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The Power of Storytelling and Memory in Ung's *First They Killed My Father*, Haitiwaji's *How I Survived a Chinese 'Reeducation' Camp*, and Park's *In Order to Live*

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Introduction

Storytelling not only helps others understand the author's experiences, but it can also help the readers navigate their own experiences, as well. Memoirs by people who are survivors of genocides, for example, permit the writer to offer a personal explanation of an event, and that explanation brings the event to life. There is no way to simplify the horrors these people endured and the memories they carry with them. Storytelling, then, is significant for many different reasons. Often, people's individual experiences get lost behind statistics and broad descriptions of what occurred. However, the brave individuals who share their survivor stories provide personal insight into these atrocities. The choice to share one's survival story is no easy decision to make, but publishing these memoirs gives a voice to both survivors and those who did not survive these genocides.

This thesis studies memoirs by survivors of the Cambodian Genocide (1975-1979), the on-going genocide of the Uyghur Muslims in Chinese reeducation centers, and the prison-state of North Korea. These current or past genocides share the goal of controlling certain groups of people or eliminating those the government cannot control. Fortunately, there are the lucky few who survive these genocides, and some have published memoirs about what they experienced. Loung Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father* shares what her life was like when the Cambodian Genocide occurred when she was just five years old. At this young age, Ung already had to face the hardships of war. From never having enough food to eat to the constant fear of her loved ones being brutally killed, Ung was robbed of a childhood, and her memoir traces her journey from innocence to experience. Gulbahar Haitiwaji's memoir *How I Survived a Chinese 'Reeducation' Camp* exposes the Uyghur Genocide occurring in China at this moment. Haitiwaji is one of the few Uyghurs to tell the story of what is happening in the Xinjiang region of China.

Currently, Uyghurs in Xinjiang are being forced into Chinese reeducation camps with the purpose of completely stripping them of their culture. After a trip to visit her family, Haitiwaji found herself trapped in one of these detention centers and her memoir describes both what she experienced and what it was like to see the place she once called home be destroyed. Similarly, Yeonmi Park's memoir, *In Order to Live*, shares her life in and escape from North Korea. Park lived in North Korea until she escaped at the age of thirteen. In North Korea, she had no freedom at all. Every day she was being manipulated by government propaganda and was told the sacrifices she was making were for the betterment of the whole country. However, she was one of the many starving children who was often left to take care of herself. At thirteen she and her mother began their two-year journey to South Korea. However, all of their problems did not suddenly disappear once they left North Korea.

Ung, Haitiwaji, and Park faced some of the most traumatic experiences one can imagine, and Ung and Park were only children at the time. Their stories detail what they and their families endured: starvation, torture, and family separation. Though each of these women faced different events at different points in time, what they share is perseverance, bravery, and the will to survive. Memoirs like Ung's *First They Killed My Father*, Haitiwaji's *How I Survived a Chinese 'Reeducation' Camp*, and Park's *In Order to Live* emphasize the power of storytelling and give the reader a better understanding of the events being depicted, and how these events affected those lucky enough to survive.

Chapter 1: The Importance of Memory in Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father*

During the Cambodian Genocide (1975-79) the Khmer Rouge was responsible for the torture, starvation, and killing of around two million people. Survivor stories of this genocide, like Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father*, recount the horrific events that occurred in Cambodia over a four-year period. Told from the perspective of a five-year-old, Ung's story only further proves how inhuman the actions of the Khmer Rouge were. From the constant starvation she and her family faced, to the brutal murders of the people she loved most, Ung's life was completely changed at the age of five. At the beginning of the memoir, the reader sees Ung as any other child, playing with friends, going to school, and getting into the typical fights one does with their siblings. She is seen getting ready for the New Year's celebration with her family, living the ordinary life of a child. However, within days, her life is completely changed, and the reader follows Ung both on her physical and emotional journey as she experiences war. This memoir does not just list factual information about what occurred during this war; rather, it allows the reader to get to know the people, Ung and her family, and the pain their deaths brought to those still alive. From brutal killings to the abuse people faced, the atrocities experienced would be difficult for anyone to have to witness, but especially challenging for a young child. Ung's memoir, *First They Killed My Father*, brings forth a whole new perspective of war and the lasting effects it can have on people. Survivor stories present a whole new perspective, allowing the reader to not only understand the physical implications war has on people, but the emotional struggles as well.

The Cambodian Genocide, according to Sydney Schanberg, was responsible for the brutal deaths of 1.5 million Cambodians (Schanberg 35). Through disease, starvation, extraneous labor and mass killings, almost twenty percent of Cambodia's population was killed after the

takeover of the Khmer Rouge (35). Pol Pot was the leader of this genocide with the purpose of enforcing his new regime. In 1962, Pol Pot began his takeover without the knowledge of others, titling themselves the Khmer Rouge or the Cambodian Reds (Kiernan ix). After countless civil wars fought against Prince Sihnouk's Kingdom of Cambodia and Lon Nol's Khmer Republic, Pol Pot finally gained full control of the country in April of 1975, where he established a new regime in Cambodia (ix-x). He viewed urban classes as "traitors contaminated by foreign influences and ethnic groups" (x). When the takeover first began, the Khmer Rouge seemed to be peaceful with a possibility of there being a potential peaceful reconciliation (Schanberg 35). However, this all quickly changed as everyone was forced into the countryside with the threat of being killed if they did not comply with these orders.

Pol Pot's purpose in forcing people out of the city was to erase any potential resistance to this new regime. This included any senior officers left from the defeated Lon Nol army, former members of the Phnom Penh government, educated classes, and monks (Schanberg 35). People were torn away from their old lives and forced into labor camps. As seen in *First They Killed My Father*, families became separated from one another, and children were taught to go against their own parents. The Khmer Rouge were constantly attempting to perpetuate propaganda onto people, especially children, promoting their new regime. In this new regime, there were no schools, money was abolished, and any type of media no longer existed. There were no newspapers, television stations, or radios reporting what was happening (Schanberg 35). Any freedom people had prior to the takeover was completely gone, causing them to be unable to express themselves at all. It is through survivors' stories like Ung's that people are better able to understand how the aggressions, violence, and crimes of the Khmer Rouge affected each individual person.

The personal experiences further an understanding of the Cambodian Genocide. Like many families, Ung's family was unexpectedly torn apart when she was just five years old. Being forced to face grueling confusion and hysteria, Ung's Pa remains a constant support for their entire family. He provides constant guidance and support to all those around him, reassuring them during a time when he likely does not have all the answers. Eventually, due to his status of having worked for the government, her father is eventually taken away by soldiers and killed. While they are never explicitly told of his death, they can only hold onto hope of his survival for a short period in this time of war. His presence was so strong that even after he died Ung would still find herself talking to him to comfort her when thrown into difficult situations. She was able to take her memory of him to help her fight to survive. While he is alive he attempts to remain strong for everyone else, but this war eventually takes the inevitable toll on him as well. While he was eventually killed by the Khmer Rouge, they were able to emotionally kill him long before that. While he was still alive, she notes how "He seems so serious and sad, and [she wonders] if [she] will ever see [her] fun Pa again" (Ung 49). Ung is often seen remembering what her life was like before with father and all of the fun they used to have playing or going to the movies. Now, her father is no longer the energetic, "fun" father simply because he cannot be that person if he wants his family to survive. Seeing that his family survives this war is his main goal and living in constant survival mode causes him to slowly degenerate from this positive figure to a shell of who he once was.

