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Understanding North Korea: Rimjin-gang Citizen Journalists out to cure the "Sick Man of Asia"? 北朝鮮を理解する--「臨津江」市民記者ら、アジアの病人を治療？

Suzy Kim

Understanding North Korea: Rimjin-gang Citizen Journalists out to cure the "Sick Man of Asia"?

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Back in 2008, a small but significant piece of news circulated in South Korea about a magazine "secretly published by North Korean journalists" as one headline read. This was hardly covered in the Western media, but it seems the news has finally reached across the Pacific with the publication of the magazine's first English edition in October 2010. On the evening of October 18, 2010 Ishimaru Jiro – editor and publisher of *Rimjin-gang* magazine[1] – was invited to speak at the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at NYU in "a discussion about journalism in and about North Korea" (according to the event flyer). *The Nation* published an article on November 15, 2010, seductively titled "North Korea's Citizen Journalism" featuring the publication.

With years of experience reporting on North Korea, Ishimaru launched *Rimjin-gang* in 2007. Published twice a year in South Korea and Japan in their respective languages, it is edited in Seoul by North Korean defector, Choi Jin-i, before being translated into Japanese and then from Japanese into English.[2] *Rimjin-gang* aims to publish reports about everyday life in North Korea with the help of a dozen underground North Korean informants, whom Ishimaru identifies as "North Korean journalists." I have opted to use the term "informant" instead, given serious misgivings about whether they can be called journalists. This is a central issue as explained in the body of this essay. The magazine is important to evaluate for several reasons. Not only does it claim to be "the first magazine about North Korea written by North Koreans" (*The Nation*), but it is also touted as "the first publication to create a channel for two-way communication between the divided Korean people," as exemplified by the title "Rimjin-gang" – the name of the river that flows across the De-Militarized Zone dividing the north and south.

This article is an attempt to engage in a critical conversation about how we know what we know about North Korea, reflecting upon the historical and structural conditions that configure the way North Korea is known and understood by those outside North Korea. A look at the epistemology on North Korea is, of course, not the same as looking at North Korea itself, and some may be tempted to dismiss such an essay as entirely pedantic or worse, irrelevant to the task of finding out what is really happening in North Korea, particularly in a dire situation when so many are thought to be suffering under famine conditions and totalitarian rule. Yet, without a viable framework for understanding the unfamiliar, things may not be what they seem. To assess a project such as *Rimjin-gang*, self-identified as journalism, it is doubly imperative to interrogate the sources of information and knowledge. Based on attendance at the NYU event and a reading of the English edition of *Rimjin-gang*, this article interrogates the kinds of issues that arise in reporting on a country as closed as North Korea in an environment in which tensions associated with the US-Korean War and the legacies of the Cold War continue to shape conditions in North Korea while failing to inform those reporting on it.

Question of Framework: "Markets are a Miracle"?

Born in Osaka, Japan in 1962, Ishimaru Jiro, is said to have studied in Seoul for two and a half years in the aftermath of the 1987 June Democratic Uprising that brought down decades of military dictatorship in South Korea. Shortly thereafter in 1993, he began his reports on North Korea for Asia Press mostly from along the Sino-North Korean border. Founded in 1987 to "promote and protect independent journalism" in Asia, Asia Press is a network of thirty journalists from Japan, South Korea, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, and India. Like some progressives who went through political conversions in the wake of the fall of the Soviet bloc and the Tiananmen Incident, Ishimaru introduced himself as a leftist in his earlier years. Subsequently, he became deeply disillusioned with North Korea after hearing stories from refugees about the breakdown in the ration system and the punishment of whole families through a system of guilt by association. With the increasing gravity of famine conditions from the mid-1990s leading to varying estimations of 1 to 3 million deaths, Ishimaru explained that he felt the urgency of getting access to inside information to overcome the limits in how much he and others could cover from the outside. He began cultivating relationships inside North Korea in 2002. By 2004, Ishimaru had begun training a handful of North Koreans in China to gather undercover video and photographs back in their homeland. Ishimaru emphasized his motivation to dispel stereotypes about North Koreans as "brainwashed, like robots" (6) and North Korea as an unchanging, stagnant place. Both are admirable goals. Yet, questions arise when he attributes the source of changes in North Korea to the expansion of underground markets after the breakdown of government authority by its failure to feed its people.

