

South Korea's Infamous National Security Law: Interview with Korean American Shin Eun-mi

Hyun Lee interviews Shin Eun-mi

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On January 10, after detaining her for questioning on charges of violating the National Security Law (NSL), [South Korea deported U.S. citizen Shin Eun-mi](#) and barred her from returning to the country for the next five years. For the past two months, the Korean American housewife made daily headlines in South Korea after her speaking tour on her travels to North Korea sparked controversy and became the target of right-wing attacks. At one of the events, the detonation of a homemade bomb forced the evacuation of 200 people. South Korean authorities interrogated Shin for more than 50 hours before deporting her and arresting activist Hwang Sun who emceed the speaking tour.

"The gap caused by national division runs very deep in South Korean society," says Shin. Indeed, in a year, 2015, that marks the 70th anniversary of the division of the Korean peninsula, the Park Geun-hye government seems intent on silencing all those who advocate peaceful unification. The deportation of Shin and the arrest of Hwang follow on the heels of South Korea's dissolution of the opposition Unified Progressive Party and growing concerns about intensifying government crackdown on free speech. The [South Korean Ministry of Justice recently announced](#) that it will push to strengthen the controversial NSL to allow the Supreme Court to disband organizations it deems "anti-government."

But more people like Shin, who are willing to travel to both sides of the division to bridge the gap between people who have been separated for the past seven decades, may be exactly what Korea needs for reconciliation and peacemaking. For now, Shin, the author of *A Korean American Housewife Goes to North Korea*, a Korean-language travel journal, is back home in California. The entire ordeal, she says, has taken a toll on her physical and emotional health. In the following interview, she reflects on her recent speaking tour, the South Korean government's deportation decision, and the kind of response her saga has received in the United States.

Hyun Lee: Start by talking about your personal background and how this affected your perception of North Korea.

Shin Eun-mi: I grew up in a very conservative Christian family. My grandfather on my mother's side served three terms as a member of the Constituent Assembly in South Korea during Syngman Rhee's rule and played a key role in railroading the National Security Law through the National Assembly in 1948.

My father is from a military background, so I received a very thorough anti-Communist education growing up. My earliest memories of hearing about North Korea were through my

father's stories of how he had led his troops all the way to the northern tip of North Korea during the Korean War to crush the North's People's Army, and I remember feeling proud that I was the daughter of a war hero. Naturally, growing up, I believed without question that the North Koreans were our enemy.

In grade school, we had anti-Communist poster contests in art class. The North Koreans I drew always had devil-like red faces with horns and a tail. I wrote in big letters, "Crush all commies!" I won awards in anti-Communist writing and speech-making contests. I imagined North Koreans as having no human emotion, always carrying guns, and ready to die for their party and country. I imagined children snitching on their parents and their parents being dragged away by the police in the dark.

As a child, I was part of a children's performance troupe called the Little Angels, which toured the world to project a positive image of South Korea. I studied voice in university, then came to the United States to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of Minnesota. I taught voice in Seoul until 2002, then settled in the United States, where I am currently a housewife.

My trip to North Korea in 2011 completely changed my thoughts about the people of North Korea. Ironically, I eventually became the victim of the NSL, which my grandfather had helped to establish.

Your first trip to North Korea was in October 2011, and you have been back five more times since then. What made you visit in the first place and what made you return?

My husband, who loves to travel, was surfing the Internet one day looking for our next vacation destination when he learned that North Korea was open for tourism to people of any nationality except South Korean citizens. We realized that it was even possible for us to travel there since we are U.S. citizens. When my husband decided on North Korea as the next vacation spot, I had no desire to go with him. So at first I refused. But then I started to develop a curiosity about just how different North Koreans really are from us. So I decided to join him.

There, I realized that the North Koreans are not at all different from us. Parents worry about their children's education, housewives worry about the dinner menu, and young women worry about marriage, no different from us. They were not at all the warmongering and robotic people that I thought they would be. I discovered that the people in North Korea are very pure and innocent. But North Korea was very poor. So in the preface of my book, I described North Korea as "a poor country where beautiful people live."

I adopted the North Korean tour guide on our first trip, Seol-gyeong, as my goddaughter. So I returned many times since then to visit my goddaughter.



Shin Eun-mi and her husband at her North Korean goddaughter Seol-gyeong's home. Photo credit: Shi Eun-mi.

Talk about your first trip to North Korea. What was most surprising?

I arrived at the Pyongyang airport full of fear and curiosity. As soon as we met our tour guides and our driver, I was shocked. Seol-gyeong talked about her boyfriend, and another guide worried about his children's education. Such mundane, everyday things – these were things I never imagined were possible in North Korea. I had assumed that they would be expressionless – certainly not smiling – but Seol-gyeong was so chatty, she reminded me of my own daughter.

On the street, I saw couples holding hands, kids giggling and joking around, women gossiping on their cell phones, a man carrying his child on his shoulders. What would be just an ordinary street scene anywhere else in the world was the most shocking for me to see in North Korea.