Children are often the ones to question everything around them and look to the adults in their life for guidance. However, in these instances of war the adults in children's lives are unable to give adequate explanation for what is happening, because they do not even know. When Ung and her family were forced out of their home in Phnom Penh, she is often heard

questioning how much longer their journey would be to their unknown destination and when they could go home. Though struggling and confused, she keeps close to her Pa, someone who remained as constant support to her throughout the memoir, even after he was killed. Her sister, Keav, explains to her that “the soldiers claim to love Cambodia and its people very much,” but this causes Ung to “wonder then why they are mean if they love [them] so much” (22). Even at such a young age, Ung is already able to see the contradictions in what the Khmer Rouge are saying. While they claim one thing, their actions tell another story. Ung is unable to understand “why they are looking at [her] as if [she] is a strange animal, when in reality, [they] look very much the same” (57). This was only the beginning of the confusing propaganda Ung was exposed to in her years during the war, and she was unable to understand why they were being treated like this.

As Ung journeyed through her new life during the war, the pressure she was put under only grew. She was told she needed to completely erase her identity in order to survive. Ung was never given any reason for this: “All [she] knew is that [she is] supposed to act dumb and never speak of [their] lives in the city. [She] can never tell another soul that [she misses] home, that [she wants] to go back to the way things were” (40). Everything Ung’s family does and tells her is to protect her. If people were to know her family’s status, that they had lived in the city or that her father worked for the government, it would put them all at risk of being brutally killed. This secrecy is for their own protection, but it is important to point out the immense struggles that come with not talking about their past. She is forced to suppress her feelings and emotions and is never to talk about how she misses her past life. Often, it brings people comfort to talk about their emotions when feeling this way. However, Ung has been taught that if she does not suppress this information, she or others in her family could be killed.

This memoir gives the reader a closer look into how war can completely change a child and tear away their innocence. Ung had to quickly forget her childhood and live in survival mode for years. It is hard to believe that the child from the beginning of the memoir is the same person at the end. At one point, during the start of the war, Ung points out, “Yesterday I was playing hopscotch with my friends. Today we are running from soldiers with guns” (27). Within days, Ung’s life completely changed. She now has to live in constant fear for her and her family’s lives. She often goes to sleep starving, not knowing when she will eat next. She fears accidentally being the one to share her family’s secret with others, causing her to close herself off from all other relationships and friendships that are necessary for children. As time went on, she began to realize “Laughter has become a distant memory and [she] cherishes the echo of a different time” (133). All she can do is remember her past and move forward with those memories. Being forced to forget her past life brings its own challenges. While she may cherish those memories, the thought of the joy her past life brought her can also be difficult to think of as well.

The Khmer Rouge constantly attempted to infiltrate Ung and other children's minds with propaganda. The “base people,” often referred to in the memoir are the ones who already lived in these villages before the revolution began and are viewed by Angkar as “model citizens because many have never ventured out of their village and have not been corrupted by the West” (57). These people are looked to as role models to those coming from the city, like Ung and her family. Met Bong is the leader of Ung’s camp where she is being trained to be a soldier and she always tells Ung “Pol Pot loves [her], but [Ung knows] he does not” and she explains that “Maybe he loves the other children, the uncorrupted base children with the uncontaminated parents,” but she points out that she “came to this camp under false pretenses and lies. They

think [she is] one of them, one of the pure base children” (142). Again, this is an instance of Ung’s ability to call out the hypocrisy of what has happened to her country. The soldiers and Met Bong attempt to perpetuate this idea of “love” to children. Having come from a family and life filled with love, Ung knows this not to be true. However, some children, unfortunately, do not have these memories to allow them to see all that is wrong going on around them.

Ung is always surrounded by propaganda attempting to convince her and everyone else of something that is not true. At one point Met Bong is yelling to the crowd of hundreds of children: “‘Angkar is all powerful! Angkar is the savior and liberator of the Khmer people!’ The one hundred children erupt into four fast claps, their fisted arms raised to the sky, and scream ‘Angkar! Angkar! Angkar!’” (125). Met Bong continues to tell them, “‘You are the children of the Angkar! Though you are weak, the Angkar still loves you. Many people have hurt you, but from now on the Angkar will protect you!’” (126). Children are easily influenced, especially by the adults around them. These kids could be too young to remember their lives from before the war, making them more willing to adapt to their new environment. Many children, being orphans with no other family left, might be so scared for their lives that the need for a trusting adult could be enough reason for them to believe all that is being said. All Ung knows is that it is the same people who claim to love her that killed her father, and that is enough to not believe what she is being told. It is these memories that keep her alive because she does not automatically believe everything that is being said to her.

At just five-years-old, Ung is being taught how to be a soldier by the Khmer Rouge. When at this new training camp, she must go by a new name in order to hide her true identity. At this camp she is called Sarene and claims to be an orphan whose family was killed. When being trained by Met Bong, Ung is brought forward to demonstrate for the rest of the children how to

hold a rifle. Met Bong explains to the children that ““The rifle is easy to shoot. Anyone can learn to use them - even a child can shoot it,”” and then she hands the rifle to Ung. The rifle “hangs on [her] back a foot from the ground, its butt bouncing, lightly on [her] calf. ‘Obviously, it is too long for Sarene to carry this way,’” Met Bong points out, using Ung’s new name (139). Though Ung has been through so much, she is still just a child, not even taller than the rifle she is being forced to learn to use to fight with. Met Bong “puts the rifle on [her] hand, which is heavy, and [she] cradles it against [her] chest because [her] fingers are not long enough to wrap around its stock” (142). At the beginning of this memoir, Ung was only five years old, playing games with her friends, and now she is forced to learn to fight in a war she and many of the adults in her life cannot even comprehend. This image of a young girl standing with a rifle as big as her that she is barely able to hold shows the little innocence Ung holds on to. Through all this training, “Met Bong’s voice sounds enthusiastic and jubilant, but [she] feels neither her joy or passion, only [her] hatred for Pol Pot” (139). Not only has this war taken away her childhood, but it has forced her into this hateful mindset. It is this hate that drives her to continue to live. She is often heard talking about seeking revenge for those in her family who have been killed and so she pushes herself to survive in order to do so.

Though living with constant fear and anxiety, Ung’s family is always making sacrifices for one another. They might be putting their own life at risk doing so, but they are always willing to help each other. This is especially seen through food. One of the greatest hardships people were faced with was starvation and never having enough food to remain healthy. After their father was killed, Ung’s brother, Kim, risks his life to steal corn from the fields for the family. He feels “he has no choice” but to be brave, especially when he sees his starving siblings as they cry for more food that their mother is unable to provide. Kim “doesn’t know how long [Geak,

their youngest sister,] will live if he doesn't do this. . . The images fuel his anger, pushing him nearer and nearer to the cornfields" (116). Since their father has been killed, Kim feels he has no other choice but to take on these fatherly roles and provide for his family. Knowing the possible repercussions of doing so, Kim is still willing to steal food to keep his family alive. At only twelve years old, Kim is making sacrifices for his family when in reality he is still just a child as well. When thinking of their father, "there is such pain in his heart and the burden is too heavy to handle. He cannot run away from it. His pining for our father is unbearable, but he is the man of the house now and cannot speak openly of his suffering" (116). By taking on this new fatherly role, Kim can no longer worry about himself because he has his mother and siblings to think about.