The magazine makes repeated references to the "natural" emergence of market mechanisms in place of the paralyzed central economy in North Korea, in effect reifying markets as a positive, miraculous force that can topple ineffective regimes. (185) According to *Rimjin-gang*, the "power of supply and demand conquered the strict control of state authorities" (15) and the market economy "developed naturally with no laws or regulations"

Ishimaru Jiro with *Rimjin-gang*

when the "economy collapsed and the rationing system stopped operating." (33) Thus, "only the market economy stood up and rescued the people and the country, despite the repeated government attempts to knock it down." (352) But, as explained by the magazine's own sources, farmers markets had been regulated and utilized to distribute additional goods beyond the state distribution system even before the economy collapsed. Indeed, with the onset of famine conditions and the breakdown in rations, the North Korean government reorganized the farmers markets into general markets in April 2003 as a stopgap measure while collecting taxes from the expanded market activities. (37) The greatest irony lies in the repeated photos of marketplace activity, which show legal markets with prominent signs of the name of the markets posted at the gate. These photos make clear that the markets are state-sanctioned and operated institutions, hardly a force opposing the state and the magazine provides little direct evidence of state crackdown on market activities per se.

The magazine points to the large quantities of food being sold in the markets, claiming that the problem at present isn't the lack of food or aid, but the North Korean system itself. But this is precisely the issue – markets have plenty of food, but most people do not have money to buy the food, creating disparities between the haves and have-nots since the breakdown in rations. Indeed, many of the North Koreans interviewed in the magazine voiced concerns that the spread of markets resulted in growing inequalities. Kae Myung-bin, a North Korean official working in a state enterprise, stated during an interview in May 2006, "The personal wealth of some people increased due to this mechanism [of the market]. Wasn't it in this very 'March of Tribulation' period [referring to the late 1990s period of famine] that there were those booms in used Japanese bicycles and video players? At that time, it took an average eight years' worth of state wages to buy a Japanese bicycle, and yet those who made money in the *jangmadang* [markets] had started riding them." (57-8) In another conversation, two office workers are recorded saying, "[I]f the government were to control 100 percent of the rice, then 100 percent rationing would be possible… In the end, the rice that gets sold in the *jangmadang* is a problem, but will the administration be able [to] control that rice…and ration it out properly?" (100-101) There are other examples, but such voices seem to get sidelined by the editorial voice that paints markets simplistically as an oppositional force that is sustaining the welfare of the people despite the failed North Korean state, raising concerns about the extent to which the information is being filtered to fit a certain perspective.

The chapter on North Korean people's reactions to the currency redenomination of December 2009 offers a good illustration of such potential problems with *Rimjin-gang*. The chapter is based on a set of core interviews with three North Korean women traveling in China, two of whom were visiting legally. The three women had different experiences and perspectives on the redenomination, shaped by their individual circumstance. One merchant woman had taken out a loan of $3000 to buy Chinese goods to sell in North Korea. She took a huge hit when she was not able to convert the large sum into the new currency. A suburban woman thought the redenomination would hardly affect her since she raised her own livestock and crops, recently using all her money to buy food and had little cash savings left. Finally, the third woman was relieved that her sister's husband was holding foreign currency but worried about the rising price of rice when the markets froze from uncertainty caused by the currency redenomination. We find out from the women that "There were some who said they hoped that this currency exchange would shrink the gap between the rich and the poor that had been growing recently." (144) While there was general anxiety about price fluctuations and the inflation that ensued, the suburban woman concludes that "Those who were swooning and crying over their losses were located more in the center of the city… In any case, the playing field has been leveled." (164-165)

These differences in the women's perspectives notwithstanding, the chapter ends with a commentary by Ishimaru that smoothes over the differences, instead choosing "To sum up our view, [that] the redenomination was an attempt to restrict the market economy as a security measure, but at the same time part of a strategy to reorganize it so that in the near future the powerful will be able to gain new profits and interests." (175) Ishimaru juxtaposes the market with centrally planned economies as though they are incompatible, viewing the events unfolding in North Korea as a fight between the two when indeed there are many stunning examples of using both mechanisms, the Japanese and South Korean models of development being only one version of combining central planning with market principles.