Shin Eun-mi and husband with a young woman they met on the street in Pyongyang. Photo credit: Shi Eun-mi.

I'm a U.S. citizen of South Korean descent. Since North Korea considers the United States as an enemy, I thought the North Koreans would really dislike people from the United States. But that wasn't the case. The North Koreans we met on our trip gave us a warm welcome. They offered us food, beer, and became teary-eyed as they held our hands and said we are the same people. I can't count all the times that I was deeply moved.

How did these experiences change your perception of North Korea and your thoughts on unification?

They changed my thoughts about the people of North Korea – that they are no different

from us. We are misinformed about the North Koreans. They are not people who spend all their time wielding guns and preparing for war. You would know this if you just had a chance to meet them face to face. To really know them, we need contact. We need to meet them face to face and converse with them. I came to the conclusion that we would have no problems getting along if we were to live together. And that's how I came to think about unification. I started to long for a unified Korea and ending the state of war.

You published a travel journal about your experiences in North Korea, and it became a bestseller in South Korea and even made it onto the recommended reading list published by the Ministry of Culture. Talk about the impetus behind writing the travel journal.

I wasn't planning on writing a travel journal. I didn't think people would be interested in a travel journal about North Korea, and I didn't want people to know that I had been to North Korea. When I told close friends about my trip, one of them suggested that I write about my trip and post it on a South Korean internet site called [ohmynews](http://ohmynews.com). When I posted my first entry there, it was read by hundreds of thousands of people. I was shocked and overjoyed at the thought that people still care about North Korea and want unification. So I kept writing. After that, lots of publishing companies approached me about publishing my stories, and eventually, the series of my travel diaries was published as a book.

You did a series of speaking tours in South Korea about your trip to North Korea, but the most recent one sparked controversy and drew allegations from right-wing groups and President Park that your "talk concerts" were "pro-North." Talk about the most recent speaking tour.

The speaking tour was organized by the Southern Committee to Implement the June 15 Joint Declaration and endorsed by many other civic groups.



Shin Eun-mi at a church of North Korean defectors in Seoul during her speaking tour. Photo credit: Shi Eun-mi.

We started the tour in Seoul on November 19, then went to Gwangju, Daejeon, Daegu, and Iksan. Immediately after the first event in Seoul, there were sensationalized media reports calling the tour a "pro-North concert." They falsely reported that I had said "North Korea is paradise on earth" and praised North Korea's "hereditary succession of power," and they re-broadcast these reports 24/7. It was like McCarthyism in the media.

Right-wing agitators stood outside our events and yelled "Go back to North Korea!" The false media reports continued, and at each stop of our tour, the protests grew more intense. In Daejeon, just two hours before our scheduled event, the owner of the building where we were supposed to hold the event threatened to cut off electricity if we went ahead, so we

were forced to cancel the event. But we refused to call off the tour and pushed on, and we were also greeted by many supporters, who braved threats from right-wing agitators to fill the lecture halls.

When we arrived at Iksan, in Jeolla Province, the university where we were scheduled to hold the event changed its mind, and we were forced to move the event to a Catholic church at the last minute. This is where the bomb incident occurred and we were forced to cancel the rest of our tour.

A police investigation later revealed that the media reports about me were false. I am currently in the process of filing a lawsuit against those media outlets.

What do you think caused such a backlash?

I really have no idea. I had been to South Korea many times since 2012 and given many lectures about my travels to North Korea. In April last year, just six months before the most recent tour, I had done the same speaking tour, organized by the same people. We stopped at even more cities and I gave about 20 lectures without incident. The previous year, in 2013, the Ministry of Unification praised my book and produced a documentary about me. The same media that recently accused me of being “pro-North” had done interviews with me and praised my book.

But suddenly, this time, it was exactly the opposite. *Tongil* (unification) became *jongbuk* (pro-North). I don’t understand why the same lecture became so controversial.

At the event at Iksan on December 10, a high school student set off a homemade incendiary device in the middle of your lecture, and two people were seriously injured. Talk about what happened.

A young man stood up in the middle of my presentation and said, “Isn’t it true that you referred to North Korea as ‘paradise on earth’?” Before I even had a chance to respond, he pulled out a homemade acid bomb from his knapsack and hurled it in my direction. Had a staff person not gotten in the way to block it with his own body, I would have been seriously injured.

The police later found that the assailant had packed other incendiary devices in his knapsack. The police were quick to declare that he had acted alone, but this is doubtful. Several witnesses said they had seen the assailant being dropped off at the church by other people. And when he arrived inside the church, another man, who appeared to have arrived earlier to save a seat for him, got up and gave him his seat, then walked out.

What was strange that day was that when we arrived at the church, I noticed fire trucks lined up by the building. I remember wondering, “What are they doing here?” What shocked me also was that when the bomb went off, an explosives unit was on the scene within minutes. I still wonder if the local authorities had been tipped off in advance about what was about to happen. Prior to that day, the assailant had apparently posted online comments announcing his plan.