While Kim was able to steal food for his family for several nights, it was only a matter of time before the Khmer Rouge discovered what he was doing. When caught, the Khmer Rouge screams at him, calling him a "bastard" and a "worthless shit" for "stealing from the Angkar" (117). As they continue to scream and beat him for taking the corn, he "whimpers as blood drips out of his mouth. But this isn't enough for them. More hands and more legs continue their assault on him. The same questions of him and the same answers given" (117). Now with his father gone and his older siblings either dead or sent away, Kim feels responsible for caring for everyone. This entire time he is attempting to be brave for his mother and his family. It was almost as if being able to sneak out each night brought Kim a sense of pride at a time when he is unable to help his family. They are left with very little freedom to do anything for each other when they are constantly controlled. However, after being caught, everyone is brought back to the reality that "He is no longer a boy trying to be the man of the house, trying to be brave, wanting to take care of his family. He is just a twelve-year-old boy now, looking into the barrel

of a rifle” (118). Beaten, bruised, and bleeding, Kim represents the extent to which people were willing to go to help their family, knowing what would inevitably happen to them. People of all ages were victims to the violence of the Khmer Rouge. No exceptions were made and children, even babies, faced both this torture and being brutally killed. However, knowing the potential consequences did not stop the extent to which people of all ages were willing to risk their lives to help their families survive.

Though just a child, Ung is faced with immense guilt. Everyone in her family is doing everything they can to not only survive but to help each other, as well. However, with these sacrifices comes guilt. For example, while it was no easy task for Kim to gather the extra food for his family, it was also challenging for them as well, because each time he would leave, they would “wait with fear and guilt for his return. Each night, it seems to take him longer and longer” (115). They all know the risk of sending him off to steal food, but there are also risks to him not doing so as well. Everyone in the family was facing extreme starvation that was slowly killing them. After Kim was caught and beaten for “stealing” the corn, Ung was seen talking to her deceased father, saying, “Pa, don’t let Kim die. Pa, I feel so bad, all this for corn to feed us. Pa, I am bad because I am also sad that we have no corn...Pa, I am going to kill them all. I am going to make them suffer” (119). This hatred has caused a shift in Ung, wanting to seek revenge for all that has been done to her and her family. While what she and her family feared most with Kim’s actions happened, she still cannot help but also know this will put an end to the extra food her family would get.

When her family begins lacking food security, Ung sneaks rice from her family’s rice container, but experiences immediate regret after doing so. In reality, the small amount of food she took would not have made much of a difference for the rest of her family, but every time she

sees her youngest sister cry out for food, she always remembers that she stole food that could have soothed her. Later on, when visiting her mother and Geak, she cannot help but look at Geak and “choke back [her] sadness” and see “there is always sadness and hunger in her eyes,” remembering she “stole her food and now [she’s] letting her starve” (149). Ung is also facing starvation, yet she still regrets not being able to help her younger sister. Ung holds on to this regret because she remembers what life was like before the war. She can remember the New Year’s celebrations, time spent with her family, and having her basic needs for living met. Since her sister is so young, she unfortunately does not have any memory of this and “never knew how it felt not to be hungry” (160). Seeing her sister’s brittle nails and frail body causes “pangs of guilt” to “gnaw at [her] stomach” (146). All the events of the war have caused her to have to grow up much faster than any child should ever have to. Ung is only a child as well, yet she still feels responsible for her family’s suffering, when in reality there wasn’t anything she could have done to prevent it. As a child, she should be the one being protected rather than feeling responsible for the suffering of others. Unfortunately, this new regime offers no protection for anyone, even children. No matter how much a person may want to help themselves and others, there is very little they can do. This desire only leaves people feeling helpless because no matter how much they try to aid one another, there is very little that can actually be done.

Memory is something all characters are seen struggling with at any point in the memoir. Often, when going through difficult times it can be a person’s memories that fuel their desire for survival. It can be those memories that bring small moments of joy to a person who is struggling to block out the challenges they are facing. One person doing this is Ung’s older sister, Chou. Chou remembers how things were before the war and “[dreams] of when things are nice again, and [she] can leave all this behind,” while Ung is intent on remembering all the harm that has

been caused to both her and her family (128). Unlike her sister, Ung “[needs] the new memories to make [her] angry to replace the old ones that make [her] sad. [Her] rage makes [her] want to live just to come back and take [her] revenge” (128). Ung is clearly putting up a fight to survive throughout the entire memoir. This urge for revenge is what allows her to survive. To Met Bong and other soldiers, she is seen as a strong soldier ready to fight, but in reality it is her hatred for the enemy that fuels her survival. This is not the case for most children or people around her. Some cannot cope with these major changes and die by starvation, others are killed by the soldiers, and some are unable to continue living under these conditions without their loved ones and die by suicide. While memories can bring comfort to those fighting for their lives, to others they can be the biggest burden when they have lost everything they once loved.

When just learning about the events of the Cambodian Genocide, it can be challenging to truly understand the effects it had on people. However, putting names and faces to the people who experienced these horrific events allows readers to have a much deeper understanding of what occurred. Later on in the memoir, Ung explains that, “As my family talks about the war, I pretend to have no memory of it. They do not ask me about my experiences. In our culture, it is enough that the oldest child relates the family’s story. Children are not asked for opinions, feelings, or what they individually endure” (213). Being encouraged by her culture to keep her story to herself can be an isolating experience. This constant repression of feelings, emotions and experiences can become overwhelming to anyone, especially a child. Ung does “not volunteer information about [her] indoctrination as a soldier, [and] escape from being raped...For a long time [she] needed to hold on to the memories because they made [her] angry. [Her] rage made [her] strong and resilient. Now, however, enclosing the memories in [her] heart and mind is unendurable” (213). The suppression of emotions will eventually lead to a person’s breaking

point, no matter how old they may be. The memories she had were what pushed her to continue fighting. Though her mother, father and so many of her siblings had been killed, she was not going to let this stop her from surviving. It was their lives that pushed her to fight for her own, in order to seek the revenge she was often seen looking for.

Ung's captivating memoir provides the reader with a glimpse of what her life was like during the war. From being completely uprooted from her home in Phnom Penh, to having the physical and emotional implications of war, Ung had her childhood taken away from her at only the age of five. Not only was she forced into this life, but she had to witness the ones she loved experience it as well. By sharing her story, she is bringing to life both the people who survived and did not survive this genocide. Ung even chooses to include images of her family from before the war, allowing her to further bring these people to life and give a closer look into the lives this war destroyed. When reading this memoir, people are no longer a number among the 1.5 million lives lost, but rather their individual stories bring them to life. Sharing traumatic experiences as described throughout this memoir is no easy task. It is very difficult for anyone to speak about such traumatic topics, like starvation, rape, and mass killings. However, by courageously sharing her own story, Ung is not only giving readers a deeper understanding of the Cambodian Genocide, but also giving a voice to those who did not survive.

