

# Feast in Famine: Exploring Manipulability and Cultural Bias in AI

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Inspired by Jean Baudrillard's "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place," in this assignment, I chose to use Midjourney to create a series of images titled "Feast in Famine." These images aim to explore the living conditions in North Korea and the manipulability and cultural bias of AI. Through this process, I gained a deep understanding of AI technology's role in shaping and reconstructing reality.

Baudrillard, in "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place," argues that in modern society, the media not only reports events but also creates a new reality through selective presentation of information. This "hyperreality" is composed of symbols and images, replacing real experiences (Baudrillard, 2012). In my creative process, AI technology played a similar role. It generated images based on my prompts, and these images, to some extent, reconstructed our understanding and perception of life in North Korea. However, through this experiment, I also discovered that AI's manipulability and bias is higher than any other media or tools.

## 2. INITIAL RESEARCH BEFORE CREATION

Before I started using AI tools for creation, I conducted preliminary research on the food shortage issue in North Korea. First, due to the closed nature of information in North Korea, we cannot verify the accuracy of the information available online. However, through recent reports from BBC News, interviews with North Korean defectors, and a United Nations General Assembly resolution, we know that the famine problem in North Korea remains severe (United Nations General Assembly Human Rights Council, 2013). Second, the food crisis has not improved but has worsened since the pandemic.

In addition, while the North Korean authorities have not explicitly denied the existence of famine, they have historically romanticized this tragedy by referring to it as the "Arduous March" (Hancocks, 2023). Also, according to recent reports from North Korea's official media, Rodong Sinmun, North Korea claimed that the former leader Kim Jong-il invented a "wheat wrap" in 2011, presenting it as a solution to the food crisis. These reports state that the wrap is filled with beef, cabbage, and radish. To enhance credibility, the video prominently features an image of Kim Jong-il smiling in a kitchen where the wraps are being made (Rodong Sinmun, 2021). However, this news appears ironic to the defector Hyun-seung Lee, who was born into an elite North Korean family and defected in 2014, said that even he had never seen wraps in North Korea, and most people simply cannot afford foreign food. Lee pointed out that Western food is very uncommon in the isolated North Korea, and in the 1990s, any act that shows your interest in bread and butter would be seen as "betraying socialism." (Steinbuch, 2022)

Based on the preliminary research mentioned above, I decided to use the "wheat wrap" as the inspiration for my creation and to employ Midjourney to create a series of images that highlight North Korea's food crisis and the government's manipulation of media.



**Figure 1. North Korea claims Kim Jong Il invented the burrito (wheat wrap), New York Post, 2022.**

## 3. THE PROMPT AND THE RESULT

The prompt I used was as follows:

"a hyper-realistic photograph. The image depicts a North Korean woman seated at a dining table on board a space-aged style train, enjoying a hamburger. The photograph is notable for its attention to detail, with every aspect of the scene rendered in vivid and lifelike detail. The futuristic train setting adds to the overall feeling of wonder and possibility."

The final results are:



**Figure 2. Feast in Famine, AI-Generated Creation by Midjourney and Me**

Since I started using Midjourney in June 2022, I have adhered to the above prompt for two reasons. First, to maintain consistency, I try to avoid using different prompts. Second, after multiple trials with various styles, I found that using a single descriptive prompt, such as "A realistic photo depicting a woman in North Korea

having a hamburger in a traditional restaurant," often results in aesthetic instability. This means that sometimes the output is realistic, while at other times it is illustrative, which is generally less desirable for the creation.

#### 4. REFLECTION ON THE RESULT

Using the AI tool to create the series "Feast in Famine" provided deep insights into the dynamics of agency in the creative process. The AI acted as a "co-creator," generating images based on my prompts. This interaction highlighted the shared agency between human and machine in producing art. While I conducted most of the research and provided crucial direction and thematic guidance, the AI outputs several elements that I might not have conceived independently, reflecting a hybrid form of creativity. However, there are still several issues that I believe deserve to be addressed during the process.

##### 4.1 Cultural Bias

The AI-generated images exhibited significant cultural bias. From the final images, it is evident that the AI's impression of North Korean women leans towards a specific stereotype: obese, small-eyed, monotonously dressed, serious (unhappy) face, and poor (the hamburger looks weird). To test whether this cultural bias resulted from my prompt, I tried to change the prompt:

"a hyper-realistic photograph. The image depicts a North Korean **girl** seated at a dining table on board a space-aged style train, enjoying a hamburger. The photograph is notable for its attention to detail, with every aspect of the scene rendered in vivid and lifelike detail. **The girl's expression of pure joy as she bites into the juicy burger is infectious**, and the futuristic train setting adds to the overall feeling of wonder and possibility."

