poison], *Rodong Sinmun*, February 22, 1995.

⁵¹ “제국주의의 <원조>는 락탈과 예속의 올가미” [Imperialist “aid” is a noose of plunder and subjugation], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 24, 2005.

“Playing around with cutting off aid to exert pressure” harshly criticized the US for placing conditions on its aid to Nicaragua—the US had requested that “transparency be guaranteed” in the national elections.⁵²

Only if you introduce punishments for corruption and guarantees of democracy will they provide “aid.” They make high-handed demands to improve the investment environment and change the banking system. Using “aid” as bait, they make demands for change, right up to and including the political system. They time and time again blatantly interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries: telling them to implement a multi-party system, embrace a market economy, saying who can and cannot govern the country, etc.⁵³

Accusations of intrusion into internal affairs particularly resonate with North Korean ideology as the notion of autonomy is fiercely defended. To this effect, political enslavement is said to be a central intention behind aid. Donors demand “slavish submission” such that recipients “act under their pulls and pressure.”⁵⁴ It is claimed that aid is used to advance political agendas on a global scale, as “during the Cold War era, the criteria for [Western] ‘aid’ were anti-Communism and anti-Sovietism,”⁵⁵ while it is pointed out that modern-day programs are contingent on democratic reformation and the adoption of liberal economic policies. Similarly, aid programs are depicted as “neocolonialist plots,”⁵⁶ targeting “those countries which have achieved political independence”⁵⁷ and “scheming [...] to rule them and have them

⁵² “압력을 노린 <원조> 중지놓음” [Playing around with cutting “aid” to exert pressure], *Rodong Sinmun*, February 4, 2009.

⁵³ “가시박한 <원조>외교,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁵⁴ “제국주의 <원조>는 독약과 같다,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁵⁵ “서방의 <원조>란 어떤것인가,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁵⁶ “제국주의 <원조>는 독약과 같다,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

under their control once more.”⁵⁸ The *Rodong Sinmun* suggests that donors have little regard for the safety of recipients, recounting an incident in which Germany offloaded tons of toxic waste to Albania under the pretext of humanitarian aid.⁵⁹ A 2008 editorial warned, “Holding your hand out begging to the West is stupid; it is like, out of your own free will, sticking your head into a trap of subordination.”⁶⁰

Last century, the imperialists ruled and robbed other countries and people largely by flagrant armed aggression and coercive means. [...] This century, the imperialists are daring to use more concealed and cunning methods. One of the most representative ways is exploitation and plunder through “aid.” That is to say, the imperialists portray themselves as “patrons” while intensifying their neocolonial exploitation and plunder.⁶¹

The use of aid in bringing countries into alignment with the worldview of donors is a recurrent idea, either as a bargaining chip—“US aid [...] is nothing but dangerous leverage to enslave other countries economically and politically in order to Americanize them”⁶²—or by inciting political disturbances—“[Washington] [...] employed [...] “aid” and “sanctions” to engineer political coups and rally its stooges in different parts of the world.”⁶³ More broadly, aid as an instrument of world domination is a common motif: “American aid is a tool of aggression for world

⁵⁷ “제국주의 <원조>는 독약과 같다,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁵⁸ “식량문제해결은 발전도상나라들앞에 나선 절박한 과제,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁵⁹ “서방의 <원조>란 어떤것인가,” [What is Western “aid”?], *Rodong Sinmun*, October 25, 1994.

⁶⁰ “식량문제와 자주적인 삶,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁶¹ “제국주의 <원조>는 락탈과 예속의 올가미이다” [Imperialist “aid” is a noose of plunder and subjugation], *Rodong Sinmun*, July 11, 1997.

⁶² “Reactionary and Dangerous Nature of U.S. Aid Disclosed,” *KCNA*, March 24, 2005.