Chapter 2: Resistance in Gulbahar Haitiwaji's *How I Survived a Chinese "Reeducation" Camp*

An estimated one to two million people are being held in Chinese detention centers for simply being Uyghur Muslims. China's goal in all of this is to slowly eliminate the Uyghur ethnicity. Currently, there are very few memoirs sharing people's stories from these "reeducation" camps. Gulbahar Haitiwaji's memoir *How I Survived a Chinese "Reeducation" Camp* shares her own experience in these detention centers. Though fearful of the repercussions she or her family members in China could face, Haitiwaji still chooses to share her story to bring light to the current genocide occurring in China that is going unnoticed by the international community. What started as a family visit to Xinjiang led Haitiwaji to her being detained for almost three years. Prior to this, Haitiwaji and her family had relocated to France. While her daughters and husband decided to obtain refugee statuses, stripping them of their Chinese identity, Haitiwaji, unable to part with her past life, chose to apply for a residence permit that was renewable every ten years, which allowed her to go back to China and visit her family and the place she once called home. Unfortunately, the last visit she took, on November 21, 2016, with a projected return date of December 11, 2016, led to almost three years of being detained in Chinese reeducation facilities, unable to return to her family. Haitiwaji's memoir goes through her three-year journey in these detention camps, from how she arrived there to the torture she faced. The reader also gets a closer look into what her life was like when living in China and what her life was like after leaving the camp. Haitiwaji's memoir *How I Survived a Chinese "Reeducation" Camp* offers a closer look to the current genocide of Uyghur culture occurring in China that so few people have been able to share survival stories of.

China has been forcibly placing Uyghurs in reeducation camps, detention centers, and using them as slave labor. China has attempted to completely erase the entire Uyghur culture by

destroying burial sites, closing mosques, and criminalizing any expression of faith (Quinn). There is a clear imbalance between the Han Chinese and Uyghurs. After 1978, there were many Han Chinese migrants going to Xinjiang, a primarily Uyghur dominated location, yet many of the Han migrants had no interest in learning Uyghur language, dress, food, and social customs (Zang 2174). The Han Chinese have always maintained this sense of cultural superiority to the Uyghurs and show no regard to the Uyghur culture, even to the point of them dominating the political leadership running Xinjiang, with no Uyghur representation (2174). The Han Chinese want to assimilate Uyghur Muslims into their Han Chinese culture. They go as far as to force sterilization and the use of birth control to reduce Uyghur birth rates. From 2015 to 2018, birth rates decreased by 84% in Xinjiang's two major Uyghur regions (Quinn). China's main purpose with these reeducation camps is to eliminate the Uyghur people and their culture. There are several policies that prohibit cultural practices, religious beliefs, and the different social aspects that make up the Uyghur identity (Roberts 2). The conditions within these camps are ruthless. From being forced to study the Chinese language for hours, to constantly having to listen to Chinese propaganda, every freedom has been stripped away from the Uyghur people. The Chinese claim that the purpose of these centers is to eliminate the "terrorist," "extremists," and "separatists," when their main goal is to erase the Uyghur culture (2). While China has aimed to claim the purpose of camps is to eliminate terrorism, their classification as "terrorists" in the early 2000s was politically motivated. It was started by the People's Republic of China to classify one small Uyghur exile group in Afghanistan, but this classification had consequences for Uyghurs everywhere (63).

People living in Xinjiang live in constant fear of being sent to one of these camps at any time. Due to this fear, no one really speaks of the camps to anyone, even to those they trust most,

let alone criticize them. The Uyghur people are constantly being watched. Every Uyghur person is under surveillance and is constantly being tracked. There are frequent checkpoints, police stations everywhere, and cameras watching their every move. Uyghurs have no privacy to the point that spyware is installed on each of their phones. This allows the government to be able to track where people are, to monitor communication, to restrict any manner of daily freedoms, all with the intention of finding and punishing any form of disloyalty (Roberts 3). Though China has been reluctant to speak about these camps, Haitiwaji explains that “China abruptly broke its silence. In October 2018, it acknowledged the existence of centers for ‘transformation through education,’ but rejected wholesale the accusation that these camps violated human rights, claiming instead that these were ordinary ‘vocational training centers’ aimed at fighting terrorism, Islam extremism, and unemployment” (Haitiwaji 128). However, the reality of these statements was much different than the image China was attempting to portray.

There are many different aspects to Uyghur culture that make up a person's identity, but one major part of Uyghur culture are gatherings that emphasize the importance of poetry, music, and dance, referred to as Uyghur Meshreps (Pawan et al. 81). These gatherings often combine singing, music, and dance that are traditionally held on the harvest, holidays, festivals, weddings, and different coming of age ceremonies (82). Dance is specifically highlighted in these traditional gatherings since they believe it can eliminate fatigue, emotional distress, and bring together the mind and body. Dance is used as a way to bring people together in the Uyghur culture and allows them to make connections with one another. Dance is even often talked about in Haitiwaji's memoir. First, she begins reflecting on the joyous celebration that occurred when her daughter was married and how dance was one way people were unified prior to them leaving China. One of the major priorities of the Chinese government is to eliminate the Uyghur culture

yet dance still remains as a method for Haitiwaji and the other prisoners to come together in a time where maintaining any form of hope seems impossible, proving that eliminating a whole culture would not be easily done.

Time spent in isolation will inevitably take a toll on anyone, especially when left with so many unanswered questions. The memory of Haitiwaji's family and previous life in China is what allowed her to push through the first days of confinement. Haitiwaji noticed both the mental deterioration of herself and fellow prisoners, and as time went on, "this conscription was wearing away at [their] critical faculties. It distanced [them] from the memories and thoughts that were keeping [them] alive" (90). Being forced into facing the same, isolating environment everyday wears on one's mental state. Gradually, "the faces of Kerim, Gulhumar, and Gulnigar grew blurry" as Haitiwaji became "no longer anything but animals dumbed down by labor" (90). Haitiwaji and her cellmates were treated as bodies, reducing them down to numbers rather than calling them by their actual names. It is important to note that their tactics took a toll on Haitiwaji. She explains that "You can't fight brainwashing forever, even if you think you can. Even if you've fought it with dignity, it sets to work. All desire and willpower desert you. What options do you have left then?" (220). The Chinese authorities attempted to erase their identities, as if they never even existed as Uyghur people. Slowly, as their resilience wore down, so did their ability to maintain their memories of the past, alongside any hope they had for a better future.

Haitiwaji explains many of the different ways China controlled her and the others who were being detained. Specifically, she talks about the vaccines she and other women were forcibly given. If she tried resisting, she would be told that she "must be vaccinated" because she's "fifty years old, [and her] immune system isn't what it used to be. If [she doesn't] do this,

[she] might get the flu” (107). Though it might appear at first that she had a choice to get this shot, she would get it either way. As time went on, many women noticed their menstrual cycles stopped shortly after receiving these “vaccines,” and came to the realization that they were not in fact being protected from the flu but instead were forcibly being sterilized without their consent. This would be violating to any person, but this caused extreme distress to “The younger women, most of whom engaged to be wed, wept and grieved, for they had hoped to start families once they were released from camp” (108). This again makes it difficult to be optimistic about a better future outside of these camps. The lives these women had envisioned for themselves were being destroyed as China attempted to slowly eliminate the Uyghur people.

