

Why North Koreans Cried

By [Ian Buruma](#)

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Can an entire people go mad? Sometimes it certainly seems so.

Images of hundreds of thousands of North Koreans howling with grief over Kim Jong Il's death suggest something very disturbing. Was this an exercise in mass delusion? A ritual of collective masochism?

Kim was a brutal dictator, who pampered himself with the finest French brandies — allegedly worth \$500,000 a year. He flew in fresh sushi from Tokyo and feasted on food prepared by the best chefs money could buy, while millions of his subjects starved to death. Yet, here they are, masses of his bullied, downtrodden subjects loudly mourning his death as though they had lost their beloved father.

Granted, the people publicly mourning in Pyongyang belong to the most privileged class, and dramatic bawling is a traditional Korean way of expressing grief. Even so, the behavior broadcast from North Korea appeared unhinged. Is there a plausible explanation?

First of all, North Koreans are not unique. Few countries suffered more from Josef Stalin's cruelties than Poland, yet many Poles, too, wept publicly after his death. Of course, it is possible that this was coerced — a horrible form of forced self-abasement. Not only did people have to put up with being kicked in the teeth, but they also had to thank their tormentor and lament his death.

Clearly, North Koreans who refuse to show deep sadness on occasions of public mourning risk serious trouble — children expelled from school, careers blocked, perhaps even time in a slave-labor camp. Therefore, believing the propaganda in a totalitarian state can be a form of self-preservation. The more one feels doubt, which cannot be openly expressed, the more torturous life becomes.

Whether an intelligent human being can force himself to believe in something totally insane is an interesting question. But coercion, certainly a factor in the scenes from Pyongyang, is perhaps not the only explanation. Mass hysteria can take many forms. It is too easy to assume that such humiliating behavior is always false, a form of play-acting.

Consider, for example, a less sinister outburst of public hysteria: the extraordinary emotions expressed by many people in Britain after the death of Princess Diana. Men and women who had known her only from magazine features or television coverage claimed that Diana's death had affected them more deeply than the passing of their own parents.

We often suppress real pain, such as that caused by the loss of a family member. Numbness, rather than hysteria, is the norm. But our feelings must find an outlet somehow, and they can emerge when a leader or celebrity dies.

Sometimes, a public figure's death makes us mourn the passing of our own lives. It is irrelevant whether the person who has died is a beloved princess, a popular singer or a bloody dictator. We grew up with them, and they are a part of us. When they die, a bit of us dies with them.

Mass hysteria is highly contagious. I visited North Korea the year that Kim Jong-il's father, who is called "The Great Leader," died. Part of our compulsory tourist program was to pay our respects at his monument — a giant statue of him — in the center of Pyongyang. We stood at the Great Leader's marble feet, surrounded by flowers and funeral wreaths, while the sound of women sobbing was played through huge loudspeakers.

I watched rows and rows of uniformed schoolchildren being led to the monument by their teachers. They looked impassive at first, with the poker faces worn by people accustomed to waiting for authorities to tell them how to behave. Then the teachers began to make the appropriate noises of public grief. Low moaning changed to loud wailing, then to cries of "Father, why have you left us?" Little by little, the children followed their teachers' example, crying their hearts out. They wept after their teachers started to cry.

Was this an authentic expression of grief? The tears looked real enough. Teachers and pupils alike probably felt something, perhaps even profound distress. Some may have been sufficiently indoctrinated to feel that the Great Leader really was a benign father figure to whom they owed everything.

Others no doubt displaced their emotions, which could have stemmed from any number of private and public sorrows. After all, the poor North Koreans have plenty to cry about. Life in a totalitarian dictatorship is a daily misery. And so they cry for the men who are largely responsible for it.

Ian Buruma is professor of democracy and human rights at Bard College and author of "Taming the Gods: Religion and Democracy on Three Continents." © Project Syndicate

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