⁶³ “KCNA on U.S. Arbitrary Practices in 2003,” *KCNA*, December 12, 2003.

domination” is a forthright headline from 2014.⁶⁴ This is complemented by the oft-repeated refrain, “American ‘aid’ is an important means of carrying out their world domination strategy.”⁶⁵ The media claims that aid is “nothing more than a military tool,” with aspersions that the West uses it “as bait to set up military bases in other countries”⁶⁶ and to secure military allies, encouraging them to sign “shackling ‘military agreements.’”⁶⁷

On another tact, the North Korean media contends that aid is motivated by economic interests, conferring asymmetric benefits on the donor. Firstly, a linkage between structural adjustment prescriptions and the dispensation of aid is highlighted, and the US is attacked for exploiting aid as a means of achieving the introduction of economic policies coinciding with its interests:

From the early 1990s, the U.S. has forced international monetary organizations under its wire-pulling to use the “Washington Consensus” as a string when rendering “aid.” [...] As a result, [countries undergoing economic difficulty] forfeited the rights to control the strategic domain and economic artery and in the long run, they were controlled by the “Wall Street.”⁶⁸

Similarly, “economic infiltration” enables the securing of access to new markets, investment opportunities and raw materials.⁶⁹ The media asserts

⁶⁴ “미국의 원조는 세계제패를 노린 침략의 도구,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁶⁵ “제국주의의 <원조>는 락탈과 예측의 올라미,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁶⁶ “미국의 원조는 세계제패를 노린 침략의 도구,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁶⁷ “U.S. Aid Is Means for Aggression: Rodong Sinmun,” *KCNA*, June 6, 2014.

⁶⁸ “U.S. Foolish Attempt to Attain World Domination through Banking Facilities,” *KCNA*, April 24, 2008.

⁶⁹ “Imperialists’ Economic Infiltration Termed Means of Aggression and Plunder,” *KCNA*, July 20, 2008.

that “the objective [of aid] is to milk the country for greater profits.”⁷⁰ These arguments are supplemented by unreferenced statistics to contend that American multinational corporations profiteer from humanitarian investment: “They reaped four of five times and even more than 10 times for every US dollar invested.”⁷¹ This asymmetry is also evident in a particularly common quote, cited from the 1990s through to the current decade, attributed to Kim Jong Il: “The imperialists’ aid is a trap of plunder and subordination in order to steal ten or one hundred things for every one given.”⁷² Likewise, an explanatory piece from 1997 outlined in detail a “develop and prey on” policy, supposedly practiced by imperialist countries, giving chicken as an example:

Their logic is that if you want to eat a lot of good chicken, you need to feed them from when they are chicks so that they become fat. Similarly, by giving developing countries what they desperately need, you can extort more from them, and more quickly. In other words, if you want to exploit and plunder other countries more effectively, you give to them steadily, and then you can make them happily function as a source of raw materials and a place to sell your products.⁷³

In this light, any humanitarianism is made void, as foreigners are painted as parasitic, seeking only to profit from untapped markets and resources. Moreover, they may seek to actively damage the recipient’s economy. They “seize absolute control of the life of the economy and rights, and suppress economic development, and pursue economic subjugation,”⁷⁴ which may “[deter] developing countries from achieving

⁷⁰ “제국주의 <원조>는 력탈과 예측의 올라미이다,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁷¹ “KCNA Blasts U.S. Economic Aggression,” *KCNA*, April 6, 2006.

⁷² “서방의 <원조외교>에 각성을 높여야 한다,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁷³ “제국주의 <원조>는 독약과 같다,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

⁷⁴ “제국주의 <원조>는 독약과 같다,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

economic self-sustenance.”⁷⁵ It is claimed that aid leads “not to prosperity but poverty, destitution, and death”⁷⁶—to this end, it is asserted that aid has made some African countries poorer, bringing about “only economic bankruptcy, mass unemployment and chaos.”⁷⁷ Western donors are said to use aid to foster a relationship of dependency: They allegedly provide assistance as a “lure” in order to become an essential “economic lifeline,” before applying additional conditions under the threat of the suspension of aid.⁷⁸

Figs. 3 and 4. Published decades before the arrival of Western aid, these two satirical cartoons



demonstrate the consistency of anti-aid themes within state media up to the present day: how aid is used as a bait to damage and subjugate the economies of small and weak countries (fig. 3, 1962) and how Americans suck dry a country of its resources (fig. 4, 1965).

