The Human Element of Politics: the Modern Political History of Korea as Experienced by its People

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The Human Element of Politics:
An analysis of the modern Korean political experience and the relationship between Korea’s distinct national identity and prospects for reunification

by

Jennifer Kim

Advised by Professor Gerald Easter
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Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this work to my grandparents, Kesun Kim and the late Andrew Kim, for inspiring me through their stories and experiences. My pursuit of this work was aroused by a desire to honor their story, and because of what I have learned about them through the experience of writing this, I feel more proud than I ever have not only to be Korean but also to be a part of their family.

I would like to thank my father, Thomas Kim, for his willingness to share stories with me, for always reminding me of where I come from, and for all his cooperation in helping me prepare our family history.

I would also like to thank Professor Gerald Easter for his support and guidance as my thesis advisor, for backing me in my vision and encouraging me to reshape my design for this project in a way that better captured the spirit of what I wanted to say.
Abstract

In this thesis I trace the modern political history of Korea as experienced by the Korean people in the twentieth century. By focusing largely on my family’s own experience, I trace the master narrative of Korea’s modern political identity, and analyze how the political forces and changes of the past century have impacted the Korean people and shaped their identity, from Japanese annexation to division after World War II, through the Korean War and until the present. By also analyzing the uniquely Korean national collective identity, I also analyze how this political identity and collective suffering will in turn impact prospects for Korean reunification. Though policy analysis and the character of modern Korean politics are essential to understanding these prospects, I ultimately conclude that the desires of the Korean people as one nation for national reunification is a force too unique and strong to ignore.
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- Introduction -

There is a concept in Korean culture known as han. The term is difficult to translate into English, but can be loosely described as a combination of feelings of immense sadness, anger, frustration, and resentment for sufferings and injustices of the past. Many Koreans believe han to be a core component of the collective Korean identity. Korean culture abounds with lamentations and express sorrows that are fueled by han. Some conceptualize han as a sadness so profound that it cannot even be conveyed through tears. A Korean poet named Ko-Un expresses this feeling of han further: “Koreans are born from the womb of han, grew up in the bosom of han, and live out han, die leaving han behind.”¹ It is widely believed to comprise the essence of being Korean, and from Japanese annexation to the Korean War and prolonged national separation, han has been both established and perpetuated by these numerous political tragedies which were left unresolved and irreconcilable. Though han reflects over a century of suffering and division, it is this very han which also unites. It provides a means by which Koreans can have a shared consciousness about their past and a shared hope for their future.

For those in the generation of Koreans who have experienced firsthand the many hardships of life in a peninsula that has been subjugated, tormented, and divided throughout the 20th century at the hands of various international powers, the prospects for reunification are most salient and yet also perhaps the most grim. As this generation slowly fades away, it will become increasingly easy for the realities of modern Korean history to be forgotten. Before the prospects for reunification can be analyzed, it is imperative to examine the stages

¹ Dennis Frederik Burger, “Perspectives on Counselling and the Counsellor in the Korean Culture,” http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-03292007-173605/unrestricted/00dissertation.pdf, p. 70
of Korea’s political history through the 20th century, from its pre-World War II colonization to its post-war division to the Korean War and perhaps most importantly the Cold War politics which immediately followed. Through considering each of these stages, it becomes increasingly apparent that the problems and obstacles seen in attempting reunification are deep-seated ones, and this history provides a necessary framework by which the contemporary Korean political situation can be understood.

Despite the relative ease with which a general narrative on the modern socio-political history of the Korean peninsula can be constructed, the rare opportunity to explore the stories of Koreans on a ground level reveals much more about the very nature of life amid an ever-changing political climate. In the case of Andrew and Kesun Kim, my grandparents, the instability of life under oppressive regimes and the threat of communism, along with decisions they would make made for an experience unlike any other. Theirs is a story of purpose and determination, and most importantly, survival. Unfolding their story provides an understanding of the actual effects of Korea’s modern political history on the lives of its people and how these effects will in turn shape its political future.

In recalling the history of her own life, Kesun Kim exhibits apprehension in discussing those topics which may be “too political.” Despite having been naturalized as a U.S. citizen years ago, her anxiety about answering questions in a manner that might be politically tinged speaks volumes about the life she has led and what political life was like in the most formative years of her early life. As part of a generation which had only known a Korea under Japanese colonial subjugation and which saw the rise of communism in the North, the division of her country, a bloody fratricidal war, and dictatorship and military coups in the South in the years that followed, Kesun and others like her know firsthand the
day to day realities of the political trends which have dominated the modern political
landscape – imperialism, communism, and the Cold War, which is technically still plaguing
the Korean peninsula today.
Chapter 1
- Japanese Annexation and World War II -

Born on March 18, 1923 in Yang-Shi in the Pyeongbuk or North Pyongan province of northern Korea, Kesun Kim was the youngest of three children and the only daughter. By the time she was born, Japanese political rule had already been well-established in Korea and she and others who grew up in this period found that they were living in an extremely tumultuous and confusing time. Because her father owned some land, Kesun and her family were able to just get by without getting hungry, and they were neither poor nor rich by the standards of the time. Other Koreans were not as lucky, for on the whole the Japanese annexation of Korea deprived the Korean population of its pride, identity and wealth. While Kesun’s family was able to sustain itself, it was not immune from the difficulties of the time. Japanese political rule meant that her two older brothers and her father had to go find work in China, and consequently her family was divided, her father being employed in Beijing and her brothers in both Dalian in Manchuria and Shin Kiang, while she and her mother remained at home.

Andrew Kim came from a nearby neighborhood in the same village of Yang-Shi, which lies about twelve miles south of the Chinese border and Yalu River and about 250 miles northwest of Seoul. Andrew was the first of eight children born to Kim Bong Nin, who was an artist and craftsman, and Paik Ssi. As the first born son of his family, Andrew was required to go to work at an early age, between fourteen and sixteen years of age for most. But the nature of the Japanese regime in Korea meant that the best jobs and opportunities for education or advancement went either to the Japanese or to Koreans who were openly pro-
Japanese. As a result, Andrew chose to learn rare skills and pursued studies in graphic arts and civil engineering.

While the existence of two Koreas is seen as an established reality today, it is actually the reflection of continued adversity after a century of hardship on the peninsula. Korea’s arbitrary division at World War II’s end transformed the Korean nation and challenged solidarity even further after decades of torment as a forcibly annexed colony of Japan demoralized and challenged a generation of Korean people.

Although the split of Korea between the Soviet Union and the United States reflected the use of Korea as a pawn of power politics, the same use of the peninsula as a tool for strategic control in the region took place in the fifty years which preceded the incident. Samuel S. Kim describes this use of the Korean peninsula for more than a century as “a highly contested terrain that absorbed and reflected wider geopolitical struggles and even sanguinary wars”2 of all the great powers in the region. Korea’s modern history of manipulation at the hands of greater powers began with Japanese attempts to monopolize power in East Asia. As Roland Bleiker reveals, Japanese minister of war Yamagata Aritomo realized that whoever occupied Korea “would wield enormous control,”3 and consequently wars were fought over its control with China in 1894-1895 and again in 1904-1905 against Russia. Japan’s colonial occupation began with a formal annexation in 1910 and lasted until Japan’s defeat at the end of World War II.

During these thirty-five years, however, Japanese occupation created what Bleiker calls “a certain vacuum of Korean political identity, which could have facilitated the

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3 Bleiker, Roland, Divided Korea, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 7
subsequent imposition of ideological conceptions of self an other that were entirely alien to
the Korean tradition.” Thus instead of being able to determine their political context and
identity on a global scale, Koreans instead endured life under a harsh and oppressive regime
by which their identities were threatened through the forced adoption of Japanese customs
and the eradication of their own. For both Andrew and Kesun, Japanese political rule
affected the way in which they experienced and understood their Korean culture and heritage.
In the thirteen hundred years preceding the forcible annexation by Japanese, Korea had been
invaded many times by surrounding powers such as China and Japan, but had largely enjoyed
a unified and ethnically homogeneous existence.5

Japanese annexation not only meant the forceful occupation of Korea against its will
but also the forceful oppression of Korean culture and identity. As Kesun recalls, “around
the 1930s, despite stealing our country by force against our will, the occupying Japanese
called us Chosen-Jin (people of Chosun), a derogatory term equal to ‘nigger’ in modern
times.” This term essentially deemed Koreans second-class humans and citizens. The
Japanese not only vocalized these racist beliefs but also institutionalized them, banning
Korean history or heritage from being taught in schools and denying Koreans their right to
speak their language and have their own names. In a case study pursued under Comparative
Genocide Studies, it has been argued that renaming citizens not only denied Koreans their
identity but also had the more profound goal of destroying the Korean family system.6
Despite these threats to the cultivation of their ethnic identity, Kesun’s own experience

4 Bleiker, 7
5 John Feffer, North Korea South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis, (New York: Seven Stories Press,
2003), p. 22.
6 http://www.cgs.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/workshops_e/w_2004_02_23_e.html
indicates how Korean heritage stayed alive during this time: “We were taught by our parents through their mouths.”