When Haitiwaji was first put into this detention center, she was already being forced to hear different forms of Chinese propaganda. Haitiwaji tells us that detainees were “taught patriotic songs while standing in formation” and warned by the guards that they ““must learn them by heart, or [they] will be punished”” (80). Through all this propaganda, Haitiwaji fought to never fall victim to the brainwashing she was being subjected to and finally understood “this was brainwashing, whole days spent repeating the same idiotic phrases” (89). Though constantly being subjected to this propaganda she knew she could not mentally succumb to the ideas she was being forced to hear and repeat. She continued to hold onto her memories of her life before, including memories of her family, celebrations, and happiness. These memories are what allowed her to push through her time in the detention center. In a way, it was her memories that allowed her to not be fearful of what was to come and to not be overwhelmed with anxiety about her terrifying situation. Memories allow for survival, especially in order to not go insane in a place like this. However, what began as laughable pages of propaganda slowly turned Haitiwaji into a shell of the person she once was.

Haitiwaji represents the many Uyghurs whose culture means so much to them that having to give it up is unbearable. Choosing to seek refugee status in France when she left China meant she “would never be able to return to Xinjiang,” but this led her to ask: “How could [she] ever say goodbye to [her] roots, to the loved ones [she’d] left behind, [her] brothers and sisters, their children?...Giving up [her] Chinese nationality felt like giving up on [her] too. [She] couldn’t bring [herself] to do it” (39). So, instead she applied for a residence permit that she was able to renew every ten years, allowing her to be able to go back and visit China. The thought of leaving her own family and life behind is so unbearable that she cannot bring herself to do it. Her whole life is in China, family, friends, and the sources of all her memories, making this an extremely challenging decision for her to make. To Haitiwaji, her life in China is her identity and all she has ever known.

Identity and culture shape people and people can feel lost without them. Haitiwaji and the other women’s mental capacities begin to deteriorate when they are completely stripped of their identity. She explains that the reeducation camp “starts out by stripping them of their individuality. It takes away [their] name, [their] clothes, [their] hair. There is nothing now to distinguish [them] from anyone else” (18). No one was allowed to set themselves apart from anyone else, especially in any regard to Uyghur culture. It is through taking away their identity the Chinese are attempting to further brainwash these people. They are trying to erase them as people in order to more easily be able to infiltrate their minds with propaganda. They “were reduced to living like disposable creatures, eternal victims bowed beneath the weight of threats” (87). The Chinese government used fear to gain its power. In these centers, they were no longer treated as human beings, but rather were being falsely accused as criminals and terrorists. Though many remained resilient at fighting against their brainwashing tactics, these constant

interrogations can take a toll on anyone's mindset and make it difficult to believe there will ever be an end to this torture.

The small acts of resistance were necessary for her survival. Haitiwaji quickly learned how to fight to survive in these camps, both physically and mentally. She had to know this system well, making this her "first act of resistance: Learning everything by heart. Not giving them the chance to, or the pleasure of, humiliating [her] with punishment" (59). Haitiwaji faced numerous types of torture in this camp, from being chained to her bed for days on end, to never being able to go back to her home. Any act of defiance pushed Haitiwaji to survive. Her memory might be slowly fading, but her will to live never does. One of the rules was that she was prohibited from praying, but soon enough her "only outlet was prayer. God alone could hear me now" (110). This was one thing she could do that would not lead to punishment. She was able to pray on her own, breaking their rules without facing any consequences. Any time the physical and mental torture she was enduring became overwhelming, "An old idea came back to haunt [her]: [She], Gulbahar Haitiwaji, was innocent. Once upon a time, [she'd] been a loving mother. A passionate wife. A woman who stood on her own two feet, upright and determined, A woman who was alive" (112). These thoughts alone are what allowed her to push through the most difficult times in these centers where she found herself struggling the most mentally.

One way they held onto their culture was through music and dance. Though forbidden, Haitiwaji and her cellmates would find themselves dancing to the imaginary music and, "During these brief respites, our faces, their features worn from waiting, could relax. With a little imagination, [she] could see sequins scintillating on vests, silk wrinkling between the legs of dancers as they leaped from one foot to another, the answering clatter of bracelets on wrists. Yes, with just a little imagination, [She] could relive [her daughter,] Gulhumar's wedding" (67). From

the start of the memoir, Haitiwaji talks about her daughter's wedding and the joy it brought her. At events like this, her life from before was filled with "animated conversations" "laughter" and it was where "the dancing never stops" (21). The wedding brings to their lives the things they loved before: culture, celebration, and family. It is these reminders that allow them to bring small moments of happiness during times they find themselves unable to be hopeful for a better future. At times it is these memories that a person might want to forget because the thought of a happier time might make their current struggles even worse. However, when dancing with one another, they are able to create a community within this detention center at a time when all other aspects of their identity have been taken away.

Haitiwaji is often heard referring to a "secret garden," which is a place within her own imagination she goes to in order to escape the torture she endures on a daily basis. Haitiwaji was put under countless interrogations, accusing her and her family of false crimes and terrorism, yet "Their attempts to break [her] would come to nothing" because in her "secret garden, amid [her] memories, [she'd] dug up a little square of dirt. There [she] planted seeds of [her] resistance" and "[she] would survive the hell that was Baijiantan" (87). These horrible accusations and stressful environment never caused Haitiwaji to cave to what they were saying, and it was this ability that allowed her to both mentally and physically survive in this tortuous environment. In this "garden" she "cultivated happy memories. They reminded [her] where [she] was from. Thanks to them, [she] managed not to be completely overwhelmed" (82). Though she is able to immediately point out how ridiculous the propaganda she is being forced to learn is, when being forced to be subjected to it on a daily basis for the unknown future, it will eventually wear anyone down, no matter how resilient they may be.

Haitiwaji might be the one who is being forced into this reeducation camp, yet she still feels overwhelming guilt while here. She cannot help but think of her family and the worries they are facing in France with her unknown disappearance. Haitiwaji especially faces this guilt when finding out her sister has also been placed in a detention facility. She knew “They’d locked her up because of [her]” and she truly believed “It was [her] fault, and [she’d] have to live with that guilt forever. [She], her ‘terrorist’ sister who’d lived abroad, who was married to a political asylee - without meaning to, [she believed she] brought the wrath of the authorities down on her head. Maybe they were torturing her to make her confess to the ‘crimes’ [she] refused to confess to. [She] refused because [she] hadn't done anything. [Her sister] hadn't done anything either. [They] were both innocent” (96). Associating with someone viewed as a threat could be reason enough for them to be put in one of these camps. Though it is not her fault, Haitiwaji cannot help but feel responsible for her sister's placement. Haitiwaji has spent time in a camp and knows exactly what happens to people here. The thought of this happening to her own sister is unbearable, especially if she was the cause of it.