⁷⁵ “Imperialists’ Economic Infiltration Termed Means of Aggression and Plunder,” *KCNA*.
⁷⁶ “제국주의 〈원조〉는 독약과 같다,” *Rodong Sinmun*.
⁷⁷ “제국주의자들의 〈원조〉의 략탈상” [The predatory nature of the imperialists’ “aid”], *Rodong Sinmun*, October 26, 2002.
⁷⁸ “원조기구인가, 모략기구인가,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

4. Aid explained as a diplomatic tool

The characterization of aid is not limited to a tool of imperialism; it is also suggested as serving a diplomatic function for donors. While the North Korean belief that there exist ulterior motives behind aid has been demonstrated above, the ways in which it is said to be politicized deserve further investigation.

The North has accused America and Japan of obstructing the work of UN aid programs, hijacking them to “wrest a sort of ‘concession’”⁷⁹ in the resolution of bilateral disputes:

The U.S. and Japan have put up political conditionalities on the humanitarian aid to the DPRK under the pretexts of the nuclear issue and the issue of “abduction.” Not content with this, they are openly hindering the regular assistance of UN organizations by politicizing it.⁸⁰

In particular, the North charges the US with spreading “anti-DPRK false propaganda” in the wake of its appeal for UN aid, openly acknowledging and dismissing accusations of food diversion to the military.⁸¹

Notably, the North Korean media interprets US offers of food aid in the late 1990s—widely believed to be a means of incentivizing negotiation, but officially unrelated—precisely as a tool to secure talks.⁸²

What also disappointed us was the U.S. position that food assistance to the DPRK can be expanded only after the “four-way talks” are opened.

⁷⁹ “Humanitarian aid with political conditionalities unacceptable,” *KCNA*, December 16, 2002.

⁸⁰ “Attempt to Politicize UN Organizations’ Assistance to DPRK Rebuffed,” *KCNA*, September 15, 2003.

⁸¹ “Humanitarian aid with political conditionalities unacceptable,” *KCNA*.

⁸² “Results of preliminary meeting for ‘four-way talks’ are below DPRK’s expectations,” *KCNA*, August 10, 1997.

With a serious food problem, we guard against the possible use of food assistance to the DPRK as a political weapon at the “four-way talks.”

The North complains that the “brigandish demands” attached to aid carry the aim of “[forcing] [...] countries to disarm themselves,”⁸³ and that, more generally, the US “[is using] the humanitarian issue of food assistance [to] [...] disarm the DPRK.”⁸⁴ In the late 1990s and early 2000s the North Korean media exposed what it saw as the use of food assistance from the US as a bargaining chip to pressure it into denuclearization:

The U.S. is clamouring about “missile threat” and the “suspected underground nuclear facility” in the DPRK, politicizing humanitarian food assistance together with its followers. What it seeks in this is to disarm the DPRK.⁸⁵

If we give up our nuclear programme, the American imperialists will “provide” us with food or will give us “humanitarian assistance” or whatever, and are waging a hypocritical propaganda campaign. The objective of America’s “aid operation” in Korea is to promote a fantasy about America in the minds of our people and, by paralyzing anti-American consciousness, weaken our class consciousness and ideologically bring about our collapse, and eventually overthrow our socialism.⁸⁶

This defiance and cynical interpretation of aid has been maintained through to this decade. The launch of the Kwangmyŏngsŏng-3 satellite in

⁸³ “People Called upon Not to Harbor Illusion about Imperialism,” *KCNA*, November 17, 2008.