There are many unresolved questions about this incident. For example, the police claimed they searched the assailant’s home after the incident. But when organizers of the speaking tour met with the assailant’s parents, they told them that there had been no such search.

What's even more surprising is that President Park said nothing about the terrorist incident. Instead, she publicly denounced our speaking tour as "pro-North." The police downgraded the charge against the assailant, then called me in for questioning, and raided Hwang Sun's home. We were the victims of a terrorist act, but the South Korean police and the Ministry of Justice treated us as if we were the criminals.

Talk about your what happened when the South Korean police and the Ministry of Justice took you in for questioning.

The police summoned me three times and the Ministry of Justice once. In total, they interrogated me for over 50 hours. I was scheduled to return to the United States on December 12, but they barred me from leaving the country.

The investigation started based on an allegation that my lectures were in violation of the NSL. But it only took them a few hours to realize that there is nothing to substantiate this allegation. So then they focused their investigation on the content of my book and lectures I had given in the United States – which is absurd. I wrote the book and gave those lectures in the United States, so why is it the business of the South Korean government?

They asked about every line in my book, from the preface to the very last page and demanded to know what my intentions were behind each sentence. For example, I had written in my book, "Christ tells us to love our neighbors, and I realized the North Koreans are our true neighbors," and they wanted to know, "What is the true meaning behind this sentence?" I wrote about cell phone use in North Korea and printed photographs of my trips in the book, and they wanted to know, "Do you really believe these are real?"

They showed me a copy of an email exchange between me and another person in the United States. The Internet server for our emails is based in the United States, so I have no idea how that was in their possession.

At any rate, they found nothing that I had done that was in violation of their NSL. Ultimately, they deported me based on immigration law, which states that a foreigner who acts against the national interest, disturbs the peace, and/or threatens the safety or security of the country may be deported.

Did the U.S. embassy or the State Department get involved?

As soon as I felt threatened, I contacted the U.S. embassy in Seoul. At first we exchanged emails, but after the bomb incident, I went to the embassy myself and met with a consul there. I explained my situation, but he already knew my story very well. I requested protection, and his response was, "Go to the South Korean police for protection." I had no communication with the State Department.

You also requested a meeting with President Park, who famously highlighted the advantages of unification in her phrase, "Tongil is dae-bak" ("Unification is a jackpot"), and claims to be pro-unification. Did you get any response from her to your request to meet? If you were granted a meeting with her, what would you actually have said to her?

No response. If she had agreed to meet with me, I was going to tell her,

"The people of the South and North are not much different. We share the same

history and culture through thousands of years. Please move forward for the unification of Korea – for peace and for the people of the Korean peninsula.”

Describe what happened when you arrived at the LA airport upon your return home. How did you think you would be treated within the Korean diaspora community in the United States?

When I arrived at the airport, it was the same scene as in South Korea. People from my church had come to the airport to welcome me home. And on the other side were right-wing people shouting, “Go back to North Korea!” I was focused on getting out of there quickly, so I only learned later that there was a physical confrontation and the police arrested two right-wing agitators for assault.

I realized that the gap due to national division runs deep in our community.

I’m not sure how I will be treated by the Korean American community. I suppose truth will prevail one day. What’s most urgent is reconciliation between North and South Korea – in other words, a return to the pro-engagement mood of the post-June 15 era.

Hwang Sun, who appeared with you in the speaking tour, is now under arrest on charges of violating the NSL. The government has taken your book off the recommended list of books and has ordered all libraries to return all copies of the book to the Ministry of Culture. Your thoughts?

Hwang Sun is the mother of two young children. She poses no flight risk. And since the police have already raided her home and taken everything, there’s no risk that she will destroy evidence. I hope they will allow her to stand trial without being detained.

It was the South Korean government that selected my book for its list of recommended books, and it was the same government that rescinded this decision and announced a recall of my books. I don’t know what to say. I never considered the selection of my book for the government’s list as a matter of personal glory, because I’m not a professional writer. But it does raise a question for me. The content of my book hasn’t changed since the time the government saw fit to put it on the list, so what has changed to make it so controversial?

All this follows on the heels of the controversial dissolution of the opposition Unified Progressive Party and the South Korean government’s frequent use of the NSL to stifle free speech. Can you comment generally on the current political climate in South Korea?

I don’t know much about South Korean politics. But I do think the dissolution of a political party should be decided by the voters, not by the government. As for the NSL, it surely hinders freedom of speech and expression, which should be guaranteed in a genuinely democratic country.

What are your future plans and hopes? What do you take away from this whole experience?

I haven’t yet thought seriously about my future plans or hopes. For now, I want to get some good rest and recover from mental and physical exhaustion.

The gap caused by division between North and South Korea runs very deep. Without resolving the problem of division, I don’t believe we can expect to have true democracy, let alone peace on the Korean peninsula. The most urgent task is national reconciliation and peaceful unification.

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