Though finally being able to leave China may seem undoubtedly exciting for someone who lost her freedom for three years, it still came with its challenges for Haitiwaji. As noted in the beginning, the decision to leave China and move to France was no easy decision for Haitiwaji, and leaving again is yet again no easy task. This time, when she leaves, she knows she will never return, unable to ever see her mother and sisters again in person. When getting ready to leave she “couldn’t bring [herself] to face the fact that soon [she’d] have to say goodbye to [her] mother, [her] sisters, [her] country. Never again would [she] return” (222). Even after all she had been through, she still has a connection to this country, making it even harder to part from the place she always knew as her home. When visiting her mother in the ICU, she describes

Ghulja as a “museum of her childhood” and being back brought “discomforting nostalgia” knowing she would never be able to return to the place she once knew and loved (215).

Obviously being able to leave the restrictive centers China has created and go back to France is something every Uyghur could do. To leave the place she considered home, the place where her family is, was still challenging.

The choice to share her story was not an easy decision. No matter what choice she made there would be negative consequences. Even after returning to France, Haitiwaji still faced repercussions from her time being held in China. First, she carried the fear living in the detention centers caused her to have. Though still able to keep in touch with her mother and sisters, she “still lives with the fear, vast and uncontrollable, that one day she’ll call and there’ll be no answer” and “Just thinking about it makes her stomach knot up” (230). She even questions what will come of her sisters and mother in Xinjiang once the authorities in China learn of her book. However, she does not let these fears prevent her from sharing her story. Instead, she shares her story “like a free woman, determined to turn her trauma and her wounds into strength” (231). Though scary, it can also be empowering to share traumatic experiences. By sharing her story, Haitiwaji can raise awareness to what is happening to countless people in Xinjiang. Even when back in France, it is not just the internal struggles she faces, but she faces repercussions from her own community as well. The small community of Uyghurs she had built in France feared being close to her after her return. They were uneasy, thinking the Haitiwaji’s home could be “bugged” or that China somehow turned her into a spy. They feared what happened to her could happen to them as well.

Haitiwaji is one of few people who have shared their experiences with what is currently happening in China. One reason for this is that these events are so recent that there are so few

survivor stories because this is a genocide that is currently happening. Aside from how recently these events took place, few people share their story because they fear the repercussions of doing so. People fear being put in these camps or risking the status of their family members who currently live in China. However, survival stories like Haitiwaji's provide a deeper insight into what is happening in China, especially on an event that has such little information, let alone firsthand experiences. Haitiwaji is not only educating others on what is happening to the Uyghurs in China, she is taking a major risk in sharing a story that will hopefully lead the way for others to do the same.

Chapter 3: Survival in Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live*

Yeonmi Park spent the first thirteen years of her life in North Korea. She and her family faced the harsh realities North Koreans are forced to endure daily. Park experienced constant starvation and malnutrition, never allowing her to have any of her basic needs met. At only thirteen years old, Park and her mother had to make the difficult decision to leave North Korea and flee to China. However, their new life in China was not any better. Park and her mother were sold and trafficked in China for two years. When finally able to cross the Gobi Desert into Mongolia, they were immediately faced with a soldier who was prepared to send them back to China, but after Park threatened to kill herself, they agreed to send her to Seoul, South Korea instead. No part of this journey was easy, from living in North Korea to her two years of exile in China and Mongolia, and she still faced hardships once in South Korea. But escaping North Korea was something she had to do in order to survive. Park's memoir *In Order to Live* details the harsh realities of North Korean daily life, as well as her brave decision to escape. Through choosing to share her story, Park brings light to the horrific experiences she and many North Koreans are forced to experience.

Between 2000 and 2018, 32,000 North Korean refugees settled in South Korea (Lee et al.). Many North Korean refugees left their country due to severe economic hardship and harsh treatment from the regime. These refugees leave North Korea with a wide range of traumatic experiences, such as imprisonment, separation from family members, and sexual assault. Additionally, the sights North Koreans are forced to witness, such as public executions and shootings, are traumatic on their own (Lee et al.). There is a constant shortage of the basic goods needed for people to survive and millions of people are malnourished and left to starve, yet the rulers of North Korea maintain a life of luxury with all their imported goods from the west

(Choi). The life North Koreans are forced to live leaves people like Park with no option but to escape, making them willing to put their own lives at risk in the hope of a better future outside North Korea. Since the South Korean government considers North Koreans as lawful Korean citizens, many supports are put in place for them. This includes receiving social welfare benefits, like universal health care and public housing. Additionally, defectors are given resettlement packages and free college tuition (“Lost in Paradise”). However, even once these refugees have entered South Korea, their hardships do not disappear. Many refugees have noted how difficult of an adjustment it is getting used to unfamiliar experiences and even still facing prejudice (Lee et al.). The suicide rate for North Korean defectors is three times higher than South Koreans, unemployment rates are four times higher, and incarceration rates are six times higher (“Lost in Paradise”). The experiences North Koreans are forced to endure leave lasting effects on them, even to those who have escaped.

Park never truly was able to have a childhood growing up in North Korea. From never having food security to being constantly left alone, Park was faced with having to take care of herself even though she was still only just a child. At one point, when living in North Korea, Park explains that her mother had to leave her and her sister alone for over a month while she went into the city to look for their father. Before she left, she gave the two girls money for food, but as their mother departed in the train, right away, “Without thinking, [they] spent all the money [their] mother had left for [them] on a small bag of Chinese sandwich cookies and a cup of sunflower seeds” (Park 73). This is a major point in the memoir that highlights how young Park and her sister are. At first when reading this, many might initially have the reaction of thinking how mindless it was for the sisters to spend the little money they were given right away. However, this only highlights how young and immature these girls are and should not have to be

left alone to take care of themselves. Though they are being left to act like adults, this one moment proves that they are still just children who did not plan and save their money for the unknown amount of time their mother would be gone. They did not think of the possible consequences of doing this, rather were just excited to buy some food with the little money their mother left for them.

As time went on, they suddenly began to realize the repercussions of their actions, having little to no food at times. At the moment, spending the money on sandwich cookies and sunflower seeds seemed so exciting for children who rarely got to do this. Weeks had gone by until their neighbor was able to give the starving girls food, and the small amount of rice that was given to them was so memorable that she can now still “close [her] eyes and remember the incredible aroma of that rice, probably the best thing [she had] ever smelled in [her] life. [She had] never had a more delicious meal, or been more grateful for a simple act of kindness” (75). After almost a month of having little to no food to eat, Park and her sister could not be more grateful for this neighbor helping them. Though Park notes this is a “simple act of kindness,” it shows how hungry these children are. This small portion of rice remains a distinct memory to Park when reflecting on her life in North Korea.

When their mother returned, she did not hold back any details of Park’s father’s condition in the detention center. The police “had tortured him by beating one place on his leg until it swelled up so badly he could barely move” (75). It would be difficult for anyone to hear of a loved one in this condition, but it is especially true for a child. Though she did not see her father herself, she still had to hear the graphic details of his condition. Within this short period of time, Park and her sister act like adults and take care of each other on their own and then, when their mother is finally back, they have mature conversations about their father’s health. Park never had

a childhood to begin with because there is not the opportunity for that to ever occur in North Korea.