Suburban private market in North Korea

There are other examples of differing opinions. During an interview with Ishimaru, one of the North Korean "reporters" (pseudonym: Chang Jeong-il) appealed directly for food aid, regardless of where it goes – even to the military – because the net result is a decrease in food prices overall.

> "I want those who see these pictures to understand the most pressing problem in North Korea, which is the lack of food, and hope they show support for an increase of food aid… Even if food is diverted or sold illegally by those with power, whenever there is a large amount of food coming in, its market price naturally drops. So the more aid we get, the more we are thankful for it." (266-267)

Meanwhile, a different conversation among several North Korean residents revealed the men saying something quite the opposite: "Aid was sent to disaster victims, yet the cadres keep it all for themselves… Everyone thinks it's better if they didn't send anything at all." (301) Clearly, North Koreans have a diverse set of opinions like people anywhere else, but rather than showing the wide array of perspectives, *Rimjin-gang* attempts to present a uniform and unified view.

In doing so, serious problems of interpretation surface throughout the magazine. A very good example is the chapter made up of images of Pyongyang – photos taken by the North Korean informants. The commentary and captions to the photos are authored by Ishimaru. The caption for a photo of two women squatting on the ground with various wares possibly for sale reads, "Selling at the market is fun," and the

footnote explains, "it appears they are relaxed and are smiling as they conduct business. It must be exciting for them to be running a business of their own." (187) Another footnote of an image of a smiling woman says, "Her smile is a sign that what she sells is quite an interesting item." (213) Photo after photo in this chapter show scenes of the various markets spread throughout the suburbs of Pyongyang, women and men bundled up in the cold to sell their wares and eke out a living. It is doubtful that they would choose to be out in the cold if they were given a choice to go back to the way things were before the breakdown in rations. But, the concluding commentary notes, "Despite their harsh conditions, they happily go on making a living through commerce, the only way to survive in this strictly-controlled authoritarian city. The harder they work, the more their profits grow, and making this living through sales is the only chance they have to gain wealth. We should understand from these images of working women how they struggle to win 'economic freedom,' as well as their drive to keep living." (224) North Korean people certainly are making their best efforts to survive, but where is the evidence to support the conclusion that they are "happy" about having to make a living through commerce or that they are struggling to win "economic freedom"?

Indeed, Ryu Kyung-won, one of the North Korean "reporters" now residing in China, sheds better insight writing about the history of the marketplace in North Korea:

> "When the Soviet Union collapsed and the spread of market economies ensued, North Korea's planned economy fell apart and the income gained from the planned economy quickly deteriorated… As the Party began to violate its own planned economic system and began to emphasize luxury, the Youth League and other special organizations were forced to focus their energies on bringing in foreign currency… The wealth of the state's planned economy started to flow into foreign currency-earning ventures." (115)

Ryu traces the onset of economic problems in North Korea to the fall of the Soviet bloc, and to the abandonment of the government's own principles of a planned economy, thereby alluding to a time when the system did indeed function. Moreover, he concludes his analysis by warning that "It is dangerous to assume that ideological transformation will come with the accumulation of capital." (119) In other words, a simple one-to-one calculation that market liberalization will be the first step towards political liberalization is dangerously naïve and has already been discredited by the Chinese example.

More telling is the way Ryu reminisces about the past with a certain sense of nostalgia for the days of Kim Il-sung before the onset of crises: "It is possible that if Kim Il-sung had remained alive he might have come out of semi-retirement and halted the excessive influx of foreign currency through the party and the privileged institutions, and North Korea might have developed into a more sustainable, open and reformed state like China." (116) It is telling that nowhere in the interviews published in the magazine is there any reference to negative remarks about the late eternal president of North Korea, which doesn't stop Ishimaru from laying the responsibility for current conditions at Kim Il-sung's footsteps: "It was the late North Korean leader Kim Il-sung who was the ultimate top manager…" (125) Ultimately, Ishimaru holds the Juche ideology of self-sufficiency responsible for North Korea's economic failures, despite the fact that his own "reporters" have a more varied viewpoint, reflecting perhaps the experience of North Korea's relative successes in the 1960s and 70s.

