

COPING UNDER OPPRESSION: A LAZARUS AND FOLKMAN ANALYSIS OF JIA'S PSYCHOLOGICAL SURVIVAL IN HYEJIN KIM'S *JIA: A NOVEL OF NORTH KOREA*

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological survival of the protagonist in *Jia: A Novel of North Korea* by Hyejin Kim through the lens of Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory. The research aims to identify how Jia tolerates, minimizes, and adapts to the extreme sociopolitical pressures she faces as the daughter of a condemned political figure in a totalitarian regime. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the study collects data through close reading of the novel—focusing on narration, character interactions, and depictions of surveillance, fear, and danger—supported by secondary sources on coping and psychological resilience. The analysis reveals that Jia consistently employs problem-focused coping through processes such as threat identification, planning, information gathering, evaluating alternatives, selecting viable solutions, and undertaking concrete actions to escape state control. These findings demonstrate that Jia's strategies are not merely reactive behaviors but deliberate, adaptive responses shaped by continuous cognitive appraisal of risk. The study concludes that Lazarus and Folkman's framework effectively illuminates how individuals under authoritarian oppression develop strategic psychological mechanisms to maintain agency, emotional stability, and the possibility of freedom.

Keywords: coping, psychological survival, problem-focused

INTRODUCTION

Psychological survival under authoritarian regimes is a profound human struggle that reflects not only political resistance but also internal resilience. Individuals living under repressive conditions often experience persistent psychological stress, fear, and trauma as a result of surveillance, social control, and systemic violence. Reports by Freedom House consistently identify countries such as North Korea, Syria, and Turkmenistan as among the world's most repressive regimes, where state control over everyday life is pervasive and psychological freedom is severely limited (Bouchard, 2018). In such environments, people inevitably develop psychological responses—both conscious and unconscious—that help them endure fear, trauma, and social alienation. These responses include defense mechanisms, which shield the psyche from intolerable anxiety; coping strategies, which offer adaptive methods of endurance; and deeper psychological processes such as individuation, which enable personal integration and growth (Vaillant, 2025).

Because these psychological struggles are often hidden from public view, literature becomes a crucial space for exploring them. Literature functions not only as a medium of artistic expression but also as a vital tool for revealing the emotional and cognitive dimensions of human experience under oppressive conditions. Fictional narratives allow readers to enter the internal world of characters who confront extreme political or social constraints, offering insight into how

individuals think, feel, and survive when their freedom is restricted (Kennedy, 2025). Through storytelling, writers illuminate the subtle psychological negotiations that accompany life under constant threat.

Building on this understanding, many narratives set in totalitarian contexts portray characters who must develop psychological strategies of survival that extend well beyond physical endurance. Such texts show how individuals rely on denial, repression, selective attention, and other unconscious processes as protective buffers against overwhelming reality. These stories mirror real-world psychological research indicating that humans often adopt both conscious and unconscious responses when faced with sustained oppression. Examining such narratives therefore deepens our understanding of not only what characters do, but also why they act, think, or feel in particular ways when subjected to systemic pressure.

Within this broader literary landscape, Hyejin Kim's *Jia: A Novel of North Korea* provides a compelling portrayal of psychological survival under authoritarian rule. Set between the 1970s and 1990s, the novel follows Jia, a young woman born into political stigma and lifelong surveillance. Branded as an enemy of the state because of her family background, Jia is forced to live under conditions of fear, control, and social exclusion. Her eventual escape to China is not only a physical attempt to flee oppression but also a psychological journey marked by danger, emotional upheaval, and the constant fear of forced repatriation. Through Jia's experiences, the novel illustrates the tension between the desire for autonomy and the heavy psychological burden of survival in an oppressive society.

The novel's depth is further enriched by the author's background. Hyejin Kim, a Korean scholar with international experience in Korea, China, the United States, and Singapore, draws on cross-cultural perspectives to craft a narrative that re-humanizes those often viewed solely through political lenses. As the first contemporary North Korean novel published in the West, *Jia* has received acclaim for its nuanced portrayal of life inside a closed society and for challenging common stereotypes about North Korean citizens (Goes, 2025). Kim's engagement with North Korean stories thus provides the narrative foundation for exploring the psychological dimensions of survival depicted in the text.