Park was surrounded by propaganda her whole life in North Korea. No matter where she was, even in her own home, she was always being fed different forms of propaganda promoting North Korea. Each home was even issued their own radio that blared the national anthem every morning with no way of turning it off. It was the only station available, and it was “how the government could control [them] even when [they] were in [their] own home” (66). Each morning it “played lots of enthusiastic songs with titles like ‘Strong and Prosperous Nation,’ reminding [them] how lucky [they] were to celebrate [their] proud socialist life” (66). People had no sense of privacy. No matter where they were they were constantly forcibly being told how happy they should be to be living in North Korea. There was no way to escape these false messages, not even within one’s own home could they hide from this propaganda. Choice is limited to people living in North Korea in every aspect of life, no matter where they may be. Disguising these anthems and songs with titles that seem to promote a united, strong nation, it only further hides the destructive nature of the regime. People lack the necessities to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

Park was constantly hearing the lies of “unity” and the need for everyone to work together for each other, when the government was not helping anyone. They were taught that “Communal labor is how [they] keep up [their] revolutionary spirit and work together as one people. The regime wants [them] to be like cells in a single organism, where no unit can exist without the others. [They] have to do everything at the same time, always” (67). There was no sense of individuality, and the regime was constantly perpetuating these false ideas that what people were doing was for the betterment of the whole country. Instead, people have no freedom

of expression, and are suffering from severe starvation and their every move is under surveillance. Children are some of the most easily influenced people, especially when growing up in North Korea is all they know. Park describes how thirty to fifty thousand children trained for hours to sit on risers and hold up colored squares to create a living mural that glorified the regime (67). It was not until “much later did [she] realize how abusive it was for these children to perform for hours and hours without even a small break to eat or use the bathroom. [They] were taught that it was an honor to suffer for [their] leaders, who had suffered so much for [them]. Given the chance, [she] would have proudly joined them” (67-68). Not only are adults being taught to suffer for their country, but this same mentality is being taught to children, only continuing this cycle of misinformation. Suffering should in no way be connected to honor, yet to Park and many other children, it was.

From a young age, a sense of fear was instilled in Park. Her mother taught her to always be careful, even when it came to her words. She recalls that “As soon as [she] was old enough to understand, [her] mother warned [her] that [she] should be careful about what [she] was saying. ‘Remember Yeonmi-Ya,’ she said gently, ‘even when you think you’re alone, the birds and mice can hear you whisper,’” and though she did not mean to scare her, she “felt a deep darkness and horror inside [her]” (19). Going against the North Korean regime definitely was not encouraged, and the reality was that it was dangerous to do so. Her mother only did this for her own protection, knowing that speaking out against the regime would have dangerous consequences. Park “was taught never to express [her] opinion, never to question anything. [She] was taught to simply follow what the government told [her] to do or say or think. [She] actually believed that [their] Dear Leader, Kim Jong II, could read [her] mind, and [she] would be punished for [her] bad thoughts” (16). Since Park was born in North Korea, she believed these lies. To an outsider,

it might seem ridiculous to believe that someone could read your mind, but to someone, especially an impressionable child, who has known nothing else this mindset could easily be believed. Park was taught that her leaders were like gods, making it even easier for them to control her every move.

At only thirteen years old, Park and her mother had to make the difficult decision to leave North Korea. While this might seem like the obvious choice, Park was risking her life to leave. Even after leaving North Korea, their lives were not automatically better once they entered China. Right away she and her mother were sold to human traffickers and were forced to hear their negotiations. Park recounts that she “will never forget the burning humiliation of listening to these negotiations, of being turned into a piece of merchandise in the space of a few hours” (129). Immediately upon entering China, they were still being treated as objects, not even being considered refugees who had just escaped their country. Instead, they continued to be used. From when they first arrived, the broker attempted to rape Park, but to protect her daughter, her mother told him to take her instead. From the moment they entered China, she and her mother were only viewed as objects, and Park was just thirteen years old. Park writes about how looking back some might not be able to understand why they went along with all of this, but Park explains that they “were caught between fear and hope. [They] were numb, and [their] purpose was reduced to [their] immediate needs” (129). At this point in their journey, all they could think about was how to get away from the border, how to get away from this broker, and find any food to eat (129). While this new stage of life they entered was risky and dangerous, going back to North Korea would be worse. All she knew was that staying in China guaranteed her the abundance of food she never saw in North Korea, and that was enough reason for her to stay in that moment in time.

Though Park was subjected to human trafficking, food remained one of her main priorities. After the negotiations were over, to her surprise Park and her mother were given whole bowls of rice and spicy pickled cucumber. To Park “eating all that rice seemed impossible” because in North Korea she “would have to share her food with others and always leave something in the bowl” (129). In North Korea, she would be considered rude for finishing her food, never mind asking for more. This again goes back to the false sense of unity the regime attempts to perpetuate. Park, a starving young girl, should not be forced into this mindset. She even notes that the apartment she is in has more food in the trash than she would see in one week in her old home. It is important to remember the extreme starvation Park went through in North Korea as just a child. She and her sister at times had very little food. When left alone for long periods of time, they had no idea how to ration their food because they were both only children, and they never knew how long they would be alone for. Park and her mother were just reduced down to objects as their prices were being negotiated, yet she was still very happy with her decision to leave North Korea because this is likely the first time in her life she was being given more than enough food, further proving the immense starvation people are facing in North Korea.

While her mother initially was able to shield Park from witnessing her being raped, the second time she was unable to do so. She watched Zhifang, the broker, as he “threw [her] mother to the ground and [raped] her right in front of [Park], like an animal” and Park “saw such fear in her eyes, but there was nothing [she] could do except stand there and shiver, begging silently for it to end. That was [her] introduction to sex” (130). Being exposed to such graphic assault is difficult for anyone at any age, but it is especially traumatizing to a young girl watching her mother be the victim of this. Eventually Park was separated from her mother, and within days of

her mother being gone Zhifang would attempt to rape her for the first time. She was then sold again to another man named Hongwei, who was the next person who attempted to rape her, and each time she “fought back, kicking and biting and screaming like a madwoman. [She] made so much noise that [she’s] sure it sounded like a murder was taking place in [their] room” (141). Unfortunately, though time after time she fought against him, he eventually convinced her he could reunite her with her mother, find her missing sister, and convince a broker to bring her father to China from North Korea. Though Hongwei was giving Park the illusion of having some sense of choice in this decision, either way she would end up with the same outcome, and “for a long time [she] thought of it as a business negotiation, not rape” (146). In her thirteen-year-old mind, she thought she “had the chance to choose [her] family over [her own pride]” (146). Though Park is just a child herself, she feels like this is her opportunity to save and reunite her family. She is willing to put her own well-being at risk to help others, when in reality she is the one who needs help herself to escape this dangerous situation she is in. She felt that if she were to die now, she would die in shame knowing she could have potentially helped her loved ones. This was yet again another instance where people manipulated her into situations no child should ever have to face.

