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Terry Bryant Law School Scholarship Essay

From an observatory deck in South Korea, I watched people across the North Korean border. I fantasized that they were my relatives. Standing beside my aging grandfather, I felt the intense longing that runs in my family. Separated from his family by war as a teenager, my grandfather's lifelong wish was for the Koreas to reunify. Throughout my life I have heard my mother speak about North Korea in her sermons and seen her tear up thinking about the family she has never met. Yet, I can tell that the separation affects me less deeply than my mother and affects my mother less deeply than my grandfather. This is not due to a lack of love, but to a lack of familiarity that comes with losing something we never had. My grandfather's death last spring brought to the fore an unspoken truth: With each passing generation, the longing felt on either side of the border will fade, and the ties that bind us will loosen.

One of the most painful aspects of North Korea's isolation is that I cannot contact my relatives. However, as a volunteer tutor for a North Korean defector, I gained precious insight into the lives they might live. While I helped this person prepare for the GED, he told me stories about his family, starvation, and mandatory weeping after Kim Il Sung's death. I also learned that for him and other North Korean defectors, technology played a crucial role in providing exposure to the outside world. For example, watching illegal South Korean dramas through VPNs or smuggled USB drives can cause North Korean citizens to doubt their government's anti-capitalist propaganda. Soon, they may begin questioning other aspects of their government's authority. These stories give me hope that, if governed ethically, the spread of technology across borders might enable separated peoples, such as my family, to come into contact.

Technology is, however, a double-edged sword. Now studying Mandarin in Beijing as a Yale Light Fellow, I observe firsthand how an authoritarian regime uses technology to

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consolidate its power at the expense of individuals' freedoms. WeChat messages about "sensitive topics" are mysteriously never sent. At every restaurant, store, and subway stop, faces are scanned so that every individual's whereabouts are always known. Under the guise of public safety, these data are used to track and limit the movement of religious minority groups and political dissidents. The systematic implementation of such technologies creates the sense that surveillance and censorship of speech are as ubiquitous and fundamental as the air we inevitably breathe.

Perhaps most unsettling is the degree to which these constraints are accepted and normalized. Threatened by serious consequences for dissent, nearly everyone appears to accept these limitations, and it is disturbingly easy to do so. In just a year here, I already notice this insidious effect taking root in myself: I used to constantly remind myself to avoid discussing sensitive topics over WeChat messages and in classrooms surveilled by microphones, but now the avoidance is second nature.

I imagine a world where new technologies promote rather than suppress human connection and free speech both domestically and across borders. Throughout my undergraduate education at Yale and my year in China, I have become increasingly convinced that the legal field is where I can have the greatest impact to make this ideal a reality. Law does more than regulate behavior—it shapes the boundaries of what societies come to accept as normal. I have seen how quickly surveillance and censorship can become internalized, transforming from external impositions into quiet, unquestioned habits. But I have also seen the inverse: in the United States, a nation composed of immigrants with vastly different cultural norms, the Constitution establishes a shared expectation of individual liberty that people not only follow but

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can come to believe in. As technological innovation accelerates, the law will play a decisive role in determining whether these tools are used for good or evil.

The US is a global leader in technology and, thus, in a unique position to promote democratic values abroad by requiring that use of our technology complies with democratic principles. As a future lawyer, I hope to work for an international organization, the U.S. government, or a technology company, creating policies that advocate for the most vulnerable people in the world in the face of new technologies. I want to ensure that these technologies promote rather than suppress free speech. Whether this will enable me to communicate with my relatives in North Korea, I cannot say. Nevertheless, the compassion I've inherited from my grandfather's longing drives my pursuit to advance democratic uses of technology for all people living under authoritarian regimes.