Given the intense pressures Jia faces, analyzing her coping methods becomes essential for understanding how individuals adapt to extreme sociopolitical environments. Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory offers a particularly relevant framework, distinguishing between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies used to manage stress. Their model clarifies how individuals appraise threats, regulate emotional turmoil, and take action to navigate hostile circumstances. Applying this framework to *Jia* enables a more precise examination of how the protagonist evaluates danger, makes decisions, and implements strategies that support her psychological survival. Accordingly, this study examines Jia's coping strategies through Lazarus

and Folkman's theory and analyzes how these strategies contribute to her resilience and adaptation under authoritarian oppression.

To achieve this goal, the study pursues two main objectives. First, it explores how Jia attempts to tolerate, minimize, and adapt to adversity as the daughter of a political traitor, focusing on the psychological strategies she employs to endure life under a totalitarian system. Second, it analyzes Jia's coping processes—particularly her use of problem-focused strategies—through the theoretical framework proposed by Lazarus and Folkman. These objectives work together to reveal how coping functions as both a psychological and behavioral process in contexts of extreme control.

This study also positions itself within existing scholarship. Previous research has effectively applied Lazarus and Folkman's theory to literary analysis, demonstrating its usefulness in understanding how fictional characters manage emotional strain. For example, *Malin Reed's study Coping Strategies in Searching for Her Mother in Jo Baker's The Mermaid's Child* (Damayanti, 2021) employs close reading to trace the protagonist's coping behaviors as she confronts personal uncertainty. Reed's work illustrates how coping theory can illuminate the ways characters convert internal pressures into adaptive decisions—an approach that also guides the present analysis of Jia's survival strategies.

This study makes a new contribution to literary psychology by presenting a clear and systematic analysis of problem-focused coping in *Jia: A Novel of North Korea* by Hyejin Kim. Previous studies of trauma narratives in repressive regimes often focus on emotional endurance or collective suffering. In contrast, this research highlights how Jia actively manages her psychological survival by examining her coping process through distinct stages of appraisal, planning, and action. In addition, Jia has received limited attention in psychoanalytic and coping-based literary studies, especially regarding individual agency under totalitarian control. By combining Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory with close textual analysis, this study deepens the understanding of Jia's psychological development and shows that problem-focused coping operates as a form of adaptive agency in conditions of extreme repression.

METHOD

Data Collection

This study employs critical reading to identify key narrative elements in Hyejin Kim's *Jia: A Novel of North Korea*. Primary data consist of narrative descriptions and character dialogues relevant to plot, character development, setting, and thematic construction. Secondary data are obtained through library research, including textbooks, scholarly articles, and critical writings that discuss

problem-focused coping strategies. All selected data serve as the basis for the analysis presented in the Discussion.

Data Analysis

The study uses descriptive qualitative analysis. Relevant conversations, internal monologues, character actions, and narrative settings are examined to reveal Jia's coping responses. These data are then interpreted through Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory, focusing on how Jia employs problem-focused strategies when confronting external stressors. The findings are synthesized to formulate the study's conclusions.

DISCUSSION

Since leaving her home village to live with her maternal grandparents—her grandfather being a high-ranking military officer in Pyongyang—Jia must undertake substantial effort to conceal her identity as the daughter of a political traitor. Discovery would mean immediate arrest and imprisonment. Her years in the orphanage and her role as a state-trained dancer intensify her vigilance, requiring her to monitor every word and action with extreme caution. This psychological burden becomes even heavier when her true identity is eventually exposed, placing her in a perilous and emotionally destabilizing position. The persistent fear and uncertainty that structure Jia's daily existence form the psychological conditions under which her coping processes unfold, making it necessary to understand her responses through a framework that captures this constant negotiation with danger.