These Japanese tactics were in keeping with the colonial practices of the great world powers of the time, but were arguably of a very different nature on a country with such a traditionally unified culture and past. Imperialism that took place in the past few hundred years had almost always involved the seemingly arbitrary imposition of the mother country’s culture and political system on native peoples. But unlike colonialism in Africa or even other Asian countries such as the Philippines, where peoples did not share a national language or culture and new nations were formed and boundaries drawn, Japanese annexation imposed a cultural genocide on an exceptionally robust nation of people whose culture had been well-established for centuries and consequently on a perpetually resistant people. Bruce Cumings argues that the Japanese initiated a policy of substitution and not creation in Korea, for Korea had exhibited a level of culture and modernization which impressed Westerners who visited the peninsula before annexation in 1910. Angus Hamilton, a visiting American, declared Korea “a land of exceptional beauty,” finding Seoul far superior to Beijing, as it was “the first city in East Asia to have electricity, trolley cars, a water system, telephone and telegraph all at the same time.” Hamilton offers a vivid description of 1904 Seoul:

The streets are magnificent, spacious, clean, admirably made and well-drained. The narrow, dirty lanes have been widened; gutters have been covered, and roadways broadened…Seoul is within measurable distance of becoming the highest, most interesting, and cleanest city in the East.

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7 Bruce Cumings, “Divided Korea: United Future?” Headline Series, the Foreign Policy Association, no. 306 – Spring, p. 17
8 Cumings 16
9 Ibid. 17
Koreans had much pride in its past and its customs and despite a substitution of a Japanese culture and system for Korean tradition that was incredibly comprehensive, Koreans have not thanked the Japanese for anything it enacted in their country, eradicating and even banning all things Japanese after liberation.

In addition to forced name changes and being required to speak Japanese, Kesun recalls other methods by which the Japanese suppressed Korean culture. During these decades, the Japanese defaced and altered Korean monuments and temples and altered traditional Korean songs and poems. Kesun and Andrew were both converted to Christianity at an early age by missionaries who came from the West. Although Christianity is essentially defunct in North Korea now because of its political system, it was originally in what is now known as North Korea that Western missionaries found success for planting a church on the Korean peninsula, after being rejected by Koreans further south. Kesun still remembers quite vividly the American missionaries who came to her village: “my recollection is that some American missionary people came to our village church to give sermons in very broken Korean.” Andrew was a devout young Christian and often passed out flyers about the Christian faith to strangers at railroad stations and bus depots. But Kesun and Andrew’s Christian faith was also stifled by Japanese political rule, and she explains that they made their Korean subjects worship Shintoism, though she and other Christians refused.

By the time World War II began, Japanese aggression toward colonial subjects only intensified. The invasive rule of the Japanese only continued to afflict Koreans and others under Japanese Imperial rule. As Kesun recalls, at the start of the war, “those of us who were left behind were told to go to the train station to wave and sing good-byes to troops being sent off to war.” As the war deepened, Japan increasingly turned to Korea to supply its
troops, extract resources, and for military industry. So in addition to cultural and religious oppression, the Japanese directly altered the lives of Koreans in other more severe ways. Throughout the war Kesun and her family were affected by shortages in food, clothing, and help. Moreover, in the later stages of the war, Japan’s wartime scarcity led them to turn to Korean households as a source of supplies. Kesun recalls that “the Japanese came and took all our brassware, mostly made as Korean tableware, in order to turn them into ammo castings.” Despite not experiencing harsher direct Japanese atrocities in her own life or seeing it in the lives of her direct family members, Kesun learned at a young age that many young men were being recruited and then forced either to work in Japanese labor camps or to enter into the army.

The trend Kesun observed was phenomenal in terms of the number of Koreans involved. Between 1939 and 1945, nearly 670,000 Koreans were brought to Japan for forced labor, of which thousands would be killed in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and more injured. The Koreans injured from the bombings did not receive compensation from the Japanese government as Japanese victims did, however. Similarly, Korean soldiers drafted to serve in the Japanese army were refused military pensions after the war by the Japanese government.

Young women were eventually forcibly sent away as well during World War II, some as young as twelve years old. These girls often came from poorer and more rural areas and were recruited under the false pretense of future factory employment, only to find that they were actually being used as sex slaves for the Japanese army. Known as “comfort women,”

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11 Feffer 26
the estimated one to two hundred thousand young girls$^{12}$ who survived this brutality in what were essentially officially-sanctioned rape camps$^{13}$ have been fighting to this day for acknowledgment from the Japanese government for their sufferings.

Comfort women were subject not only to constant rape but also to beatings, forceful abortions or other medical experiments and operations without anesthesia, and even death. Eighty-three year old Park Young-Shim recounts in an interview that some Japanese soldiers offered her and other starving comfort women beef soup which they later found out was actually made from the flesh of a Korean girl who they had killed.$^{14}$ Though awareness for such atrocities and the general plight of the comfort women has been widely spread particularly among young Korean-American college students as a House Bill is currently under consideration for this awaited political recognition, it is a particularly sobering aspect of modern Korean history for women of Kesun’s generation. This easily could have been Kesun’s fate as well, and so hits very close to home for her and others who share her past and upbringing.

The harshness of Japanese rule combined with the resilience of Korean civic pride made for a volatile combination and the fight for independence was largely formative to Kesun’s identity as a young Korean girl living in an oppressive regime. She reflects on these independence movements, emphasizing that “it was exciting to hear about the dissidents and soldiers for independence, fighting for the freedom of Koreans overseas. It gave us a lot of hope that some day, our country would be free of Japanese rule.” These Koreans exhibited

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$^{12}$ Cumings 22  
what can only be described as incredible feats of self-determination, particularly following World War I. Pro-independence movements in March and April of 1919 saw the participation of over two million Koreans, though Japan responded by killing thousands of these protesters and arresting over twenty thousand. Realizing that men were fighting with fervor to sustain a heritage which she was forbidden to embrace helped Kesun realize that there was something fundamentally wrong with the way of life she knew.

Though Korea previously had not formed its own political identity or context, the consequent political climate which formed during this period was one of uprising and protest to resist the Japanese and fight for Korean sovereignty. Attempts at diplomacy and appeals made to enlist support from President Theodore Roosevelt were essentially unsuccessful, and despite successfully dispatching three Korean delegates to the Hague for 1907’s Second International Peace Conference at the Hague, efforts to beseech international support for the Korean cause were blocked by Japanese delegates who were also present. While Korean nationalism flourished during this occupation period in particular as a reaction to the imposed Japanese presence, no modern political identity seemed to exist beyond this nationalism. Furthermore, there was no unified national movement to make this nationalism effective or tangible, only the negative anti-Japanese stance was shared by every Korean. This quality reflected to some degree what Sung Chul Yang calls “anti-foreign negativism” which had developed through centuries of invasion, identifying what Koreans did not want to be, primarily directed towards colonial and Western influences and a desire to maintain and

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15 Feffer 25
“restore the traditional order.”[17] True modern political identities did not emerge until political systems were forcibly installed into the two pliable zones by ideologically opposed powers at the end of World War II.

As the war heightened, Andrew married Paik Kesun, then a nineteen year old Christian girl, in January 1942 after a brief courtship arranged by both of their families. Kesun had stopped going to school after middle school, as most girls were not encouraged to be educated beyond high school at the time. Girls were generally expected to help with housework and chores while being groomed and prepared for young marriage, so that families would have one less mouth to feed. With his background in the arts and civil engineering, Andrew was sent all over the Korean peninsula for various job assignments but the couple eventually settled in a city called Anshan, in Manchuria, the northeastern section of China bordering the north of Korea. Andrew served as a supervisor of a Japanese owned construction company there. The Japanese-sponsored Showa Steel Works in Anshan was an iron processing industrial site and was of great strategic importance to Japan during the war because of the steel and iron it provided. Construction projects such as these along with other budding industries had begun to spring up across the peninsula and beyond, starting from the 1930s, as Japan industrialized within its colonies, building up infrastructure via railroads and roads and extracting resources to supply its own economy. During this time in Manchuria, Mr. and Mrs. Kim found that they had to dodge bombing raids by the United States, who was targeting these Japanese military and strategic installations in the surrounding area in 1944. The couple was forced to seek refuge in bomb shelters to avoid the frequent attacks made by B-29 bombers of the United States Army Air Forces.

[17] Ibid., 130
The couple stayed in Anshan until the end of the war. Kesun still vividly remembers the day Korea was liberated from Japanese control. On August 15th, 1945, Kesun and her fellow Koreans were elated to hear the news of Japanese surrender to the Americans. As she recalls, “at first, we couldn’t believe it, so we were listening to the radio over and over again. We went out into the street and danced happily. I believed that from then on, we could all live with dignity and pride. I still can’t describe those feelings even today.” Japanese defeat meant that Korea would be liberated at last from thirty-five years of foreign political occupation and humiliation. But Japanese occupation of the peninsula was simply replaced by occupation by two new powers – the United States and the Soviet Union, as the United Nations planned in 1945 for separate trusteeship administration of the newly freed country. When Kesun learned that her country and people would be split, her heart was filled with immense sadness and disappointment.