In exalting market and technological principles as the way forward, Ishimaru fails to acknowledge the state of war that North Korea has been in for the past 60 years, and the way that war and US embargoes have hampered developments in North Korea. As the state enterprise official Kae notes, "the whole country is perpetually run in a state of war." (76) Ishimaru himself footnotes that "In a normal country, the military structure lies below the state governmental structure… Hence the 'military-first government'…today [in] North Korea cannot be considered a normal country." (74) Despite the congruence here, Ishimaru fails to notice his own insightful footnote in assuming that the 'military-first' policy is merely the abnormal choice of an irrational ruler. By doing so, the continuing legacies of the US-Korean War and the Cold War – the fact that there was no peace treaty ending the Korean War, only an armistice holding a fragile cease-fire, and that Korea remains divided with 27,000 American troops stationed in South Korea – do not inform the way *Rimjin-gang* reports on North Korea to its detriment.

A Question of Form: "Reports by North Korean Journalists in North Korea"?

During the NYU presentation, Ishimaru intensified the impact of the print media by showing video footage recorded in North Korea. A memorable scene showed people being loaded onto a truck (Ishimaru explained that this was a police vehicle, which was being used to ferry people to the market), when a middle-aged woman got in an altercation with the police officer on the scene. The woman talked back very aggressively shouting, "Who do you think you are? (niga mŏndae)," shoving the officer in full uniform. The scene is captured by a still image reproduced in the magazine with the following caption: "A truck driver and his female partner fiercely protest the bribes demanded by a policeman… The image speaks to the people's open backlash against authority and the weakening of the Kim Jong-il administration." (294) Ishimaru interprets the episode as a sign that people were "learning to speak out," using the market economy to feed themselves, no longer dependent on the ration system. "What allowed the North Korean government to exert tight control over the daily lives of its people was the state's food rationing system, which taught everyone to remain subservient as long as they were fed." (15) With a broken system, people were no longer compliant, so Ishimaru claims throughout the magazine.

But, why assume that a woman shoving a police officer in uniform is evidence of recent breakdown in authority? Do we know that this kind of interaction in North Korea was not possible in earlier decades? In South Korea, for example, it is quite common to see older women and men chiding and talking back to police officers as they would talk to their own children because many of them are indeed young men, fresh out of school. Even if the interpretation of the scene is coming from the North Korean informant, it is common knowledge that the "native" perspective does not have privileged access to the truth. Indeed the fallacy of a project like *Rimjin-gang* lies in believing that it has a better grasp of what is going on inside North Korea because the information is coming from within. The magazine opens with the statement, "No one can report on a nation better than its own people." (3) This is not as self-evidently true as one might presume. Some of the most common East Asian proverbs instruct how a frog in a well knows little about how to place itself in a larger context, and it is undeniably the darkest just under the lamp where its own shadow is cast. Indeed, the magazine itself acknowledges potential for inaccuracy among North Koreans – a comment about Kim Jong-il's family during an interview is corrected by a footnote with the statement that "much of the rest of the hearsay conveyed in this comment is incorrect." (313)

Furthermore, language itself mediates the way we understand the issue. For example, whether North Koreans abroad are referred to as migrants, refugees, escapees (Ishimaru's term), defectors, or border-crossers colors the way one understands the nature of their status. Escapee implies that one is running from something and the same is true of refugee. Defector has political overtones with reminiscences of the Cold War divide. Migrant and border-crosser are less saturated with overtones, emphasizing the physical movement of those in question. In South Korea as in the United States, there are thousands of migrant workers looking for work and a better life, but no one thinks to call them refugees or escapees precisely because it is not their plight or the reasons for their migration (i.e. globalization of the labor market) that is of any immediate geopolitical interest. In fact, they are seen as opportunistic at best and at worst, a nuisance that disrupts the stability and integrity of one's society. By contrast, North Koreans leaving their homeland are visible as victims in need of rescue because North Korea is

already characterized as an evil regime. If 90% of border-crossers return to North Korea as Ishimaru submits, then it makes more sense to look at the reasons for their movement back and forth rather than focusing unilaterally on what they may be fleeing from. This brings us to the question of what then are the motivations for North Koreans working with Asia Press.