⁸⁴ “Trick over food problem,” *KCNA*, April 24, 1997.

⁸⁵ “U.S. can not flee from responsibility,” *KCNA*, January 9, 1999.

⁸⁶ “미제의 심리모략전에 각성을 높이자,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

April 2012 violated the terms of the Leap Day Agreement, and in response the US suspended its delivery of food aid. One week later, the North implied that it had turned down the food of its own accord, dismissing the aid as part of an American disarmament strategy.

Now while America waves a food aid package worth pennies in our face, it is plotting to strip us of our right to a space development programme, but this is nothing more than a foolish delusion. Our military and our people have not survived through American support and cooperation with anyone.⁸⁷

The North argues that aid is used by donors to boost their international profiles. The US is censured for using aid as a means of “swaying public opinion” in developing countries, and improving its relations with other countries by appearing charitable, in a shallow bid to make amends for other wrongdoings.

The objective of America’s “aid operation” is to create a fantasy about America in people’s minds, paralyzing anti-Americanism by encouraging pro-American flunkeyism. [...] While America was heavily bombing Iraq with one hand, it was providing the country’s inhabitants with “aid” with the other.⁸⁸

Similarly, Japan is also accused of seeking to improve its reputation and brush off its history with its “cunning” aid:

Whenever the Japanese authorities have a chance they praise themselves

⁸⁷ “미일반동들과 그 주구패당들이 아무리 짓어대도 우리의 위성은 더욱 힘차게 구쳐 오르게 될 것이다” [No matter how much the reactionary Americans and Japanese and their lapdog keep on howling, our satellites will soar ever more powerfully], *Rodong Sinmun*, April 20, 2012.

⁸⁸ “미제의 심리모략전에 각성을 높이자,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

as the number one provider of economic aid [...] However, popular opinion holds that Japan is flaunting its wealth with its economic aid, and that it is a trick to curry favour and shake off its militarism and bad name.⁸⁹

Japan is also said to use its aid to assert its credentials worldwide and further its role on the world stage. The Rodong Sinmun accuses it of “[stretching] out its dark tentacles to African countries under various names such as ‘development aid,’” with a view to “showing off its moneybag” and “[increasing] its influence on [sic] the international arena.” Through aid, it claims, Japan hopes to “open more embassies in Africa” and even to “create an atmosphere favorable for its bid to sit on the UN Security Council.”⁹⁰

5. Acknowledgement of aid by donor

Despite systematically deploring humanitarian assistance on grounds of subterfuge, politicization and its potential to thwart the pursuit of self-reliance, the North Korean media still reports specific incidents of its own receipt of aid. However, the manner in which this is covered depends strongly on the donor country in question. Stories of aid from “friendly” countries are couched in cordial language and suggest some degree of gratitude—for instance, assistance from Russia is customarily presented as “free,” “sincere,”⁹¹ and “a manifestation of traditional relations of friendship and cooperation.”⁹² Notably, in Korean-language

⁸⁹ “〈경제동물〉의 교활한 〈원조〉정책” [The cunning aid policy of economic animals], *Rodong Sinmun*, January 29, 1994.

⁹⁰ “Rodong Sinmun on Ulterior Motive of Japan’s Diplomacy towards Africa,” *KCNA*, March 29, 2008.

⁹¹ “Russian Government Provides Food Aid to DPRK,” *KCNA*, October 3, 2014.

⁹² “Russian Govt. Offers Food Aid to DPRK,” *KCNA*, August 19, 2011.

output, a distinction is made between donors on the basis of the word used for “aid”: “non-friendly” sources are simply said to provide “*wonjo*,” while donations from “friendly” states are honored with appellation as either “*hosang wonjo*” (互相: emphasizing comradery and a feeling of mutual benefit) or “*musang wonjo*” (無償: underlining the “strings-free” nature of aid between allies). Historically, assistance from the Soviet Union, Peru, Mongolia and China has all been described in such terms.