To this day Japanese annexation has left an unavoidably bitter taste in the mouths of Koreans of Kesun’s generation. Relations between Koreans and the Japanese government have been tumultuous not only because of the sufferings of the past but also because of a demonstrated reluctance on the part of Japanese officials to recognize the various wrongdoings of the imperial system of the past. Those aspects of Japanese colonialism that are already most unforgivable, such as the use of the comfort women and Unit 731, covert biological warfare and germ research in which subjects from the Imperial colonies such as Korea and China were used as test subjects of inhumane experiments, have been omitted from Japanese textbooks and either have not been officially recognized by the Japanese government or have been acknowledged only by what Koreans view as half-hearted and insincere apologies. Koreans and Japanese have been fighting for decades over Korean
artifacts which remain in Japanese possession, and the issues of rightful ownership and the return of these items remains a sensitive issue plaguing relations between the two countries. An estimated eighty percent of all Korean Buddhist paintings are believed to be in Japan.\textsuperscript{18} Even Koreans who have built up new lives in other parts of the world such as the U.S. still harbor resentment for past pains, many refusing to buy products made by Japanese companies such as Sony or Japanese cars.

While Kesun does not fall under this category of extremists, she can hardly forget how colonialism affected her and her family’s lives. Her life was essentially defined and shaped for the first twenty years of her life by how she and those around her were forced to live at the hands of a foreign political power. Fortified only with the knowledge of a Korea of her family’s past, Kesun never lived in Korea as it should have been. Her upbringing and experiences in these early years were remarkable in so many ways and yet merely mark the beginning of a perpetually remarkable life. Indeed, these hardships were only the start of a continued struggle to survive during dire political times.

Chapter 2
- Division and the Korean War -

While much attention has been given in studying the power politics at play in post-war Europe, Yang aptly asserts that “no division of a nation in the wake of World War II [was] so arbitrary, abnormal and artificial as the division of Korea,”19 which occurred against the wishes of its inhabitants. Days after the American bombing of Hiroshima, the Soviet Union’s declaration of war against Japan prompted the movement of Russian troops into Manchuria and Korea. Chosen by Colonel Dean Rusk and Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bonesteel III in the Pentagon,20 the 38th parallel had no significance geographically or socio-politically, as no sub-national ethnic groups exist in the Korean peninsula. Rather, the dividing line was strategically chosen as a method by which the surrender of Japanese forces could be received methodically between the Soviet Union, who already militarily occupied the northern region, and the United States, who wanted to prevent further Soviet movement down the peninsula and retain control over the capital city Seoul in particular. The American officials who chose this line consulted no Koreans21. While Joseph Stalin accepted the 38th Parallel proposal, even this agreement may have been in pursuit of self-interest; Chae-Jin Lee argues that in accepting the proposal, Stalin “expected that Truman would agree to share the postwar administration of Japan” and saw the approach to the division and occupation of Korea as “preferable to the four-way zonal split of Germany.”22 The North became the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK, while the South became the Republic of

19 Ibid., 149
21 Cumings 25
22 Ibid., 20
Korea, or ROK. In spite of the allies’ wartime agreement allowing Korea to regain independence after Japanese defeat, the occupiers’ inability to agree on how to unite the country and the strategic value of the territory to each of the powers seem to have worked in tandem to ensure the continued division of Korea. After American troops arrived in the South, it was decided that Japanese troops north of the 38th parallel would turn themselves over to the Soviets while those in the South retreated to the Americans. As these two alien powers made crucial decisions concerning Korea’s future, uninformed and confused as they were, the Korean population in the period immediately following World War II was helpless in many ways.

Kesun and Andrew returned to Yang-Shi in the autumn of 1945, and by this time Kesun was pregnant with their first child, Young Chul, who was born the following January. As they made their way back to Korea from Manchuria, the couple had to slip past both the Japanese troops retreating to the Soviet Union and also the Soviet communists who were slowly flowing into the Korean peninsula. Because of the danger involved in crossing paths with either of these parties, Kesun had to dress like a boy in order to avoid possible harassment or even worse, seizure and assault or rape.

Back in Yang-Shi, Mr. and Mrs. Kim discovered that their home village had drastically changed with the new Soviet occupation. At the time, the only thing Kesun knew about the Soviet Union was that it was a communist country. As the reality of Soviet occupation set in, however, Kesun and Andrew began to catch a glimpse of what life would be like in a communist North Korea. Kesun recalls, “I first saw a Russian soldier near town. All he wanted was for us to give him something valuable….watches, food, money…” Kesun considered these Russians “Soviet thugs,” who constantly set out to harass Koreans. These
thugs and the newly formed communists of Korea were backed by the Soviet Union and its pawn, Kim Il Sung. This rising class of communists began to mobilize and started trying to recruit more members.

Kesun recalls being harassed many times by gangs of communists who went on recruiting rampages, hounding people to attend their meetings, which were gradually being conducted with growing frequency. One by one Koreans were being converted into accepting the communist rhetoric and ideology that Kim Il Sung and the Soviets were advancing. As Christians, it was difficult for Kesun and Andrew to continue living in peace, as they wanted nothing to do with the communists and had no desire to attend their meetings. When asked what her biggest fear was at this time, Kesun tells of how close to home the communist threat came: “My next door neighbor became a communist party member. There were people gathered in their home every night. We were afraid that they might soon turn us in.”

Needless to say, life was difficult for Kesun and Andrew during this time. They had never heard of Kim Il Sung before the Korean liberation, but Kesun noticed that posters of him began appearing in public areas. She did not know much about him and his emerging regime, but the general lack of freedom and the pressures bore upon her and her family made moving to the South increasingly appealing. For Kesun, the breaking point was when her own best friend joined the communist party and tried to hassle her into attending meetings with her. With this sobering reality, Kesun and Andrew made the decision to escape to the South. To this day, those North Koreans who fled share the common factor of hatred towards Communists. As Bong Lee asserts, “the North Korean refugees have by and large
remained more anti-Communists than the average South Korean.”

As the two Koreas developed into very different places under two very different
foreign powers, Kesun had heard that the South was in general “more lively” and had more
to offer to its people than the North – “life was more free.” Though the Korean War had not
yet broken out, tensions and security were both high. Kesun describes the extraordinary
manner in which she, Andrew, and Young Chul escaped:

We escaped in the darkness of the night with only what we could carry in our hands.
First, we hired a guide and we set off on foot in P'yŏng Yang, and then onto Hae Ju
(Hwang Hae Do). From there, we hired a rowboat which took us down the sea off the
coast of the shoreline to the south. That was in 1947.

Risking their lives for the chance to start new lives somewhere else, Kesun and Andrew may
have been leaving their lives in the North behind, but could not have known that it would be
for good.

Once they reached the South, Mr. and Mrs. Kim established their new life in Seoul,
where Kesun’s aunt had already settled. She took Kesun and Andrew in, giving them a room
in which to stay with their young child. It was not long before Kesun and Andrew realized
that people in the South were not very welcoming towards North Korean refugees like
themselves, despite being of the same people. After settling, Andrew was hired to work for
the United States government. When the Republic of Korea officially emerged as a
sovereign country in 1948 under United States guidance, formal diplomatic relations could
officially be established between the U.S. and South Korea, and South Korea was the only
Korea which the U.S. formally recognized. Andrew got a job at a United States Army base

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in Seoul, the new capital of the South, and had various other jobs working for the United States embassy and such over the next few years, while Kesun made some money knitting. Their daughter and second child Mi Sook was born on October 15, 1948.

The years between World War II and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1953 were the most politically formative years for modern Korea. By 1948, leaders were established in each part; elections in the South gave way to a conservative government led by Syngman Rhee while the North forged a Communist government led by Kim Il Sung, under Soviet guidance. While historians often emphasize the ideological polarity between North and South, North Koreans were not quick to welcome Communism, despite land reform and other supposed benefits; the concept of equality did not suit the Korean culture of respect for elders and the educated well.  

But the political situation which ultimately emerged and endured through the Cold War thus stems from decisions made in these formative stages of political development. Samuel S. Kim aptly highlights that “the foreign relations that define the place of North and South Korea in the world community today are therefore the product of the trajectories that the states … were forced to take – given their Cold War identity and politics.”  

The two governments which emerged were hostile and largely different in political ideology and identity, and were generally not representative of the people over whom they had authority.

Living in Seoul during this time was, relatively speaking, the calm before the storm known as the Korean War, but was still far from stable. The South was plagued by political unrest, as Syngman Rhee’s regime targeted left-leaning Koreans and sought to eliminate

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25 Samuel S. Kim, 5
political rivals and activists. In one particularly extreme act, Rhee’s government suppressed a rebellion on the island of Cheju that left 60,000 dead and 40,000 in exile. In sum, Rhee is estimated to have killed nearly 100,000 suspected leftists and imprisoned another 100,000. Kesun and Andrew had many uncertainties about the future of their country and its leadership. Though the Soviet Union and the United States had agreed that the two sides would be unified by 1950, the escalation of the Cold War eventually nullified this commitment. The Korean War which broke out soon after the establishment of governments secured division within the country even further, and is largely accepted as the first true case of Cold War conflict and the first test for the newly-formed United Nations’ collective security arrangement, two occurrences which essentially meant that the handling of policies in Korea during this time required delving into politically uncharted territory.