Coping, as conceptualized by Lazarus and Folkman, refers to the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals employ to manage specific internal or external demands appraised as taxing or exceeding their personal resources. Rather than describing a fixed response, coping emphasizes a dynamic, situational process in which individuals continuously assess the nature of stressors and select strategies that help them regulate their impact. Importantly, coping is not synonymous with eliminating stress; instead, it involves attempts to tolerate, minimize, or adapt to challenges that cannot always be fully controlled or resolved. Thus, coping reflects an active process of psychological adjustment through which individuals strive to maintain emotional stability and functional well-being in the face of adversity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus and Folkman identify two primary forms of coping: problem-focused coping, which aims to address or change the source of stress, and emotion-focused coping, which seeks to regulate the emotional responses triggered by the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These strategies work together to support psychological adaptation, helping individuals maintain stability and resilience when facing adversity.

Jia's responses to constant surveillance, deprivation, and ideological pressure can be understood through Lazarus and Folkman's coping framework. Her coping process emerges from her ongoing appraisal of threats within the oppressive North Korean regime, shaping how she negotiates fear, loss, and uncertainty. Jia frequently relies on problem-focused coping when she attempts to change or escape harmful conditions, such as monitoring her environment, formulating an escape plan from Pyongyang, and seeking practical assistance —actions that reflect her efforts to alter the stressors directly.

Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping refers to active efforts aimed at addressing the source of stress directly. It involves identifying the problem, generating possible solutions, evaluating their effectiveness, selecting the most appropriate option, and taking concrete action to reduce or eliminate the stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and this pattern is clearly reflected in Jia's actions throughout the novel.

Identifying the problem

The process begins with identifying the problem, which Jia performs through her continual gathering of information about her surroundings and the risks associated with disobedience. Jia's ability to identify the nature of the threats around her represents the foundational stage of problem-focused coping, which emphasizes the need to perceive, interpret, and define stressors with accuracy before any strategic response can occur. In the context of an authoritarian system where danger is often concealed beneath ordinary routines, this stage becomes especially crucial. Jia develops a heightened awareness of her environment, learning to recognize that even seemingly mundane events can signal deeper political or personal risk.

In Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model, the first stage of problem-focused coping involves problem identification, which requires individuals to recognize, define, and assess the nature of the threat before formulating strategies to respond to it. Jia's experiences in *Jia: A Novel of North Korea* illustrate this stage with remarkable clarity. From the moment she leaves her rural hometown and enters the highly regulated environment of Pyongyang, Jia develops a heightened awareness of the social and political dangers surrounding her, particularly the threat associated with her familial background. Her process of coping begins not with overt actions but with a series of cognitive evaluations aimed at understanding the forces that endanger her survival.

Jia carries out this initial coping process through a continual gathering of contextual cues, reading the emotional temperature of her surroundings with great sensitivity. She pays close attention to fluctuations in military activity, understanding that increased patrols may foreshadow intensified repression as it happened when Jia was in orphanage:

"Dark suits came to the orphanage several times and asked me whether I remembered anything of my past and how I got so lost. My answer was always the same: "I don't remember." I was afraid any comments I made about my sister or grandparents would cause hurt to them." (Kim, 2007, p. 135-137).

Every time Jia meets Seunggyu, her boyfriend, she must carefully hide her true identity because he is a soldier. Revealing who she really is would be extremely dangerous, even though Seunggyu loves her deeply. In a political system where absolute obedience to the state supersedes all personal bonds, no affection can outweigh a soldier's mandated loyalty to the government. Seunggyu detests and considers people like Jia's family are deemed disgraced; they are trash and casted out by the regime (Kim, 2007, p. 284-285).

Jia also begins to analyze her social relationships, identifying which individuals represent safety and which pose a threat. She learns to trust figures like Song and Sunyoung—who offer guidance and friendship—and to maintain emotional distance from peers who might unintentionally reveal sensitive information. As part of the appraisal process in Lazarus & Folkman's theory, she judges which individuals might be trustworthy or helpful in managing her stressful situation and which individuals might put her at greater risk.

Jia becomes more alert and aware of the dangers around her as she realizes how harsh the punishment is for anyone who disobeys the government. Her awareness is not based on theory or general ideas—it comes from real examples, such as hearing about neighbors who suddenly disappear because they are suspected of disloyalty. A clear example of this is the fate of her close friend Seunggyu, who was detained and condemned to life imprisonment without authorities ever examining the actual circumstances (Kim, 2007, p. 261).