United Nations agencies are also depicted as acceptable donors, with their aid represented as acts of “good faith,”⁹³ and “goodwill” on behalf of the international community.⁹⁴ Aid from UN agencies requires less mitigation, as their supranationalism separates the donation from any one donor and serves to embed North Korea in the international system. Partnership with UN agencies can also lend credence to the government’s official account of events. Their response to, and cooperation with, the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee in the mid-1990s conferred legitimacy to the government’s natural disaster narrative. Even today, the current WFP operations document refers exclusively to natural disasters and insufficient domestic production as contributing causes of the crisis.⁹⁵

Stories of direct food aid from the US have made appearances in both the Rodong Sinmun and the KCNA. On the one hand, some articles seem begrudgingly brief. For instance, “The US government on Feb 25 decided to donate 100,000 tons of food to the DPRK this year through the World Food Program” is the entirety of an article published in 2003. The receipt of aid is also used as a platform to reprimand the US, suggesting that it does not fulfill its promises: “The US expressed its will

⁹³ “Gratitude expressed for appeal for international assistance to DPRK,” *KCNA*, December 4, 2000.

⁹⁴ “Interview over UN combined appeals,” *KCNA*, November 29, 1999.

⁹⁵ “Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation – DPRK 200532,” *WFP*, May 17, 2013.

to offer 100,000 tons of food aid to the DPRK through the World Food Program this year but only 40,000 tons of it have been supplied but nobody knows when the remaining 60,000 tons would be delivered.”⁹⁶

On the other hand, a minority of articles are marked by a distinct optimism and diplomatic civility. For example, in 2000, after the US agreed to donate 50,000 tons of food via the WFP, the KCNA pronounced, “This step will have a positive impact on promoting the understanding between the DPRK and the United States.”⁹⁷ Similarly, in 2008, both the *Rodong Sinmun* and the KCNA ended articles with the startlingly upbeat conclusion: “The food aid provided by the US government will [...] contribute to promoting the understanding and confidence between the people of the two countries.”⁹⁸ These incidental displays of courtesy run in direct contradiction to endemic anti-Americanism and anti-aid editorials. The authors of this paper conjecture that they represent gestures of goodwill while negotiations are in progress. Such concessions would be tolerable by virtue of their exceptionality, being swamped by inflammatory articles, and the opportunity it provides to present the country as a sincere party in talks. Moreover, the conventional narrative can be restored at a later date, while anti-US sentiment need never diminish; a story under the headline “U.S. urged not to stand in way of Korea’s reunification” ran the same day as the story from the year 2000 above.⁹⁹

Aid from Japan has been discussed in the context of the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In 1997, the North allowed Japanese-born wives of North Korean citizens to visit their hometowns, and was subsequently rewarded with another food

⁹⁶ “KCNA Slams U.S. Moves to Politicize Aid,” *KCNA*, September 25, 2003.

⁹⁷ “United States decides to donate food to DPRK,” *KCNA*, June 17, 2000.

⁹⁸ “미국이 우리 나라에 대한 식량제공을 결정” [America decides to provide our country with food], *Rodong Sinmun*, May 18, 2005.

⁹⁹ “U.S. urged not to stand in way of Korea’s reunification,” *KCNA*, June 17, 2000.

shipment.¹⁰⁰ Soon after, the KCNA wrote, “Both sides affirmed that the solution to the humanitarian and cooperation issues will be conducive to deepening mutual understanding and friendship,”¹⁰¹ demonstrating the inextricable association between food and bilateral relations. Also, the North Korean media framed an acknowledgement of aid from Japan as “continuation of the good precedents of mutual humanitarian assistance,” making reference to its own donation to Japan via the Red Cross in response to the Kobe earthquake in 1995.¹⁰²