North Koreans in China

Motivations and incentives for North Koreans are likely varied and diverse, not always as heroic as one might be tempted to attribute to dissidents. According to Ishimaru, six North Koreans are currently working with him, and they are guaranteed a subsistence of $300-400 monthly pay (no small amount in North Korean perspective) regardless of how much information they are able to provide. Ishimaru conjectured that they may be motivated by a desire to work for democracy and human rights in North Korea, economic benefits from contact with foreigners, or perhaps by having something to do amidst a "boring, meaningless" existence especially for men in their 30s and 40s who are mostly unemployed since 80% of factories are not operational. In other words, there is a mixture of pragmatic incentives, political motives, and more mundane attempts at thrill-seeking. It is difficult to extrapolate from these motivations that "there is a will among North Koreans to criticize their government and reach out to the world," as Joanna Chiu writes in *The Nation*.

Such problems of mediation (admittedly more a scholarly preoccupation than a journalistic one) do not hinder *Rimjin-gang* from presenting anecdotal stories as generalized fact. There is very little outward expression of any serious reflection on whether information coming from North Korean informants can indeed be considered "journalism by North Koreans in North Korea" if the information is being passed through multiple channels – from China to Seoul, then on to Japan, with editing done in Seoul and translation done in Japan. "Authentic" stories still need context and analyses in order to make sense of them, and it is not clear who is providing such an interpretive framework or whether the one provided is an adequate one.

Rimjin-gang is patently different from something like the samizdat under the Soviet Union, written, edited, and distributed by dissidents like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, precisely because *Rimjin-gang* is edited and distributed through Asia Press based out of Japan. Of the eight North Korean "journalists" featured in the magazine, only one (Ryu Kyung-won) is credited with written articles, while the rest seem to have either provided photos or videos of interviews. Moreover, Ryu's profile at the end of the magazine indicates that Ryu left North Korea in 2003 and currently resides in China from where he does his reporting. While those providing materials for the magazine seem to hold extensive debriefing sessions with the editorial staff in order to provide explanations for the materials they have gathered, they seem neither to write the accompanying text nor do they determine what is in fact used or left out of the final publication. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to know in what sense they are identified as journalists to substantiate the claim that *Rimjin-gang* is a collection of "reports by North Korean journalists within North Korea."

Nonetheless, the central thrust of the magazine is that "citizen journalists" are reporting from within North Korea, distancing itself from defector testimony for the many issues that have been raised against it in recent years. Throughout the Cold War, defector testimony from the Soviet bloc provided a two-dimensional view at best, and we now know about the problems with Iraqi defectors, who provided the rationale for the invasion of Iraq based on falsified claims of Iraqi production of "weapons of mass destruction". Likewise, many claims made by defectors from North Korea have proven to be false, due in large part to the fact that the South Korean government had a policy of paying more to defectors that provided testimony deemed to have national security value.

How different are *Rimjin-gang* reports from defector testimony? This is a key question in evaluating *Rimjin-gang* because basic ethics of journalism are not followed and indeed cannot be followed with respect to North Korea due to security concerns. For example, people are quoted without permission and quotes often cannot be attributed to any specific person while photos and interviews are recorded without consent. Such procedures are required, not only to protect the "reporters," but also those being recorded so that they cannot be accused of knowingly providing information to the outside world. The magazine, thus, incorporates multiple genres such as commentaries by the editorial staff in the style of an op-ed piece, transcripts of interviews, transcripts of secretly recorded conversations, and photographs with short captions and footnotes. Under such circumstances, how much fact-checking can be undertaken? To what extent can the materials in *Rimjin-gang* be legitimately called journalism?

The Return of the "Sick Man of Asia"

To his credit, Ishimaru does not support a policy toward North Korea based on threats. He sees *Rimjin-gang* as playing a small role toward positive change by nurturing "citizen reporters" within North Korea to provide a real picture of life inside North Korea to the reading public in key states like South Korea, Japan, the United States, China, and Russia. While I do not doubt the sincerity of his intentions, his analysis of the problem betrays a lack of historical and structural considerations. He compares North Korea to a sick patient suffering from a disease:

> "North Korea is gravely ill. The international community is aware that the symptoms have developed, but cannot pinpoint the name of the illness, or guess where the focus of the disease lies. A clinical examination cannot take place, because the patient refuses to disrobe to allow doctors to feel for a pulse. It tries to get by with blood transfusions but seems unlikely to be cured through self-help. Clearly, unless North Korea is properly treated, the symptoms will only worsen. The state must open up, revive its economy, improve its human rights record, and become like any other state." (16)

He warned that the wrong treatment could make matters worse, which is why he sees the importance of training North Korean journalists to be able to convey what the symptoms are within the country.