Throughout this stage, Jia synthesizes past and present information, drawing connections between her knowledge of her father's fate and the behavior she witnesses in Pyongyang. This integration forms a coherent cognitive framework that shapes her understanding of the oppressive system in which she lives. By recognizing that her own identity constitutes a political threat, she clarifies the core problem that her coping efforts must address: the need to remain invisible within a regime that punishes familial guilt.

Generating possible solutions

A crucial stage in problem-focused coping, according to Lazarus and Folkman, is the ability to generate workable solutions once a threat has been clearly appraised. In *Jia: A Novel of North Korea*, this stage becomes evident when Jia moves from merely reacting to danger toward deliberately planning for a safer future. Her decision to reveal her true identity to Seunggyu marks a turning point in her psychological orientation. Although she fully understands the consequences of admitting that she is the daughter of a political traitor, she chooses honesty as the first step in

taking control of her life trajectory. This action signals her shift from passive endurance to active problem-solving, demonstrating her emerging sense of agency in a system designed to suppress it.

Jia's planning deepens when she begins imagining concrete pathways for escape. Her awareness of the state's harsh punishment for people with tainted family backgrounds—including imprisonment, surveillance, and the denial of basic rights—makes her acutely aware that staying would only lead to further danger. Understanding these risks, she starts evaluating realistic steps that could help her survive. This reflects what Lazarus and Folkman describe as “cognitive processes that lead to selecting the best alternative for coping,” in which individuals imagine different possibilities, assess their feasibility, and choose the most effective course of action.

Jia is reaching out to people who can provide practical assistance. She contacts Jiyun, a former coworker whom she trusts, and this decision proves essential for generating viable solutions. Jiyun's husband helps Jia purchase an illegal travel permit on the black market and provides the route and instructions she needs to reach her destination safely (Kim, 2007). This network-based planning illustrates how Jia identifies available resources and transforms them into concrete steps—a textbook example of problem-solving coping. By seeking reliable allies, obtaining the necessary documents, and clarifying her route, Jia demonstrates a deliberate, organized approach to escaping state control.

Through these actions, Jia shows her ability not only to recognize danger but also to imagine and pursue alternatives beyond immediate repression. Her shift from fear-driven endurance to forward-looking planning exemplifies Lazarus and Folkman's concept of generating possible solutions, where coping becomes a constructive, strategic effort toward change. In this stage, Jia is no longer only avoiding threats; she is actively designing a path toward freedom.

Evaluating of effectiveness

Once Jia has generated several potential courses of action, she moves into the evaluative stage of problem-focused coping, where she must determine which of her imagined strategies are viable within the constraints of a tightly controlled state. Lazarus and Folkman note that evaluation involves weighing costs, benefits, and potential consequences before committing to a plan. Jia evaluates whether the strategies she has created can truly help her survive. For Jia, this means carefully thinking through her choices, comparing risks, and predicting possible outcomes. Her decisions are thoughtful and deliberate, shaped by fear, uncertainty, and her growing understanding of how unpredictable the regime can be.

Director Park's —Jia's supervisor who has long been aware of her family background and has consistently supported and protected her—advises Jia to persuade Seunggyu not to harm her:

"Jia, try to convince Seunggyu not to hurt you; you've been together for a long time, and I'm sure he really loves you; that's why he feels so betrayed by you. He almost cried. But Jia, to him, your background is paramount. Don't trust love. Just beg him to forget about you and not to shake too much dust from your past—you've got to try and catch him as soon as possible" (Kim, 2007, p. 405-406).

When Director Park advised Jia to persuade Seunggyu not to surrender her to state authorities, Jia made an immediate attempt to find him; however, after failing to locate him, she did not pursue further efforts to continue the search. Instead, she withdrew from the situation and chose to return home, signaling her reluctance to engage in a potentially dangerous negotiation and her recognition of the limits of her influence under oppressive conditions.