“The war broke out on a Sunday morning and there was chaos everywhere,” Kesun remembers. “I heard cannons and gunfire all night.” The Korean War began in 1950 as skirmishes emerged along the border between North and South, of which the North Koreans were the clear aggressors. Kim Il Sung, who had served as a Captain in the Soviet Red Army through World War II, was a well-trained Communist and adopted propagandistic strategies to convince North Koreans that South Korea had issued threats under U.S. control, and made promises of liberation for their South Korean brethren. In actuality, Kim Il Sung’s government was a totalitarian communist system that placed much emphasis on its military and para-military organizations, and desired to unify the Korean peninsula by means of force of arms under Communism. When Kim Il Sung launched an attack on the South in

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26 Feffer 29  
27 Yang, 698
June 1950, he did so under the banner of unification, as a “revolutionary-nationalist rather than a Communist. He talked about Korea, not about the Communist international.” When the invasions occurred, they were perceived by the international community as a Soviet-orchestrated scheme, particularly by the United States, who saw them as a challenge designed to test American resolve.

When asked if she understood the politics of the conflict, Kesun answers, “No, not specifically, except that it was a communist’s attempt to forcibly unite north and south.” The war came unexpectedly and caught everyone by surprise, according to Kesun. Bruce Cumings maintains that Kim’s frontal attack which launched the war was mainly his own decision, “to which he got Stalin’s reluctant acquiescence.” The U.S. tailored their response accordingly, identifying the need to contain this aggression or face the spread of Communism, and despite collective action under United Nations approval, the United States would undoubtedly have proceeded with the war with or without this support. It became the first confrontation of the Cold War for the U.S. and the Soviet Union. As the world would soon find out, powerful personalities in the North would come to dominate its political system for the next half-century.

The war itself revealed the extent to which tension between the two regions deepened as a result of the exploitative trusteeship system. In his account of the Korean War, Bong Lee reveals that the Soviets provided ample military sponsorship for the North, who “had enough arms to equip an artillery regiment and an armored brigade complete with 120 Soviet T-32 medium tanks,” in addition to having well-trained soldiers. The South was

28 Cumings 35
29 Ibid. 35
30 Bong Lee, 51
comparatively ill-prepared not only militarily but also in terms of industry, resources, and producing electrical power. The provision of American support and leadership under General Douglas MacArthur during the war turned the seemingly inevitable demise of the South Koreans around. While the actions of Secretary of State Dean Acheson and the pulling of American troops from South Korea before the war implied that the U.S. would not defend her, the sudden and surprising policy change stemmed from the National Security Council’s policy Document NSC-68, which had been approved exactly 2 months prior to the outbreak of war and stated that the U.S. “would resist any Communist threat to non-Red nations anywhere in the world.”

Despite what seemed to be imminent collapse on the continent as the battlefront moved further south each day, MacArthur’s landing in Inchon changed the course of the war entirely, as the recovery of the rest of South Korea and reversal of the battlefront penetrating deep into the North soon followed.

When the war began to intensify and troops from the North came closer and closer to Seoul, Kesun and Andrew knew they could not stay in the city any longer. Panic and chaos erupted through the country, and its people and social infrastructures disintegrated overnight. The necessity of leaving was particularly salient for Andrew, and as Kesun explains, “since my husband worked for the Americans, we were certain that they would be looking for him soon…The communists who were already embedded in the South began sprouting up everywhere.” These communists began looking to turn in anyone who fit the characteristics of the bourgeoisie or who lived a pro-Western life and supported Western ideology. Andrew’s position working for the United States had inevitably made him a target for these communists. As danger became more imminent, Andrew’s escape would unavoidably divide

31 Bong Lee, 79
their family. Kesun had to persuade her husband, who was reluctant to leave Kesun and his children behind, to flee as soon as possible. She urged him to do so with the knowledge that if communist informants came and got home, they would surely execute him. Throughout this all, Kesun clung to her faith and assured Andrew that God would reunite them.

After Andrew’s departure, some men came looking for him. Kesun told them that their family had been separated the night before amidst all the chaos and they left. Not long after, Kesun took her two children and followed the rest of the people in the area who were heading south as the war front slowly did the same. It was during the early stages of the war when Northern troops had taken Seoul and pushed the warfront nearly to the southernmost tip of the peninsula, at Pusan, that Kesun had to worry most for her and her family’s wellbeing. Young Chul and Mi Sook were three and one respectively at the time. As difficult as it was for Kesun to be faced with the prospect of now having to take care of her family without her husband, her life would become much harder than she could have expected. She started to wander, looking for a safe place to stay, and began to seek refuge anywhere, with anyone who would take her and her children into their homes.

The plight that Kesun was faced with was widely shared by South Koreans at the time. As Richard Peters and Xiaobing Li contend, “sometimes the saddest and most tragic stories in war are not about the soldiers, but about the civilians, especially the women and children.” In the case of the Korean War, thousands of civilian refugees roamed the roads, wandering without homes and fleeing from the invading communist army. They cite one story of a Korean housewife not unlike Kesun, who was forced to leave Seoul and hide

during the brief North Korean occupation of South Korea in someone’s basement. When her husband left their hiding place to go for a walk, he was seized by North Korean police officers and was brutally beaten, nearly to the point of death. He and other South Koreans who were wanted by the North Korean police eventually had to move into the mountains and live in a cave when their hiding place became too dangerous.33

Kesun eventually ended up deep in the woods in the mountains as well, finding protection in a Buddhist temple. To this day she considers it a blessing that she was able to find a place for her and her children to stay, away from the horrors of war. She had no possessions and no money, and so found odd jobs here and there, performing chores and providing labor for people so she could get food for her children and protect them from the harsh conditions. In general, Kesun found the shortages of food, medicine, and heat to be particularly challenging for her and her two young children. When her daughter came down with dysentery, Kesun was helpless, unable to do anything for her. She could only leave it in the hands of God. Mi Sook fortunately got well later.

Meanwhile, Andrew had made his way down to Pusan, which became a temporary capital for the South during the war. He went to work for the United States embassy there during the months of the North Korean occupation. When General MacArthur and the United Nations troops successfully launched their famous attack at Inchon on September 15, 1950, the North Korean troops were trapped and forced to retreat, and Andrew was able to send for Kesun and their children in the temple. The family finally reunited in Pusan after months of separation and hardship.

33 Ibid. 208
After Seoul was recaptured from the North, they were able to return home unharmed. The conflict continued for the next few years, a civil war among a divided people. Before the division had taken place, all that Kesun knew about the United States was that it was a huge country. She had not learned anything about it, as nothing about it was taught at schools in the country when she was growing up. But American occupation changed everything, and the indelible U.S. hand which guided the South after World War II was apparent in everything from the aggressive pursuit of a capitalist economy to the uninterrupted U.S. military presence in the South and at the DMZ.

While MacArthur is noted to have assured President Truman of victory and an end of resistance by Thanksgiving followed by the return of American soldiers to the U.S. by Christmas, Chinese intervention in the North across the Yalu River via hundreds of thousands of troops called the Chinese People’s Volunteers ultimately led to three more years of fratricidal fighting, the loss of too many lives, and a stalemate which resulted in an armistice, not a peace treaty, to end the War in 1953. South Korea never even signed this armistice agreement, which amounted to little more than a cease-fire. Interestingly but perhaps unsurprisingly, almost half of the 130,000 Chinese and North Korean prisoners of war told their American captors that they did not want to return to their countries. 34 The dividing line along the 38th parallel was re-adopted, and the armistice established this line as the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, and hopes for unification by Koreans in both the North and South alike became less and less realistic as hostility between the two political systems continued through the decades that followed.

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34 Meisler, 70
Like most Korean people at the time, Kesun and Andrew wished for total victory for the UN forces under General MacArthur. Even after China’s masses of troops became involved in the conflict and left the war in a deadlock, Koreans could not easily swallow the reality of prolonged division. They held out hope for the possibility that MacArthur would push the communists far into the North, across the Yalu River and well into China. When recalling the emotions she felt at the war’s end, Kesun could only think of one word to describe how she felt – disappointment. Again, hope for the future of the peninsula was replaced by frustration and sadness.
Chapter 3  
- The Development of Two Koreas -

Don Oberdorfer aptly notes that “one of the most important consequences of the war was the hardening of ideological and political lines between North and South,” 35 and while very different in ideology, both post-war Korean states were dictatorial and corrupt. Syng-Man Rhee’s South Korean regime was not Communist but became a crooked one no less, and was forced out of office by a student-led revolt in 1960. 36 The prolonged division of the peninsula after the war was shocking to Koreans, many of whom had their families split and did not see their relatives again, such as Andrew’s, failing to realize that the split would be a lasting one.

Since returning to Seoul, Andrew had resumed working for the United States. With his history of accomplishments and the work ethic he had exhibited, Andrew was eventually granted a supervising position with the Art and Exhibition department of the newly-formed United States Information Agency, a branch of the Department of State. The USIA became an official entity in 1953, less than a month after the Korean War had ended. In its mission statement, the USIA existed to explain and support American foreign policy and promote “U.S. national interests through a wide range of overseas information programs” and “mutual understanding between the United States and other nations by conducting educational and cultural activities.” 37 The USIA maintained 190 posts in 142 countries during its forty-six year existence.

