STATISTICAL EXPLORATIONS IN TERRA INCognITA: HOW RELIABLE ARE NORTH KOREAN SURVEY DATA?¹

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Abstract

In fall 2008, the UN co-conducted a census in North Korea. Even before its implementation, doubts were being cast on the reliability of the data it would gather. This article makes use of a 2002 UN household survey to investigate the extent of manipulation by the government at that time. Comparing survey outcomes to refugee surveys conducted in China and South Korea, cross-checking the data with official North Korean data and other surveys conducted in underdeveloped countries, and doing internal consistency checks, this article does not find evidence for manipulation. However, this research does find a certain degree of self-censorship in the household data, since interviews were carried out in the presence of North Korean authorities. This being the case, the 2008 census does not seem to be doomed per se. On the one hand, the government does not seem to have actively manipulated the 2002 data. On the other hand, self-censorship on the part of respondents might have posed a problem in the 2002 data, and is most likely to do so in the 2008 census data as well.

1 Introduction

Since the 1960s, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) has been a statistical terra incognita. As distinct from other countries under communism, the DPRK has made hardly any data—manipulated or not—available to the world. However, in 1989, the government provided some information to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Eberstadt and Banister (1992) were among the few researchers ever to have received permission to cite and use population data from the North Korean government. Data

¹ Research for this article was undertaken at the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Seoul National University.
pertain to the years 1987/88, and were originally made available to the UNFPA in preparation for the 1994 North Korean census, the last before the 2008 census, when the UNFPA technically assisted the government to carry out a national census. That census was officially labelled the 1993 census, but was actually carried out in early 1994, so data in fact pertain to the year 1994 (Eberstadt 2007). More importantly, some doubts have been cast on the reliability of these census data—which, until now, have provided perhaps the most detailed information we have on the North Korean state. Eberstadt and Banister (1992) had already suggested that for reasons of military security, the government did not report a large number of males in its data. This problem of the ‘missing males’ may have distorted the findings of the 1994 census. Considering that North Korea has one of the largest armies in the world—where one out of five males was under arms at that time—one might not even speak of true ‘population data’ but of mere sample statistics.2

Moreover, it is commonly known that states with a command economy often manipulate their data. For instance, in the case of the two Germanies, it has been found that the Eastern, non-democratic half falsified its production data by reclassifying watermelons as vegetables instead of fruit for political reasons (Kraemer 1998). Hence, it may be generally accepted that statistical data from totalitarian states are a source of controversy.

In fall 2008, the UNFPA in cooperation with South Korea conducted another national census in North Korea, at an estimated cost of about US$5.6 million. Even before the implementation of the census, doubts were cast on this project as well, prompted not only by the ‘missing-male’ experiences of the previous census, but also by a great famine in the mid-1990s, in which a large number of North Koreans are believed to have starved or to have escaped to China.3 There is therefore some doubt that the government will provide accurate information on its socio-economic and demographic state this time, as the magnitude of the food crisis and the extent of the enormous

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2 It should be noted that North Koreans, although officially soldiers, frequently engage in the economy, and mass mobilisations of the military in the agricultural sector frequently take place, e.g. in the harvest season.

3 There are varying estimations on the number of excess deaths during the famine, ranging from 220,000 to 2-3 millions. For an overview and discussion, see Schloms (2004) and Lee (2005). About 100,000 North Koreans were believed to have escaped to China by around 2002 and to be residing there (Lankov 2004), although reliable figures are difficult to obtain as North Koreans cross the border illegally.