"I had no idea where Seunggyu had gone, or if he really had a training session. Walking down the hall, I told myself, Right, as Director Park said, I must find him and beg him to forgive me and restrain him from endangering my life. But my legs were taking me back home. Would he turn me in, send me to a political prison? It pained me that he had decided not to tell me how shocked he was. I couldn't forget his eyes at the hotel, darting away from mine. I retired to my room for a long while" (Kim, 2007, p. 407-408).

From the way Seunggyu deliberately turns his face away, Jia immediately recognizes the depth of his anger and disappointment. This subtle interaction becomes part of her secondary appraisal within Lazarus and Folkman's coping framework, in which she evaluates whether attempting to influence Seunggyu would realistically reduce the threat she faces. Jia quickly concludes that seeking him out would be futile, not because their emotional bond is insignificant, but because she understands the ideological hierarchy that structures life under the regime. She realizes that no personal relationship—even one founded on deep affection—can outweigh the state's expectation of absolute loyalty.

Having acknowledged that Seunggyu cannot be a source of safety, Jia then turns to a wider evaluation of whom she can trust for help. In a totalitarian state, trust is extremely risky because anyone could betray her. She studies the behavior and loyalty of the people around her to decide who might help and who could harm her. Her choice to contact Jiyun and Jiyun's husband shows this careful evaluation. She selects them not because of emotional closeness but because they seem trustworthy, have access to needed resources, and are unlikely to report her. This shows a strategic approach to evaluating which relationships can actually support her coping efforts.

Jia then examines whether each step of her escape plan is realistic. She thinks about how she can obtain travel papers, how she will pass through checkpoints, and how she must behave to avoid suspicion. Jia had chosen Onsong, in the far northeast, because it was the farthest place from Pyongyang. Sinuiju, just northwest of Pyongyang, would have been the fastest escape for her, but it had already become a popular route for runaways, and the army was waiting for them at

the border. That's what Seunggyu had confided in her (Kim, 2007). By reviewing each step, she identifies weak points in her plan and adjusts it to make success more likely. This process turns her fear into a clear set of actions and helps her feel more prepared to face the risks.

Overall, Jia's evaluation of effectiveness shows that coping is not just about making plans but also about deciding which plans can actually work in her dangerous environment. By comparing options, judging consequences, and choosing trustworthy allies, she demonstrates an adaptive and thoughtful approach to survival. This stage completes her problem-focused coping process and prepares her to move from planning to taking action.

Selecting the Most Appropriate Option

Selecting the most appropriate option represents the point at which Jia must choose, from several possible strategies, the one that offers the highest chance of survival. In Lazarus and Folkman's model, this stage requires comparing available solutions and deciding which action is both realistic and effective in reducing the stressors. For Jia, this decision occurs after she has gathered information, generated possible solutions, and evaluated their potential effectiveness. Her final choice reflects a careful balancing of risks, resources, and long-term consequences within the rigid and dangerous environment of a totalitarian state.

Jia ultimately selects the option of escaping Pyongyang rather than remaining under the close watch of her grandparents and state authorities. Although her life in the capital offers temporary safety, she knows that staying increases the likelihood that her identity as the daughter of a political traitor will eventually be discovered. After comparing the dangers of staying with the uncertainties of fleeing, she concludes that escape—despite being risky—is the only strategy that provides a meaningful chance of long-term freedom. This decision shows Jia's shift from passive survival to active self-protection, marking a crucial moment in her coping process.

Her choice is also shaped by the people she decides to trust. After evaluating the individuals around her, Jia chooses to seek assistance from Jiyun and Jiyun's husband, who have the knowledge and connections she needs. This selective trust reflects her judgment that they are safer and more reliable than other potential contacts. By choosing allies based on observed behavior rather than emotional closeness, Jia demonstrates a rational and strategic approach to selecting the most effective option for survival.

Finally, Jia's decision is reinforced by her belief that she can realistically carry out the necessary steps—obtaining travel documents, navigating checkpoints, and maintaining a calm and compliant demeanor. This confidence shows that she has chosen an option that not only reduces the threat but also matches her psychological and practical abilities. In this way, the selection stage completes her problem-focused coping process, preparing her to move into the final phase: turning her chosen strategy into concrete action.