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35 Don Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas, (Basic Books, 1997), 10
36 Ibid., 10
37 USIA Factsheet, http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/usia/usiahome/factshe.htm
Once in this capacity, Andrew worked hard and turned out a variety of projects which represented American life and culture and introduced it to Koreans. In retrospect this campaign was largely propagandistic and indicative of the measure to which the U.S. was willing to go in its Cold War policy to contain communism and promote freedom and democracy worldwide. Through programs, presentations, and exchanges which were carried out under the banner of civic education, the USIA ensured that an American presence would be tangible in all parts of the globe. It was ultimately the United States Information Agency which officially took ownership of administering and overseeing the Fulbright Scholarship program. Andrew worked with much fervor and energy and earned respect and recognition within the Korean arts and social circuits but also within the Agency.

Andrew served in this position for the next sixteen years of his life as his family grew. Kesun and Andrew’s third child Sechul, my father, was born on October 23, 1955. The family of five built up their lives in post-war Seoul. Where it had originally been weaker, South Korea and its pursuit of economic growth and capitalism made it the more dynamic and successful of the two Koreas. Sechul recalls that growing up, he was a “pretty carefree, happy-go-lucky,” free to run around the city doing errands for his father downtown when he was as young as seven or eight, after which he would be rewarded with ice cream. It is hard to imagine that children of the North were enjoying the same freedom.

For all the official rhetoric of unification by both sides and the collective national identity of Korea, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism failed to bring about the changes that had been desire for so long by so many. Understanding this phenomenon requires understanding the course of Cold War politics and identity-formation in each regime.
President Syng Man Rhee is said to have made his frustrations at the emergent political situation publicly known, “accusing America of abandoning his country” and “insisted that if it were not for the secret American-Russian agreement made behind the back of Koreans, there would be no Communism in Korea, nor a separate North and South Korea.”38 While this may be the case, both regimes perpetuated divisions. The burdens of post-war reconstruction on both sides were handled differently and each side gave way to both separate and different political situations. Each state based and continues to base its legitimacy “on being the antithesis and antagonist of the other,”39 and thus South Korean identity has meant not being Communist, while North Korean identity has meant not being capitalist and under imperial control – both are articulated in negative terms.40 Each state also enacted policies to ensure control over civil society restricting access to information from the opposing side and sought to repress dissent; unauthorized border crossing led to imprisonment for fraternizing with the enemy.41 Ideology-based education and media control also characterized each state. Furthermore, any and all communication between North and South was cut off entirely.

North Korea’s comprehensively oppressive regime is essentially still run by the same elite system that emerged during this time. Kim Il Sung eliminated political opponents early in his political career, and centralized the North Korean system to the extent that the leadership would remain the same for four decades. The North Korean system is structured largely around the ideological Juche concept, a Korean term which emphasizes self-

38 Bong Lee, 68
40 Bleiker, 10
41 Ibid., 21
sufficiency. Its goal as an ideology has been independence from external powers, and Kim Il Sung would even pit his own Communist allies against one another, desiring only security for his own regime; when the Sino-Soviet divide emerged in the mid-1950s, Kim successfully persuaded each to sign treaties of friendship and alliance with North Korea against the other, but “adroitly avoided siding with either of the two.” Kim took the traditionally hermetic nature of Korea to an unforeseeable extreme, shutting out the rest of the international community while using his own fabricated personality cult to essentially brainwash a nation. Sung Chul Yang makes notes of Kim’s hypocritical rule, nothing that his own personality cult “has far surpassed that of Stalin or Mao in magnitude, intensity, and duration,” and while his proclaimed advocacy of the power of the masses were the ideological foundation for his regime, “in reality he has been the master of North Korea for more than forty years.” Such statements only reveal the surface of his complex and distorted political personality. The continued implementation and centrality of this *Juche* ideology under Kim Il Sung’s son and successor, Kim Jong Il, is a primary roadblock to progress towards reunification.

South Korea followed a very different political path after the war; unlike North Korea’s uninterrupted regime under Kim, the South Korean system saw seven regimes come to power in the decades leading up to the Cold War’s end. After Rhee’s overthrow in 1960, Park Chung Hee led South Korea for eighteen years, from his military coup in 1961 to his assassination in 1979. As Kim Il Sung was the clear dominant political figure in the North, Park would come to be known as the counter-figure in the South, his regime leaving a greater

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42 Oberdorfer, 11
43 Yang, 183
44 Ibid., 188
45 Obernofer, 31
mark than any of the others in the South within this timeframe. Park saw the source of a South Korean turnaround to be rapid economic growth, establishing an Economic Planning Council to design an economic system and development plan centered around “the principle of free enterprise and respect for freedom,”\textsuperscript{46} in the form of guided capitalism. Park’s attempts to emulate Japanese post-war success led to the unpopular but highly intelligent decision to normalize relations with Japan in 1965, which led to a Japanese assistance package of $800 million and much more in the future in the form of investments and economic links.\textsuperscript{47} Park essentially transformed the weaker state into a dramatically different country in a few decades’ time.

Both states sought to escape their reliance on the U.S. and Soviet powers respectively, but each state found it difficult to do so. North Korea was dependent on Soviet aid early in the Cold War. The U.S. maintained a military presence in the South throughout this period and continues to have 37,000 American troops stationed there today,\textsuperscript{48} and North Korean attempts to recruit Soviet or Chinese backing to renew warfare against the South in the mid-1970s were rejected because of the simultaneously taxing Vietnam War. Washington also vetoed South Korean nuclear ambitions, proving that the U.S. “could still wield impressive clout on security issues when convinced that its most vital interests were at stake,”\textsuperscript{49} despite the progress South Korea had made economically to advance its status in the global community. The two were linked through a security treaty and what Bleiker calls a patron-client relationship between Washington and Seoul.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 34
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 34
\textsuperscript{48} Bleiker, 39
\textsuperscript{49} Obernofer, 48
\textsuperscript{50} Bleiker 41
As he grew up during this formative time, Sechul learned both through what he was taught and his own realizations that although he was living in what was technically the Republic of Korea of the South, he was still part of the same people who resided in the North. This impression was particularly salient to him as the child of North Korean refugees, and the sentiment that the peninsula was inhabited by a people who were divided only by ideology was and is still shared by Koreans today. Particularly as news of the harsh regime in the North trickled southward, Sechul says, “I was always curious about my relatives and homeland, but I never really missed being in the North.” At the same time, American influence was clear in many ways. While Kesun had never even heard of the United States in school, Sechul was required to learn English in school from an early age and was exposed to American culture through magazines and the television he watched during his childhood.

Andrew’s sixteen year term serving in the United States Information Agency and the quality of the work he produced led to official recognition. In 1967 he was given the award of Distinguished Services from the State Department through the then Ambassador to Korea, William Porter. For Andrew, such an accolade was indeed the highlight of his professional career and the pinnacle of his achievements. To be able to receive such an honor after decades of hardship was an immensely powerful reminder of how fortunate he was. His life had been comprised of a series of events in which both timing and self-determination worked hand in hand to ensure his and his family’s safety and freedom.

The following year, Andrew retired from this position, and was then invited to immigrate to the United States. Along with this invitation came a position which would be made available to him immediately upon his arrival in Washington, D.C. The decision was one of the most difficult that Andrew ever had to make; he abuished over it for weeks
before accepting the offer. After fifty years of both good fortune and much adversity amidst an ever-changing socio-political landscape, Andrew was permanently leaving behind life on a peninsula shaped by more confusion, disruption, tumult, and change than most, though these memories and formative experiences would never leave him. Leaving the Korean peninsula was a vastly different experience from any of the three times he had uprooted his life before. Putting his wife and three children on a trans-Pacific plane was a far cry from being a political refugee and escaping in the darkness of night. In those decades of his early adult life, Andrew had been forced to make decisions to replant his family’s life in order to save and protect his family, but the opportunity to better his family’s life drastically revealed how much things had truly changed in South Korea. Andrew had the freedom to pursue his career as he desired and the freedom to leave as he pleased.

Immigrating to the United States in August of 1969, the Kim family was destined for Washington, D.C., where Andrew’s job awaited him. The family stopped in Los Angeles to visit some of Andrew’s friends and caught a glimpse of the Southern California lifestyle, even stopping at Disneyland in Anaheim. The family liked those few days so much that they decided to stay and make L.A. their new home instead. Sechul, who was fourteen years old at the time, had been very excited to move to America. He recalls thinking that America would be a terrific place to live, with “great foods, cars, people, and the way of life [he had] only heard about and read in the magazines.” Seeing palm trees everywhere was exotic and was a particularly palpable reminder of how different his old and new homes were. With its wide streets and cleaner environment, and lacking the overcrowded feel of Seoul, Los Angeles offered the Kims a drastically new lifestyle, and immersion in a model society of capitalism and democracy.
Meanwhile, Park Chung Hee’s regime was ultimately unstable, despite being remarkably successful in terms of the economy, and his repressive political included a brief period of martial law in 1972 to quell opposition. Many of the powerful economic systems he put into place also established a foundation for corruption after his 1979 assassination. South Korea would undergo many political and constitutional transformations but became the South Korea seen today in 1988, as free elections and civilian democratic rule were adopted. South Korean economic growth continued, however, and joined the other East Asian Tigers such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, surviving 1997’s East Asian Financial Crisis to become a major economic power not only in East Asia but the world.