With fewer political entanglements, and less resistance from donor states, the EU currently represents the largest Western donor to North Korea. Its multilateralism renders its aid largely apolitical, such that its reporting poses less of a threat to the state. This perceived neutrality is attested to the greater operational freedoms afforded to European NGOs through the European Union Programme Support structure. Individual EU members may enjoy a more positive image due to historic ties with former communist states or resistance to the US over the Iraq War, while the bloc collectively could be seen as a counterbalance to US hegemony. The depiction of the EU in the media has suggested a healthy relationship, with its “disinterested”¹⁰³ aid serving as “a token of humanitarianism” that is “conducive to promoting understanding.”¹⁰⁴

Humanitarian assistance from South Korea has been realized by means of NGOs, sometimes supported by government funding, and official joint business ventures. Both are subject to cyclical patterns of restriction and relaxation in accordance with the prevailing state of inter-Korean relations, and generally appear in the North Korean media only

¹⁰⁰ “Marie Söderberg, “Can Japanese Foreign Aid to North Korea Create Peace and Stability?” *Pacific Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2006): 433.

¹⁰¹ “Japanese delegation gives reception,” *KCNA*, November 14, 1997.

¹⁰² “Personal correspondence with the Japanese Red Cross.

¹⁰³ “Disinterested international aid, cooperation,” *KCNA*, December 19, 1997.

¹⁰⁴ “EU’s humanitarian aid to DPRK,” *KCNA*, December 26, 1997.

in response to the imposition of curbs by the South Korean government.

The humanitarian activities of South Korean NGOs in the North are variously referred to as “exchanges and cooperation,”¹⁰⁵ “north-south non-governmental cooperation,”¹⁰⁶ or “cooperation projects,”¹⁰⁷ obscuring the donor-beneficiary dynamic. Notably, both voluntary humanitarian aid and commercial ventures are conflated under the label of cooperation. While aid workers have reported a “[lack of] fundamental understanding of the nature, role, and intent of NGOs”¹⁰⁸ by their North Korean counterparts, which could explain this confusion, the tone of the writing suggests this practice is intentional, cynically implying mutual benefit and financial interest on the part of South Korean NGOs.

The disruption of the NGO cooperation pushed at least 2,400 medium and small South Korean enterprises into bankruptcy and deprived more than 300,000 of their jobs. The business loss reached 32.3 billion US dollars as of May this year.¹⁰⁹

6. Aid agencies and workers

The Rodong Sinmun and the KCNA tend to frame aid from NGOs as “cooperation,” with whole projects introduced euphemistically as “cooperation activities,” suggesting collaboration between two bodies of equal footing. On occasion, aid agencies are even relegated to passive participants and referred to merely as afterthoughts, e.g. “the resident UNICEF representative also took part in the vaccination.”

¹⁰⁵ “All Koreans Urged to Open up New Horizon for Peace and Reunification,” *KCNA*, August 12, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ “S. Korean Authorities Hit for Hampering North-South NGO Cooperation.” *KCNA*, April 5, 2012.

¹⁰⁷ “Crimes Committed by Unification Minister Exposed,” *KCNA*, July 14, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ L. Gordon Flake, “The Experience of U.S. NGOs in North Korea.”

¹⁰⁹ “S. Korean Regime’s Crimes of Hindering North-South NGO Cooperation, Exchange Disclosed,” *KCNA*, December 18, 2012.

However, the organizations also attract criticism, routinely being described as pursuing agendas political in nature, and operating as agents of sponsor governments. As far back as 1965, aid organizations were pronounced to be “dens of devils,”¹¹⁰ while a 2011 editorial under the headline “Is it an aid agency? Or a scheming agency?” elaborated on the threats they allegedly pose to the security, economy and sovereignty of host states.¹¹¹ They are pronounced to be “dens of conspiracy, interfering with the domestic affairs of other countries, and habitually scheming,” as well as “guides for invasion.” Furthermore, it is suggested that USAID missions are obliged to submit annually the telephone numbers and email addresses of all their local contacts to the organization’s headquarters, information which is subsequently “seized” by the FBI and the CIA.