Taking concrete action to reduce or eliminate the stressors

The final stage of problem-focused coping involves putting planned strategies into action through concrete steps that directly reduce or remove the source of stress. In Lazarus and Folkman's framework, this stage transforms cognitive preparation into real behavior aimed at changing the situation. For Jia, this is the moment when her internal planning becomes visible action, marking her transition from silent endurance to active resistance against the oppressive system that threatens her identity and survival.

Jia's first major concrete action occurs when she decides to secretly seek help from Jiyun and her husband (Chapter 10). After evaluating them as trustworthy, she visits their home and explains her situation, hoping they can support her escape. This decision is an active attempt to change her circumstances rather than simply cope with them. Jiyun's husband assists her by obtaining forged travel papers from the black market and advising her on the safest route to leave Pyongyang. By reaching out to reliable allies, Jia reduces her vulnerability and converts her strategic planning into tangible steps.

Another concrete action is her preparation for the journey. Jia rehearses how to speak calmly to soldiers, practices neutral facial expressions, and adjusts her appearance to resemble an obedient citizen. These behavioral strategies help her avoid drawing attention during her escape. According to coping theory, such practical behaviors are essential in problem-focused coping because they directly modify the conditions that create stress. In Jia's case, every practiced response increases the likelihood that she can pass through checkpoints without suspicion.

Ultimately, Jia takes decisive action by beginning the journey itself, using the forged travel permit to move away from Pyongyang. This step demonstrates her willingness to act despite uncertainty and danger. Crossing military checkpoints, boarding transportation, and traveling through controlled areas all require sustained composure and careful adherence to her planned strategies. Through these actions, Jia actively confronts the systemic forces that endanger her, showing that coping is not only a mental process but also a series of purposeful behaviors aimed at altering reality.

Overall, Jia's concrete actions bring together the entire sequence of problem-focused coping. After identifying the threat, generating solutions, evaluating alternatives, and choosing the most viable strategy, she finally takes steps that directly impact her survival. This stage highlights her agency, resilience, and strategic intelligence, demonstrating her ability to resist repression through deliberate and courageous behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

Jia's journey in *Jia: A Novel of North Korea* reveals that psychological survival under authoritarian rule is never accidental; it is a cumulative process shaped by constant threat appraisal, strategic decision-making, and disciplined self-protection. From childhood onward, Jia lives with the knowledge that her identity is dangerous, and this awareness forms the foundation of her coping process. Her vigilance, emotional restraint, and perpetual sensitivity to her social environment illustrate how individuals in repressive settings must continuously negotiate their safety. By the time her true background is exposed, Jia's coping efforts are not spontaneous reactions but carefully developed strategies shaped by years of navigating stigma, surveillance, and fear.

Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory provides a powerful lens through which Jia's actions can be understood as an adaptive psychological pattern rather than isolated responses. Throughout the novel, Jia moves through the stages of problem-focused coping: identifying threats with precision, imagining viable solutions, evaluating risks, selecting trustworthy allies, and translating her plans into action. Her strategies expose a living process of adaptation, shaped by how she interprets danger and summons cognitive, emotional, and behavioral means to survive. Jia's decision to leave Pyongyang is not merely a physical escape but the culmination of an entire cognitive process, a transformation from passive endurance to deliberate agency.

Ultimately, Jia's coping process illuminates the broader psychological reality of life under authoritarianism: survival requires far more than physical endurance; it depends on mental agility, emotional discipline, and strategic foresight. Her capacity to read danger, harness limited resources, and take calculated risks reflects the resilience of individuals living under systemic oppression. By examining Jia's psychological strategies through the framework of Lazarus and Folkman, this study highlights how literary narratives can deepen our understanding of human perseverance in contexts where freedom is restricted and identity itself becomes perilous. Jia's narrative thus contributes to literary discussions of trauma and resilience while demonstrating the remarkable capacity of the human psyche to adjust under the pressures of totalitarian oppression.

Thus, this study fulfills its objectives by demonstrating how Jia's psychological survival is structured through sequential stages of problem-focused coping under authoritarian oppression.

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