North Korea, on the other hand, has not met the same success, as Kim Jong Il’s rule since his father’s death in 1994 has only led to economic decline, further corruption, and devastating food shortages. The North saw its support from former communist blocs dwindle, as the Soviet Union opened diplomacy with the South, attracted to its economic growth and expecting that “South Korea could somehow play a role in the success of perestroika.”\(^51\) China also shifted support as its diplomacy was shaped by the need to move “unproductive ideological commitments”\(^52\) such as North Korea down its priority list in order to engage with capitalistic states instead.

Having given up his job in Washington, D.C., Andrew had difficulty finding something to replace it. He was then fifty two years old, and having to start a new life in a new country was undoubtedly a nerve-wracking experience. The family lived modestly for some time, Kesun and Andrew working very hard to provide for their three children. But

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\(^51\) Obernofer 210
\(^52\) Ibid., 243
they were armed with hope in the American dream and their three children ultimately built up families in America as well, their children able to attend college and build up their professional careers.

Sechul, whose American name became Thomas, joined the U.S. Army during college and was ironically placed at the Demilitarized Zone dividing North and South Korea. Though he had signed up to be sent to Korea, arriving at the DMZ was a rude awakening for Thomas, who was unaware that the U.S. even maintained a military presence there. The first few days he spent there were among the scariest of his life, as he could hear gunfire even as he tried to sleep. This 148-mile long reminder of divided Korea reminded Thomas every day of the land that his family had left behind. Even today, tensions have not eased along this border, and North and South Korean officers alike watch one another vigilantly and persistently. Thomas had gone with the knowledge that he wanted to learn more about himself, and ultimately saw his time in service as an opportunity to represent something much greater than himself: “My loyalties were above and beyond the nations. I knew my being part of the troops deployed there was to preserve the democracy and freedom of the free world, and to keep South Korea from being invaded by the communist thugs and ideology.” These words are a powerful echo of his parents’ sentiments.

As more time passed and North and South Korea slowly evolved into increasingly different nations, more and more disparate in character each day, Kesun has observed this phenomenon with both sadness and awe. After Kim Jong-Il inherited North Korean leadership after his father’s death in 1994, Kesun watched as her homeland spiraled even further into isolation and poverty, where the juche concept had been and continues to be pursued and enacted to the extreme. In this same decade, South Korea experienced the most
rapid economic growth ever recorded in modern economic history. The political rift between the two grew deeper and deeper, as Southern prosperity skyrocketed and Northern suffering and famine has seemed incurable, as the walls around North Korea have been so intolerably secured shut to the outside world.

When Kesun and Andrew left for the South, Andrew knew that hardships and persecution were certain for his parents and siblings, who he was leaving behind. At the time, his only consolation lay in the hope that the North would soon collapse under its own failure and from a lack of popular support. He believed that it would some day be possible for him to see his family again. He believed that Korea would eventually be reunited as one free country. Sadly, as we all know, he was wrong. Andrew would never return home, and also never saw his family again. He never had the opportunity to even learn what had happened to his family, where they had ended up, or whether they had even survived. Andrew passed away in May of 2000, without the opportunity to see progress made to reconcile North and South. He passed away before seeing that some families that had been divided had the opportunity to reunite after decades of separation. Andrew passed away with little else but disappointment, and never saw the materialization of the hopes and dreams for his country which he had held on too for so long.

Despite all the adversity she has faced in her life, Kesun is still grateful for the many ways in which she believes God intervened to protect her family. She is sure of God’s hand in all her times of struggle and danger, knowing that being saved from the ravages of both wars was God’s intercession in her life. As she says, “I believe that God was with me even before I was born. So I always believed he would be with me wherever I went.” Kesun was faced with many difficult decisions during her life, many of which involved uprooting her
life to start somewhere new. Her Christian faith has kept her standing when nothing else could. Ironically, although Pyongyang in North Korea once served as the center of Christianity in Korea before division, North Korea now tops the list of countries in the world where Christians are most severely persecuted.\(^{53}\)

In recent years, Kesun has been able to travel back to Asia on separate occasions. On a visit to Korea, she had the opportunity to enter North Korea the only way tourists can – to visit Kumgang-San, the second-tallest mountain in North Korea. The region has only been open since 1998, and is a special administrative region run by the government to raise money through tourism. The region’s only accepted currency is the U.S. dollar, and visitors are not allowed to bring laptops, PDAs, cellphones, and cameras or binoculars which exceed the zoom limit set by the government.\(^{54}\) The beautiful mountain scenery is the only part of North Korea which Kesun could enter, and much like the rest of the modern North, is largely characterized by staged set-ups and villages.

Kesun also visited China for a missions trip in 2006, and was able to visit the mountain range bordering China and North Korea. Atop Paektu-San, Kesun could look into North Korea and could not help but feel heartbroken remembering all that her people had gone through and realizing what her people continue to go through each day even today. With the knowledge that she will most likely never be able to return to her home, the moment was bittersweet and enormously affecting. When asked what she believes about the force of the Korean people’s desire to reunite, she replies, “We’ve always wanted to be reunited again with the North. But the strong outside international influences and interferences interrupted.


\(^{54}\) http://wikitravel.org/en/Kumgangsan
We were victims as a result of the Cold War and for not being a strong enough of a sovereign nation to choose and decide our own destiny.” Her words are an apt characterization – her experiences and those had by countless other Koreans in the 20th century reveal a people who have been victimized at the hands of many different political powers.

Political commentators commonly refer to the intrinsically different natures of the two states outlined here as proof of the improbability of Korean reunification. To be fair, the two states could not be more different, and the political situation only seems to be worsening as nuclear armament in the North and increasingly complex tension between the North and the U.S. characterize all political activity occurring today. But the intense desire for national cohesion is just as salient if not more salient as in past decades, and while this emotional and human element is potentially dismissible, it is seen as remarkable by other commentators. Randall Caroline Forsberg argues that “the common language, culture, and history of the two Koreas, along with growing re-acquaintance and familiarity, are likely to predominate over the 50-year interlude of separation.” 55 While the political and ideological differences should not be ignored in the least, the depth of a 1,000 year history of ethnic homogeneity is a powerful motivation for steps to be taken towards reunification. South Korean President Kim Dae Jung recognized this force and harnessed it through his Sunshine Policy in the late 1990s which transformed relations between North and South by opening communication and would ultimately win him a Nobel Peace Prize in 2000. Analyzing the Policy and both its successes and shortcomings will help elucidate what the goals of future reunification policy should be.

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“The North Wind and the Sun,” one of Aesop’s fables, tells the story of a competition between the North Wind and the Sun instigated to determine which is the stronger of the two. The winner of the challenge would be whoever managed to get a passing traveler to take off his cloak. The North Wind blew fiercely at the traveler, only to find that the man wrapped himself tighter and tighter with each gust of wind, and the North Wind was forced to resign. When the Sun’s turn came, he simply shined warmly on the traveler and this overwhelming warmth made the traveler immediately take his cloak off. The North Wind conceded defeat, admitting the greater strength of the Sun.

It was this very fable which South Korean President Kim Dae Jung metaphorically referred to at the onset of his term to illuminate the character of the new policy towards North Korea which he would be pursuing. The fable, which highlights the superiority of persuasion over force, ultimately served as the inspiration for the name of Kim’s policy as well – the “Sunshine” Policy. As in the fable, the approach of the policy has been to pursue reunification through gentle encouragement, by promoting greater intercommunication and economic cooperation between North and South, among other goals. In essence, the policy seeks reconciliation first and foremost as a means by which reunification can ultimately be achieved. In an age where scholars often seek to explain international relations through the framework of realism or power politics, this radical political methodology corroborates the fact that the human element of politics is still alive and well and that there is indeed still room for compassion in interstate politics.
For decades, relations between North and South were icy, neither agreeing to officially recognize the legitimacy of the other’s regime or leadership. Willingness to engage with one another was not something that came about overnight. Although Kim Dae Jung’s sunshine policy was indeed progressive, Kim’s administration did not suddenly introduce ideas which he had single-handedly conceived. Rather, the pursuits of the Sunshine Policy formalized desires which had been brewing for half a century, and there was at least some precedent of attempted engagement in the administrations that had preceded Kim.

The first of these steps began with Park Chung Hee, who was South Korean president between 1963 and 1979, not long after he had been re-elected for a fourth term. After over two decades of silence and tension between the two regimes, Park Chung Hee was the first to suggest a move towards engagement. In a speech made on August 15, 1970, Park advocated peaceful coexistence, appealing to the North that it replace “hostile military confrontation with socioeconomic competition.” A Joint Communiqué emerged soon after in 1972, in which the two governments emphasized pursuing unification independently. This formally expressed willingness to cooperate, or at the very least engage with one another softened tensions on the peninsula and laid a foundation for future policy efforts.

While efforts such as these did not enable actual changes for either of the regimes themselves or the way they actually interacted, Park’s successors similarly focused at the very least on attempting to eliminate diplomatic hostility between the two. Park Chung Hee was replaced by Chun Doo Hwan, who was in office from 1980 to 1988, who was in turn succeeded by Roh Tae Woo. Both presidents led centralized governments and ruled in a

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56 Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, *Sunshine in Korea*, (Santa Monica: RAND Center for Asia Pacific Policy, 2002), p. 6
largely authoritarian manner, but they did acknowledge the need to normalize relations between North and South. In his “Special Presidential Declaration for National Self-Esteem, Unification, and Prosperity,” Roh Tae Woo provided an analysis of Korea’s prolonged division from the perspective of the South Korean government. Delivered in 1988, this declaration spoke not of North Korea’s flawed political system or leaders, but rather linked Korea’s continued partition to the fact that “both the south and the north have been regarding the other as an adversary.”