For those familiar with the history of 19th century imperialism, similarities to discourses of the "white man's burden" or the "sick man of Asia" are uncanny. Indeed, analogous arguments were used by Japan to colonize Korea and invade China.[3] Even without historical references, it seems naïve to assume that someone would willingly take one's clothes off for an unknown doctor with no proof of credentials. But perhaps the reputations of potential doctors are not entirely unknown for North Koreans. Memory of the Japanese colonial period and the Korean War (known as the Fatherland Liberation War in North Korea for having fought against American imperialism) are never far behind even if the generation that had direct experience of these events is dwindling.

There is no question that North Korea has problems. The difficult question is who has the right and the responsibility to find a "cure." Who are the doctors? Ishimaru believes that the doctors are South Korea, Japan, the United States, China, Russia, and not just the governments of these states but experts and researchers from various fields. In some respects, Ishimaru is not far off from proponents of engagement in emphasizing multilateral strategies like the Six-Party Talks or direct people-to-people engagement in training North Koreans to become journalists, technicians, and managers. According to Ishimaru, media reports about the human rights situation in North Korea have already had a positive impact. He reports that there is evidence of decline in beatings by the police and provisions of defense lawyers as a result of international pressure. He points out that change is not possible in North Korea without pressure. I agree. But, this is true of anywhere else. Change is always preceded by pressure of varying kinds. The difficult question again is what kind of pressure and by whom?

I think it best to use *Rimjin-gang*'s own informant, Kae Myung-bin's views as a starting point. He uses the illness metaphor as well but to different effect: "It is a sickness that cannot be cured by one or two people's efforts over one or two days. We must all change our thinking so that we are able to analyze our own fields, have debates, and reach party and societal agreement. But in our present situation none of that is possible." (73) He does not explicitly go into what this "present situation" is but a few pages later, he refers to the "military-first-era economic system [that] is an emergency system in which the entire state can be mobilized by the Defense Commission, meaning that the whole country is perpetually run in a state of war." (76)

In order for true journalism to flourish in North Korea that Ishimaru sees as so critical for diagnosis of the problems there, the state of war in North Korea must come to an end. This year, marking the 60th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, must serve to remind us of the continuing costs of the "forgotten war." It is time for a peace treaty, long overdue. Normalization of relations with the United States and with Japan are critical in moving North Korea out of a state of war. This is the first step so that North Koreans can "form a space with the freedom to study and debate." In the words of Kae Myung-bin, "If we can gather together all the opinions of our people, all of their knowledge and power, I believe our society can arrive on our desired path and start a historical movement. The main players in this country are we, the people." (83) It is time to give this vision a chance. *Rimjin-gang* can be a useful venue by which such visions of debate of different opinions and perspectives can have free reign. However, without the proper historical context to make sense of North Korea's current condition and a concerted effort to present a diversity of views, it can only stifle such a vision, perpetuating the tragic state of war.

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Notes

[1] *Rimjin-gang: News From Inside North Korea* (Osaka: Asiapress Publishing, 2010) All subsequent page references from the magazine are given in the body of the text in parentheses.

[2] After the fourth issue of *Rimjin-gang*, North Korean defectors in South Korea involved in the magazine launched their own magazine with funding from the US National Endowment for Democracy. This publication titled, Imjingang, is thus more openly identified with defector sources. According to Ishimaru, *Rimjin-gang* declined NED funding in order to maintain journalistic integrity. The first English edition is a translation of selections from the first four issues published in Japanese.

[3] When asked about such overlap, Ishimaru relayed anecdotes of the kind of jokes North Koreans tell him. He reports to have heard North Koreans say, "Oh, if only colonial rule had never ended" or "If only North Korea could become part of China's Yanbian Prefecture." It is difficult to know what to make of these "jokes" without fully knowing the circumstances under which they were told, but the anecdotes reveal more about the kind of people Ishimaru is working with than North Koreans as a whole.

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