The results are:



Figure 3. Prompt Testing in Midjourney

From the results above, it is evident that even though I included the keyword "joy" in the prompt, the images of North Korean girls were still very undesirable: they appeared thin, serious, unhappy, and monotonously dressed.

To test whether this issue was specific to Midjourney, I used Stable Diffusion to test the following different prompts:

"A happy family in **North Korea** is enjoying hamburgers and other delicious dishes at a traditional restaurant."

"A happy family in **Japan** is enjoying hamburgers and other delicious dishes at a traditional restaurant."

"A happy family in **Canada** is enjoying hamburgers and other delicious dishes at a traditional restaurant."

The results are:



Figure 4. Prompt Testing in Stable Diffusion.

Upper: North Korea. Lower left: Japan. Lower right: Canada.

It is very evident that Stable Diffusion exhibited even more serious cultural bias issues. From the images above, the North Korean people is: men with middle-part hairstyles, women with ponytails (Although North Korea does limit its citizens to choosing from 18 hairstyles, I don't believe that all engineers conduct such detailed research before setting up the AI.), monotonous clothing style (all in solid color shirts), and small eyes. When I changed the region to Japan, it became apparent that the appearance and environment of the people became noticeably more "refined." Furthermore, if I changed the region to Canada, the cultural biases became even more obvious (despite the fact that Canada being one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world.)

Of course, part of these results may be due to my improper operation, as I must admit that I am not very good at manipulating prompts. However, isn't the general public in the same situation? I couldn't help but wonder, when the public uses "overly simple" prompts to generate content, could such cultural biases be more easily reinforced in the future?

Generally speaking, to ensure that creators receive "accurate" results, engineers inevitably have to use some "stereotypical" images, primarily because the training data also comes from publicly available photos. In recent news, there was an incident where Google misclassified a dark-skinned person as "gorillas" (Hern, 2018). Google then modified its algorithm, leading engineers to adjust the settings. However, this resulted in another issue where inputting "George Washington" generated images of black people, an overcorrection that distorted historical accuracy (Thaler, 2024). Therefore, balancing "cultural biases" and "content accuracy" will become a crucial issue for generative AI in the future.

##### 4.2 Manipulability of Artificial Intelligence

During this creation process, I also discovered that AI tools are highly manipulable. If I want to create a fake news or historical image, I simply need to adjust and remove several cultural elements in the prompt, such as "an Asian woman with small eyes, wearing a white shirt, eating a hamburger in a train." By using AI-generated photo, deepfake, and compositing technics, I can possibly create an image that suggests North Korea has an abundance of food.

In Jean Baudrillard's "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place," he described how countries manipulate the media, turning war into a "performance." (Baudrillard, 2012) With the advancement of AI tools, we seem to be able to foresee such a future. In fact, the Soviet Union used synthetic technology in the past to make certain people disappear from historical photos (Medium, 2021); and North Korea also claimed that they had solved the food crisis as early as 2011.

In this creation, I did not use a highly realistic style, but in my previous project, I used Heygen and deepfake technology to create quite realistic "fake advertisements." As AI technology rapidly evolves, it will become increasingly difficult to distinguish such videos from real ones. In fact, AI technology has already been used in child pornography and warfare, yet it lacks public attention. In nowadays, people seem to be more fascinated by the marvels of AI tools and ignore their profound impact on our lives.



**Figure 5. A Realistic Fake commercial that I Created for the Previous Project, visit: <https://vimeo.com/931908338>**

## 5. WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, AND IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH?

In George Orwell's famous novel "1984," the Ministry of Truth issued the following propaganda: "War is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength" (Orwell, 1949/2008). Language possesses political, symbolic, and arbitrary characteristics. AI, built on data, simulates human behavior through language. We cannot know the private language of humans (Wittgenstein, 1953), nor can we determine if AI has a private language. However, it is certain that this technology will profoundly impact culture and politics in the future, possibly even altering (or twisting) the meanings of cultural or political symbols.

Imagine a terrifying but not impossible scenario: training a model of Kim Jong-un after his death. Should we launch missiles at South Korea? Just ask the AI version of Kim Jong-un. If you doubt his continued existence, we could create videos featuring Kim Jong-un, proving that the leader still exists in the world - forever.

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