Hence, South Korean efforts to work towards cooperation and exchange had been brewing for quite some time. Roh called for the opening of trade and greater cooperation in order to facilitate mutual prosperity, among other propositions.

Kim Young Sam, who held office from 1993 to 1998, directly preceded Kim Dae Jung and, like his predecessors, his policy towards North Korea also advocated peaceful coexistence and co-prosperity. But like those who had preceded him, Kim Young Sam and the policy he launched did not do much in the way of mobilizing towards substantial action. Amidst the launching of such policies, public opinion greatly varied. Though reunification of the Korean people was virtually universally desired, the growing economic strength of South Korea juxtaposed with North Korean political and economic weakness made most South Koreans wary of unification in the purest form. As Son Key-young describes, the launching of policy by presidents before Kim Dae-Jung simply exhibited inconsistencies and fanned “the further polarization of public opinion.”

It was most likely this growing disparity between the two states that necessitated the more proactive response facilitated through Kim Dae Jung’s Sunshine Policy.

57 Ibid., 7
58 Son Key-young, South Korean Engagement Policies and North Korea, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 4
A significant contributing factor to this broadening rift between North and South was the transformation that occurred within the North during the 1990s. North Korea during this decade was marked by ruin for various reasons, ranging from the collapse of support from the former Soviet Union, the turning over of the regime in 1994 to Kim Jong Il with his father Kim Il Sung’s death, the stagnation of its socialist command economy which was still largely reliant on heavy industry, and the ultimate famine and human rights crisis which escalated as a result of the combination of these other factors. The untimely combination of a terminated source of support with bad harvests led to food shortages and inevitably, widespread starvation and malnutrition. It has been recorded that in 1993, the North Korean regime went so far as to suggest that “people at two meals a day instead of three, which was an unprecedented admission of the difficulties the DPRK’s food regime faced.”\textsuperscript{59} Although Kim Jong Il continued the \textit{juche}-driven approach to managing his regime, as the crisis deepened, so did external concern for the wellbeing of North Korea’s 21.4 million inhabitants. This concern was most deeply felt by South Koreans and Koreans spread across the globe, as they caught glimpses not only of children deformed by malnourishment but also as they heard stories of labor camps and gulags which were and continue to be operated by the North Korean government. The call for action had never been as relevant or necessary, and Kim Dae Jung both recognized and responded to this need.

The Sunshine Policy itself was a great step forward in many ways, though it sought to achieve its means through gradual steps. Through it, Kim Dae Jung set concrete steps for action and also mobilized various Korean interest groups, demonstrating an exceptional personal commitment to engagement. In his inaugural address, he cited reconciliation and

\textsuperscript{59} Cumings 72
cooperation as a top priority of his administration, although neither seemed promising from North Korea at the time and South Korea was suffering from severe financial crisis after its economic boom.\textsuperscript{60} He replaced the rhetoric of “unification” and “absorption” with terms such as “constructive engagement policies” and peaceful coexistence.\textsuperscript{61} The policy he enacted pursued these goals by separating politics and economics, allowing for private economic interaction between North and South and limiting government involvement to humanitarian and official assistance.

An important feature of the Sunshine Policy was that it allowed room for flexibility. Rather than adopting a hard-line approach to engagement, the policy dropped its initial \textit{quid pro quo} stance for one of “flexible reciprocity” in order to better interact with the temperamental North. As Levin and Han explain, the ROK “as the stronger ‘elder brother,’ would be patient and allow North Korea to reciprocate South Korean measures at an undetermined time, and in some undetermined way, in the future.”\textsuperscript{62} In choosing to implement his policy this way, President Kim made placing trust in North Korea a central component of his policy. Although he had undeniably built upon the work of his predecessors, the Sunshine Policy had placed its priority on helping North Korea first and foremost, treating the volatile nation like a brother.

The Sunshine Policy softened North Korea enough to at least accomplish a monumental summit between the North and South Korean leaders, which was the first North-South presidential summit, held in the summer of 2000. President Kim Dae Jung was honored with a Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 for his work, and was the first Korean to receive

\begin{footnotes}
\item[60] Levin and Han 23
\item[61] Ibid. 23
\item[62] Ibid., 26
\end{footnotes}
the prize, the committee esteeming him “for his work for democracy and human rights in South Korea and in East Asia in general, and for peace and reconciliation with North Korea in particular.”63 Another major accomplishment cited by many South Koreans is the development of the Mount Kumgang tourist complex in the North under the partnership of President Kim’s administration and the Hyundai Corporation. While Kim Dae Jung’s accomplishments via the Sunshine Policy should not be undermined, one must also consider the shortcomings of the Policy as well as the current situation and how to move forward from these first steps to advance towards reunification.

One weakness of the Policy was that it became largely personalized for Kim, whom many South Koreans already distrusted for his past as a leftist and for having what they perceived as near-communist leanings. Many viewed his pursuit of a summit with the North as being directly linked to his desire to increase his own political power because of its timing; the announcement of the inter-Korean summit was made three days before the national parliamentary elections. Opposition parties viewed the move in light of Kim’s desire not only to advance policy with North Korea but also to strengthen his own political position domestically,64 for they believed the move to have made what was essentially a nonpartisan issue a personally tinged one. Moreover, many aspects of North Korean dealings had been pursued secretly, which lent to distrust from some aspects of Korean society. But it is admittedly difficult to separate the politics from the politician, and it does not seem that these interpretations of Kim’s actions should necessarily detract from his efforts and accomplishments.

63 The Nobel Prize Internet Archive, http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/
64 Levin and Han 96
Beyond their judgments on Kim Dae Jung himself, the South Korean people have been plagued by doubts not only about the potential for policy to effect change in North Korea but also North Korean willingness to cooperate, and in light of developments in North Korea since the mid-1990s, these feelings are not unwarranted. As relations between North and South finally began to depart from its basis of comparing the self to the other, the unpredictable nature of the North Korean political leadership and the issue of nuclear armament which has unfurled in recent times have added to discouragement. Kim Jong Il became the leader of the North, and the information which has emerged from one of the world’s most closed societies and most secretive regimes sparks an unbearable frustration in the hearts of many Koreans. Kim is cited to “preside like a cult deity,” fostering a frighteningly intense popular dedication to the folk legends he has fabricated about himself and their country. The uniqueness of the continuously existing and perpetually isolationist North Korean society and the extreme nature of its humanitarian crisis have made change in North Korea appear impossible. He has diverted what few resources his country has towards military armament and development. The inevitable economic collapse North Korea has been experiencing is coupled with what experts estimate to be a loss of 2.5 million North Koreans to hunger and starvation between the mid-90s and 2003. These interconnected factors have made policy seem even more limited than it already might appear. Kim Dae Jung’s Sunshine Policy had already been considered by South Korean opposition groups to be too generous, simply allotting North Korea more resources and money without significant changes, and as the U.S. had chosen to focus on the North’s rumored nuclear capabilities during this time, it seems this weakness appeared to be truer than ever to his critics.

In general, the voicing of South Koreans in politics has become more pronounced than ever within the past decade or so, and the fact that opposition and dialogue even exists shows how democratic South Korea has truly become. After many decades of authoritarianism and the suppression and silencing of the South Korean people, particularly in regards to the North, scholars like Bruce Cumings acknowledge that “South Korea’s new civilian politics is unquestionably a great success.” Moreover, the events discussed here have also necessitated public outcry. For those Koreans whose painful past connects them to the North as Kesun and Andrew’s do, it clearly must be difficult knowing that as their generation fades both in North and South, younger generations in the North have no knowledge of a world before or beyond the false reality created in the North. National Geographic senior writer Tom O’Neill writes of an encounter he shared with a North Korean park ranger during an officially sanctioned tourist visit:

He aggressively questioned me about U.S. designs in Korea. ‘We hate America,’ he declared through my interpreter. ‘We are not evil, like your President says.’ His words rang in my head. Here is a nation of 23 million people who endure poverty and starvation in obedience to leaders who threaten nuclear attack as a way to win the world’s respect. North Korea, glimpsed so briefly, appeared profoundly beautiful, dangerous, and sad. The reality of statements such as these is both chilling and indicative of how deeply ingrained feelings of nationalism have become.

As South Korean voices have become increasingly audible in the public realm, they have revealed a variety of considerations in regards to reunification and engagement efforts. Clearly, these popular beliefs, whether widespread or not, reflect much about the dynamics of South Korean popular politics and the implications of these beliefs and feelings on

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66 Cumings 50
reunification efforts in the future are undeniable. The South Korean media has indirectly acknowledged the undoubtedly crucial human element of politics in the context of reunification, for countless surveys have been conducted through newspapers to continuously gauge South Korean sentiments since advances in inter-Korean communication began to be made. This media coverage has revealed that while Koreans are generally synchronized in their desire for reunification, they are often divided on how this should be achieved and how the timing of this daunting pursuit should be.