This journey only forced Park into becoming a shell of the person she once was. As time went on, she “no longer looked like a child, everything that was childlike inside [her] was gone. It was as if the blood had dried in [her] veins and [she’d] become another person” (148). When reunited, Park was unrecognizable, even to her own mother. She was only just surviving. At times she was even willing to kill herself, but she stayed alive, holding onto the hope of being able to save her family, especially when Hongwei presented her with this offer. It came to a point where she was just fighting to stay alive each day in hopes of eventually being able to leave

China. However, this constant fight to survive eventually took a toll on her mentally. She began to notice how miserable she was and no matter how much food she was given here, it would never be able to replace the happiness that her family brought her. Though it was food that made her so happy to be in China when first arriving, she later realized “the material things were worthless. [She] had lost [her] family. [She] wasn’t loved, [she] wasn’t free, and [she] wasn’t safe. [She] was alive, but everything that made life worth living was gone” (142). The human connections people make with one another is what creates a meaningful life. While in North Korea she lacked the basic necessities to keep her physically alive, such as food and water, but now in China, she lacks the emotional necessities to keep her alive. In China she receives plenty of food, but without her family she does not see a point to living without the ones she loves.

Park eventually entered Mongolia, the last part of her journey before arriving in South Korea, but yet again her struggles did not disappear once leaving China. Immediately upon entering Mongolia, Park and the group of people she was with encountered a soldier. Excited, thinking she was finally seeing an end to this journey, she starts to thank this soldier. In response he only laughed in her face, telling them he was going to send them all back to China. Park knew this was essentially a death sentence; she would end up back in North Korea. After this threat, Park told the soldier she would kill herself before going back and “felt for the razor [she] had hidden in [her] belt, ready to pull it out and slash her throat. [She] was completely serious. This was the end for [her],” which quickly changed his mind and instead began their journey to Seoul (202). At this point she should be considered a refugee, yet Park notes she still felt as if she was being treated like a criminal. Though excited to go to South Korea, she still found herself feeling guilty because she was without her sister. She, at this time, still had no idea where her sister was. And, of course, she was sad because her father, who by this point had already passed away, was

not with her either. She felt guilty that she would be able to experience this life of freedom that he never got the chance to have.

Park presents an interesting perspective on her childhood growing up in North Korea, one that might initially be shocking to someone after reading about all her experiences. She explains that she is “most grateful for two things: that I was born in North Korea, and that I escaped North Korea. Both of these events shaped me, and I would not trade them for an ordinary and peaceful life” (3). All of these events formed her into the person she is today. In every aspect of her life, she has shown resilience surviving in all parts of her life. At first, she attempted to suppress these memories, hoping that if she did not think about her past, it never happened. She soon realized, though, that, “as I began to write this book, I realized that without the whole truth my life would have no power, no real meaning” (5). She also recounts how writing about her life allowed her to work through the parts of her past and attempt to make sense of certain parts of her life. Through writing this memoir, she was able to work through a traumatic experience and could possibly act as a way to release anger about all she had to go through.

At the beginning of this memoir Park writes, “As I began to write my own book, I came across a famous line by Joan Didion, ‘We tell ourselves stories in order to live’. . . I understand that sometimes the only way we can survive our own memories is to shape them into a story that makes sense out of events that seem inexplicable” (5). Park describes every aspect of her journey to South Korea. No part of this was easy and each place she made it to only presented new, dehumanizing experiences for her. The reader watches a young girl go through the most unimaginable traumatic experiences no one should ever experience, and even at points see her questioning whether to continue living. Yet somehow Park can bring light to this awful journey she went through. The choice to share one’s difficult experiences is not an easy decision to make,

and Park was even discouraged by her mother at times from doing so. Her mother at points hoped she would stop with all the activism she was participating in out of fear of what the repercussions may be of speaking out about what happened to them. However, her mother soon came to realize that she wanted everyone to know how North Korea is like a prison camp, why they needed to escape, and what is happening to the women in China who do escape. Her mother even asks her: ““if you don’t speak up for them, Yeonmi-ya, who will?” (264). Park and her family know the need for their story to be shared: to raise awareness about what people in North Korea are still being forced to experience today.

Park’s memoir is a story of both mental and physical survival. She notes the willpower she had to survive for the sake of others and the resilience she gained in every aspect of this journey at such a young age. Not only did she demonstrate true resilience in every part of her escape, but she also continues to do this by sharing her story and bringing awareness to hardships people still face in North Korea. No part of her life was easy, and it is especially important to remember how old she is when enduring every part of this journey, a teenager. At times the reader likely forgets how old Park is due to the hardships she had to endure throughout her life. While she was able to make it to South Korea, this is not the case for every escapee. Many are caught and sent back to North Korea, where they await the severe consequences of leaving. Sometimes the consequence is death. However, this yet again shows that anything is better than staying in North Korea. It is either escape and risk your life to do so or stay in North Korea and live a long life of suffering. By sharing her journey to South Korea, Park gives voice to the few people who can escape and those who are not so fortunate.

Conclusion

Whether it is the Cambodian Genocide, the attempt to eliminate the Uyghur Muslims, or the need to control the people of North Korea through torture and starvation, those—like Ung, Haitiwaji, and Park—who are fortunate enough to survive under such horrific conditions share the same trait: the resilience to endure these events and then share their stories. Each of these women could have given up at any time, yet they were willing to endure these horrific events not just for themselves, but for their loved ones as well. It is important to note that surviving was not easy, and each of these authors, at one point or another, questioned their will to live. However, their families gave them a reason to push through. For example, as a child, Ung and her siblings fought to support each other, especially after the death of their father. For Haitiwaji, time away from her family, while in the Chinese detention center, took a toll on her mental health and challenged her will to survive. Lastly, Park was close to the end of her three-year journey to escape when she was almost sent back to North Korea. At this point, she admits to a willingness to kill herself rather than go back to North Korea. However, memories of their families gave them hope for a better future, and that pushed them to fight for their survival.

Each of these women's stories emphasize the need for an identity. All of these women had their cultures destroyed, left with only the memory of their identity. Ung is able to remember her previous life filled with celebrations and saw all this destroyed once forced out of her home in Phnom Penh. Unlike her youngest sister, she can remember the happy moments she and her family shared before the war. Haitiwaji remembers Xinjiang as being her home, where she and her family celebrated her daughter's wedding. She was so tied to her community that letting go of her Chinese citizenship felt like giving up a part of her identity. Park never had the opportunity of creating a sense of community in North Korea because the government made

every effort to prevent her from doing so. Her whole life was focused on survival, never having the chance to enjoy her childhood. At times it is this memory of identity and culture that makes living in these conditions impossible. While the memory of the past can bring joy to people in times of tragedy, knowing what life was once like can also make people feel helpless and lack hope for a better future.

No matter how old each of these authors were at the time of the events that occurred, they had to fight in order to live. It was the memories of their families that gave them the hope they needed to persevere. After surviving these atrocities, the choice to share their story could not have been easy. Because she was one of the younger sisters in her family, Ung worried that it was not culturally appropriate for her to share her and her family's experiences. Haitwaji feared coming forth with her story, since Uyghurs are still being detained in China. She feared for the safety of her family still in China, herself, and for the acceptance of the Uyghurs in her community in France. Lastly, for a long time, Park's mother discouraged her from going public with their story out of fear of the possible repercussions they could face. However, though each of these women could face potential consequences from publishing their stories, they still did so. Few people survive these genocides, and for those that do, the decision to do so is not to make. This allowed them to both work through these traumatic memories and begin to heal, as well as to educate their readers about the realities of life in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, for the Uyghurs under the watchful eye of the Han Chinese, and for the impoverished citizens of North Korea. By telling their stories, these writers give a voice to the people who survived and those who died during these tragedies, allowing their memories to live on.

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