Aid workers, too, do not escape rebuke. The same article recounts a case in Bolivia in which the president deported aid staff who had allegedly been financing “impure influences” within the country, and were suspected of plotting an “anti-governmental conspiracy.” Meanwhile, in Cuba, it is claimed that USAID personnel provided funding and satellite communications equipment to “anti-governmental criminals,” and orchestrated the Color Revolutions through the sponsorship of television and radio broadcasts.

Nevertheless, aid workers provide a convenient opportunity for the North Korean media to advance its claims of international respect for the Kim family. Indeed, this constitutes the most common depiction of NGO personnel. Following the death of Kim Jong Il, the KCNA described how “staff members of [...] the World Health Organization, the World Food Program and the United Nations Children’s Fund paid respects to the bier,” laying wreaths and leaving messages of consolation.¹¹² The

¹¹⁰ “대한 경제 원조단은 악마들의 소굴” [The Korean Economic Aid Group is a den of devils], *Rodong Sinmun*, August 10, 1965.

¹¹¹ “원조기구인가, 모략기구인 가,” *Rodong Sinmun*.

¹¹² “Foreign Diplomats Visit Bier of Kim Jong Il”, *KCNA*, December 26, 2011.

following day, representatives of the UN Development Fund, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the UN Population Fund were reported as having done the same.¹¹³ In the case of UNICEF, over the last twenty years there have been four explicit acknowledgements of the receipt of medical equipment, compared with thirty-three stories of its staff offering “floral baskets, gifts and congratulatory letters” to leaders, or paying tribute to the Mansu Hill statues.

IV. Conclusion

The North Korean official discourse related to food crises and international assistance is subtler than typically presumed. Contrary to popular assumption, the media does not wholly shy away from discussing the country’s receipt of foreign aid. Indeed, it has been acknowledged ever since the 1960s, when support from the Soviet Union and China was understood as a token of friendship. However, at the same time, other countries were applauded for turning down offers of aid. Similarly, its own subsequent receipt of aid from “hostile” countries between 1990 and 2010 was framed with disdain almost universally, with only the justifications invoked changing with time, in response to world events.

Moreover, many accusations put forward by the Rodong Sinmun and the KCNA are not entirely unfounded. They identify genuine issues, such as the increase in world food prices due to biofuels, and the alleged association between US food aid and nuclear concessions, and then distort them to fit the official narrative. Aid distributed by supposedly hostile countries is represented in a way that not only manages to preserve the official ideology, but even reinforces existing propaganda themes, e.g. capitalist greed, imperialist plots to dominate the world, the

¹¹³ “Foreign Diplomats Visit Bier of Kim Jong Il,” *KCNA*, December 27, 2011.

dangers of neocolonialism, and the imperative to resist.

While awareness of aid programs has necessitated discussion, the regime's total domination of the media landscape has enabled it to pursue a strategy of damage control. It has underplayed the extent of foreign assistance, sullied the intentions of humanitarian agencies, and vilified foreign workers. In essence, aid from "non-friendly" states has been rationalized to the extent that it does not pose an irreconcilable threat to the regime.