One element of concern that has become particularly prominent in these discussions is the factor of economics. Although Kim Dae Jung’s administration sought to separate economics from politics, the economic component of union between the two states concerns many South Koreans. Even Kesun feels that in regards to South Korea, “we need to be strong economically,” in order for reunification to successfully take place. As reported in the Korean Chosun Ilbo newspaper, forecasts made by the Korea Development Institute in 1996 suggested that a sudden union of North and South would result be immensely costly to the South and an estimated two million North residents would move South, which would inevitably cause an explosion in the labor market.68 It is difficult to determine how these estimates might differ if readjusted to better fit current times. These estimates made on the financial burdens that South Korea might suffer were produced in partnership with the German Economic Institute based on what took place upon the union of East and West Germany.

Comparisons between Korea and Germany have been frequent, for the observable similarities one would expect from two nations arbitrarily divided by external forces at World War II’s end. West Germany’s Ostpolitik policy of pursuing normalization between East and West Germany even served as the inspiration for South Korean president’s Roh Tae-Woo’s similar Nordpolitik. The German unification process sheds light on the importance of factors such as maintained bilateral exchange and cooperation and the German model of collapse and absorption was considered by many to be the inevitable fate of Korea as well after the collapse of communism not only in Germany but also throughout Eastern Europe after 1989.

But in all actuality, the situations are vastly different. Analyzing these differences also sheds light on the many hurdles that appear to exist in the way of Korean reunification. Much of the difference between the two situations can be explained by the nature of the regimes involved. Although the Berlin Wall served as a staunch symbol of division the way the DMZ does today, East and West Germany were not nearly as closed to one another as North and South Korea are today. Roy Richard Grinker offers the apt reminder that though East and West Germans could “visit each other, send mail, and watch each other’s television programs, most products of North Korea (magazines, videos, newspapers, books, and articles) remain classified in South Korea as pimil (secret) and are illegal.”69 Thus North and South Korea should gradually open both communication and exchange across borders, with both greater frequency but also with caution.

Korea’s situation also differs from Germany’s in that while East Germany’s collapse was largely dictated by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who “pulled the plug,” such an occurrence seems far less likely in North Korea under Kim Jong Il. The relationship between ruled and ruler is far more divisive in North Korea, where initiatives have been taken to ensure the forced admiration of and loyalty to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, than in East Germany, where widespread demonstrations took place in opposition to Erich Honecker. This loyalty can be seen in the popular handling of news of Kim Il Sung’s death, after which mourning lasted 100 days and saw many publicly expressing their distress and grief. But in fact, demonstrations could never similarly take place in North Korea regardless of ignorance to the regime’s failings, as any opposition or dissent inevitably leads to relocation into a work camp or gulag.

Furthermore, North Korea’s independently controlled military is well-trained and also extremely large. The level of authoritarianism in practice is comparatively much greater and more extreme. North Korea has successfully fostered the belief in its people that South Korea is no more than a puppet government of the United States. Thus many appropriately believe that reunification cannot take place under Kim Jong Il, and that he must either be removed from power or reunification must wait until his death. Such arguments are convincing for obvious reasons. Kesun argues that “the North is still unpredictable,” that they “must earn trust from the international community and come to their senses if they want to survive,” and these are considerations which are vital to understanding the prospects for reunification also.

70 Cumings 60
Perhaps more importantly, Germany and Korea do not share similar economic foundations. Despite South Korea’s immense economic growth in recent decades, its economy is not as strong as West Germany’s was in absolute terms, and more importantly North Korea’s economy is far weaker and less stable than East Germany’s, considered to be one of the stronger in the former Warsaw Pact. The strain that would burden the peninsula is incalculable when accounting for the combined economic and social implications.

Moreover, Germany’s reunification does not necessarily provide a model for economic success, either, as Germany is still plagued even today by efforts to rebuild and strengthen itself. This process can be seen simply by visiting East Berlin, where the urban landscape undergoes transformation and new development as each year passes; the city will invariably look quite different in even five years’ time.

Roy Richard Grinker voices the question that many people wonder when he asks, “for if Germany could not cope with the economics of unification, how could south Korea, with its own economic crises, manage the impoverished and ‘backward’ North?” Thus scholars and many South Koreans argue that unification should be postponed until both South and North strengthen their economies, or when the South is strong enough to provide an adequate safety net for the North. As an editorial from Korea’s Chosun Ilbo newspaper emphasized in 1997, “the government should start by putting into effect long-term prospects of a step by step reunification. It would be a big mistake to lose the chance for national reunification due to lack of preparation.” The argument made here is valid, especially in light of the advances that have been made in cooperation between North and South since it was written.

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71 Grinker 36
It does in fact seem appropriate that South Korea start saving funds for the cost of union, for even the lowest estimates of the cost of reunification are immense.

Yet in spite of these precautions and concerns, a survey conducted in 2004 reveals that three of ten Koreans desire reunification regardless of economic system.\textsuperscript{73} And while most Koreans do acknowledge that unification must be pursued cautiously, a considerable number of Koreans want immediate reunification, suggesting that “it is so important that Koreans must make whatever sacrifices are necessary.”\textsuperscript{74} Almost everything about Korean reunification politics defies political logic. Kim Dae Jung pointedly distinguished between absorption as pursued in Germany and the “reconciliation” he would pursue. As Son Key-Young explains, even the Sunshine Policy is “an anomaly, if analysed by traditional structural approaches. In particular, these approaches cannot explain the ideational motives behind the fact that South Koreans traveled to a North Korean mountain resort in spite of an exchange of fire between naval vessels of the two Koreas,” and that the South Korean government under Kim Dae Jung risked so much in order to foster friendly ties with North Korea, even risking its own traditional alliance with the United States to do so.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} Grinker 36
\textsuperscript{75} Son 49
- Conclusion -

Clearly, there are many different forces at work in the case of Korea, forces which cannot be objectified or plotted. At the root of this anomaly, it seems that the crucial factor to consider is the power of the human element of politics at play in Korea. This element is not only apparent in the people of South Korea but also in Koreans dispersed around the world like Kesun, whose lives were changed by the modern political events of the 20th century. Moreover, Korean politicians not only acknowledged the importance of considering this element but shaped policy in order to accommodate for it despite the political risks and countless hurdles to effectual policy or tangible results. But for a factor which can not be quantified or beheld tangibly, perhaps these tangible results matter less than the effort involved in pursuing the desires of these people.

As detailing Korea’s modern political history has repeatedly shown, this human element stems from a shared past and national collectivity. This identity is one of the most important distinguishing factors that limits the Korean situation from being studied or assessed comparatively. Bruce Cumings emphasizes that Korea’s experience differs sharply from Germany’s, whose unity is little more than a century old and whose territory “was laced with ethnic and linguistic variation,” and argues that “it is divided Korea that is the anomaly.” It is no surprise that the cross-border family reunions which have taken place since the North-South Summit in 2000 have been one of the greatest recognizable symbols of resolution and exchange in the move to reunification. The Korean War is estimated to have split the families of more than seven million people who, like Kesun and Andrew, fled south to escape communism. When the two Korean leaders called attention to humanitarian issues

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76 Cumings 6
at their summit, they initiated a program which has allowed for the reunions of 1,200 families for a total of 8,045 family members in eight rounds. But these emotional reunions have been delayed as inter-Korean relations have been at a standstill since late 2004 and the climax of the North Korean nuclear issue.

Feedback from South Koreans regarding the Mount Kumgang project has also been largely positive in spite of setbacks from the North, and Koreans continue to flock to the complex in increasing numbers. It is one of many factors reflecting how strong the human element truly is in Korean politics. And it seems that this is what will make Korean reunification different from previous post-communist unification efforts. As Koreans are constantly reminded of the gravity of the humanitarian crisis in North Korea, it has become increasingly difficult to stand aside and watch, particularly as China has refused to recognize some of the hundreds of thousands of North Korean escapees who manage to cross the northern border as refugees, sometimes sending them back to North Korea to certain imprisonment or death. Kesun has expressed many times her desires for reunification, and though she also emphasizes the steps which must first take place, these hopes have not wavered since she left her home in Yang-Shi or the Korean peninsula altogether.

Throughout all the suffering and disappointment Koreans were dealt at the hands of political powers and fate in general, overcoming the collective Korean sense of han can only be balanced by the simultaneously shared desire to be permanently and finally united as one nation. These strong feelings are an unavoidable force to be reckoned with when considering the prospects for reunification and how it will take place.

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78 O’Neill 25
When Andrew Kim passed away in May of 2000, he left without the knowledge of
the fates of his family members. He left not knowing what the summit between North and
South might achieve, and lost the chance to see the reunions of thousands of people who had
been divided from their families as he had. Tragedies such as this are at the very core of
Korea’s persisting collective *han*. But he also left not knowing how relations between the
North and the rest of the world would escalate as the international community became aware
of nuclear armament. Clearly this issue and the others discussed here must be fully
understood in all their complexity to appropriately gauge the future of Korean politics, but it
is also of utmost importance not to devalue or forget the role of the Korean people and their
shared past, experiences through imperialism in its many forms, division, and increasingly
pronounced inequality relative to their Northern brothers in motivating reunification efforts
and shaping them. It seems that this deep-felt desire will prove crucial to mobilizing for and
facilitating reunification between North and South Korea.
Andrew and Kesun on their wedding day, January 1942
Kesun (right) in China at the North Korean border, 2006