

# An Investigation into the Perception of Climate Change as Understood by a Review of North Korean Newspapers and Conversations with North Koreans: An Autoethnography

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

BBC interview with North Koreans



### Contemporary history of the Korean Peninsula

Korean Peninsula: After WW2, North – controlled by Soviet Union, South – controlled by US (CIA, 2024)  
Between 1945 to 1950: North Korea – Supreme Leader Kim Il-Sung, South Korea – President Rhee Syng-man (Millett, 2023)  
Korean War: North Korea's invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950 (Millett, 2023)  
This war was an extension of the Cold War and its power struggle between the US and the Soviet Union (Britannica, 2024). An armistice agreement was signed after three years, leaving the two Koreas in a state of war for 70 years, which continues to this day.

### Lack of food in North Korea

Contributing Factors  
North Korea's strong ideology of *juche*, self-reliance, which entails that the country should sustain itself without external assistance such as imports (CIA, 2024). Shortage of arable land, lack of access to fertilizers and modern agricultural equipment has led to widespread malnutrition and undernourishment (Ministry of Unification, 2023).

Reality  
A BBC interview with people inside North Korea revealed that people who starved to death lay on the streets (BBC News, 2023). According to the interviewees, North Korean citizens are left with two options: die of starvation or get sentenced to prison if not face execution for pursuing illegal means to stay alive (BBC News, 2023). One interviewee even commented that he hopes that a war breaks out, because either way they die, from starvation or from the war (BBC News, 2023).

### Lack of preparedness for the climate crisis

Vulnerability to climate change increases with poverty, unstable governance, and lack of resources (IPCC, 2022). Unfortunately, North Korea fits all these descriptions: North Korea is one of the poorest countries in Asia (CIA, 2024) and ruled under three generations of one-man leadership (Lew et al., 2024).

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## METHODS

Data collected from

- 150 newspaper articles from the Korean Workers' Party's official newspaper, the *Rodong Sinmun*; 75 on climate change, 75 on global warming. Timeline: 2013-2023
- Four conversations with North Korean defectors residing in South Korea, who left North Korea within the last 10 years

## DISCUSSION

### Regarding findings

North Korea's emphasis on reforestation can be traced back to their shortage of food, not climate change mitigation. Since the severe famine in North Korea in the 1990s, residents of North Korea have cleared plots of land on hills and mountains and converted the area into cropland to grow crops and to compensate for food shortages (Ministry of Unification, 2023; Lim et al., 2017). Thus, the stress on reforestation is not a new agenda for the purpose of mitigating climate change but started more than two decades ago to deal with issues such as decrease in water supply and soil erosion that resulted from barren mountains (Lim et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2017).

### Research journey

#### Desensitization

Before research: only recognize the divide when S.Korea conducts nation-wide civil defense drills called 민방위대피훈련, North Korea = military power & leader Kim Jung-Un  
After research: my scope has widened to the people of North Korea

#### Indifference

Traced back to a period in South Korea's recent history after the Korean War when a South Korean president-turned-dictator, Park Jung-Hee, used the excuse of fighting Communism to eliminate political dissidents (Britannica, 2023). Resulted in wide-spread fear of being associated with North Korea.

Although this was before I was born, I discovered through this research that fear of associating myself with Communism and North Korea was more deeply imbedded than I previously thought.

## FINDINGS

Knowledge of climate change		Awareness of climate change occurring in North Korea		Impact of climate change on North Korea	
NK government	NK defectors	NK government	NK defectors	NK government	NK defectors
Yes, the NK government knows. Points to release of anthropogenic greenhouse gases (GHG) as the cause of climate change	Yes, North Koreans know. However, not factual. To them, climate change = increase in temperatures due to icebergs melting in the Arctic	Mostly silent on its awareness of climate change occurring in North Korea <u>Exception</u> 4 articles in 2015 and 2016, when NK became signatories to the Paris Agreement	Yes, noticing palpable changes: • increase in temperature • longer summers • shorter winters	No, does not acknowledge <u>Exceptions</u> 2 articles on extreme weather events 1 article on reforestation efforts 1 article on educating citizens on climate change	Yes, do acknowledge Positive impacts: increase in fruit production Negative impacts: extreme weather events damaging agricultural yield