This approach, meticulously developed over the years, intensified as the activities of foreign aid workers became more conspicuous and the information blockade imposed on average citizens began to disintegrate. The famine in the mid-1990s represented a fundamental breakdown of the socialist social contract and resulted in a complete reorganization of North Korean society, with its citizens seeking to lead lives outside government-controlled structures. More frequent cross-border travel to China, the proliferation of mobile phones, increased exposure to outside sources of information and the emergence of private markets have provided new opportunities for information exchange. Indeed, the *jangmadang* emancipates the population from the regime not only in terms of commodities, but also news. It gives a previously atomized society a focal point for interaction, and acts as a conduit for the organic diffusion of information, separate and distinct from government channels.¹¹⁴

Nonetheless, at the heart of the North Korean media's treatment of aid lies an inescapable contradiction. News sources publish haughty, pious editorials that denounce the very idea of foreign assistance, alongside articles that acknowledge the country's own receipt of aid, which speak optimistically of its potential to improve bilateral relations, while boasting of the DPRK's own donations. This seeming

¹¹⁴ John Everard, "The Markets of Pyongyang," *Korea Economic Institute* 6, no. 1 (2011): 4.

inconsistency can be resolved by appreciating the onus on the media to satisfy two conflicting criteria: self-aggrandizement and victimhood. There is a need for the regime to project an image of the DPRK as a strong, independent state that unfailingly occupies the moral high ground, while concurrently accounting for and dissociating itself from the suffering within the country. Since the occasional neutral or optimistic reference to aid pales in comparison with an all-encompassing propaganda effort to besmirch the outside world, the occasional stoop to representing aid in more favorable terms is not only tolerable, but useful, as it can be assumed that readers will carry ideas across from other propaganda sources and apply them themselves. By decrying aid as a weapon, a political tool, and wholly self-serving on the part of the donor, its receipt does not necessarily entail deigning; rather, providing the recipient makes known their resolute defiance, they can show themselves to be exploiting the benefactor. In this way, the preservation of the domestic status quo in the face of pernicious foreign influences becomes an accomplishment, reversing the power dynamic of the donation and achieving the two primary goals of the media.

Unfortunately, no extensive survey regarding the perception of foreign aid by the North Korean people, and the evolution over time of this perception, has been conducted, which makes problematic a qualitative test of our hypothesis. Nevertheless, the annual surveys conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies are enlightening, in that they show that attitudes among refugees to *Juche* remain consistently positive through the years: for every year of the period 2008-2016, between 51.9 and 63.8 percent of respondents said they were proud of the regime's ideology.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, in 1998, 38.6 percent of North Koreans surveyed believed that natural disasters were

¹¹⁵ 북한주민통일의식조사 [Study on the Unification Consciousness of North Koreans] (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, 2017), 109.

the reasons behind economic difficulties.¹¹⁶ This figure falls to 0.7 percent in the 2016 survey,¹¹⁷ which is not surprising since propaganda efforts shifted away from the natural disaster narrative in the intervening years.

Upon reflection, the hope of some aid workers, donors and academics that humanitarian aid has the potential to change the perspectives of North Korean citizens and maybe effect changes within the society appear to be misguided. By means of a sophisticated response by the propaganda apparatus, the population is primed and given a lens through which they are expected to interpret any interactions with foreigners and receipt of food from the enemy. The result is the effective insulation of the population from the goings-on within their own country; it seems difficult to see how one isolated and controlled meeting with a foreigner—especially when that encounter can be of a tense and interrogative nature, and always in the presence of a government official—can modify a perspective crafted by a lifetime of propaganda. The potential for aid to undermine the official doctrine and to change the mindset of the population has therefore been greatly reduced.

Since the soft power capacity of aid is regularly invoked as an argument in favor of intervention, aid agencies would be wise to recognize the extensive propaganda apparatus working counter to their efforts. This should serve as a compelling reminder to donors that aid should be distributed, above all, on purely humanitarian grounds. That is to say, not least because its potential to achieve as much in North Korea is rendered more limited than in other settings, undue expectations should not be pinned on winning hearts and minds or undermining the regime through aid.

¹¹⁶ Philo Kim, “Social Changes in North Korea 2008-2011: Interviews with Defectors,” *North Korean Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (2012). http://www.koreafocus.or.kr/design2/layout/content_print.asp?group_id=104129

¹¹⁷ 북한주민통일의식조사, 115.

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