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# Korean-American Divided Families: catalyst for changing the course of the USA policy on North Korea

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**KOREAN-AMERICAN DIVIDED FAMILIES:  
CATALYST FOR CHANGING THE COURSE OF THE USA POLICY ON NORTH KOREA**

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PIM 70

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a  
Master of Conflict Transformation at  
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## ABSTRACT

The Korea War has left deep scars on the psyches of Koreans in Korea and throughout the world. Among many ordeals that Korean citizens had to suffer during and after the war, the separation of the family was one of the most tragic continuing results of the war. Countless individuals were forcibly severed from their family members in North Korea and most haven't seen their separated relatives for over six decades. There have been 18 rounds of reunions between North and South Koreans since a historic summit talk in June 2000.

However, Korean-American members of divided families cannot participate in such reunions with their Korean relatives. They are not eligible to even apply for the reunion program because they are American citizens and only Korean citizens are eligible to apply to participate.

The personal histories of nine Korean-Americans are related herein. Their stories cover an important chapter of Korean and U.S. history before and after the Korean War. The nine Korean-Americans' hard life as war refugees and life-long yearning and search for their flesh and blood serve as a reminder of wars' effect on humanity and humans' response to war: the brutal nature of war being legitimately used as a mechanism for peace-keeping, devastating effects of war on civilians, and family values.

The demographic characteristic of the divided family issue adds urgency to this matter: solutions must be found sooner rather than later, or any solution will be moot—the divided family members will have died. A reunion amongst divided Korean-American families could open a new avenue for the U.S. and North Korea to resolve the issue of North Korean nuclear weapons: an avenue not of confrontation, but of negotiation and dialogue; an avenue to build mutual confidence and trust; and finally commencement of normal diplomatic relationship.

## **Introduction**

What if you departed from your loved ones into the abyss of a war with the promise to come back soon, and haven't kept that promise for more than a half century? What if you don't know the fates of your parents, spouse, newly-born babies and siblings, even though you tried everything under your ability to find them? What if you knew your loved ones were living two hours away from your home, but you couldn't go because your way was cut by the world's most heavily militarized area, ironically named "the Demilitarized Zone." You can't imagine how come these kinds of situation could still happen in this overly-wired and overly-connected twenty-first century. There are millions of people who haven't met and haven't known the fate of their loved ones for six decades. They are the Korean divided families. Divided families are defined herein as "those family members whose kin are separated, lost, or dispersed under the tragic circumstances of national division and disaster" (Lee, 1992). They had never been an issue to me until I started interning for the Divided Families Foundation (recently changed its name from Saemsoni), a Washington, D.C. based NGO working for Korean-American divided families' reunions. Since the historic 2000 summit between then and deceased leader Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jung-il, the televised tear-awash reunion scene was like a sad reality show, but it didn't deeply resonate with me. Now I feel truly regretful and ashamed that I didn't give due respect for their endurance and didn't get involved in making things better for them. They are the living fossils of the turmoil of modern Korean history.

Unlike South Korean divided families, who became the candidate for a slim chance of meeting their next of kin from the lottery once in a while (thanks to the efforts of the South Korean government and Red Cross societies from both sides), Korean- American divided families have nothing to rely on to get connected to their family members in the North. Thus, many Korean- Americans search for private routes to locate their family members. However,

often-times they end up being swindled or being used as a cash cow for their long-lost families or the Northern regime.

The purpose of this paper is three-fold: first of all, it will raise public awareness of the issue of Korean American divided families by showing the first-generation divided families' personal history, covering their childhood from the Korean War to their last wishes on earth. Secondly, through their personal history, it will make a case for reunion in order to heal personal and societal cost of separation. Third, it will show how family reunions can be transferred and incorporated into U.S. policy making to help resolve the North Korean nuclear deadlock and to facilitate bringing peace on the Korean Peninsula.

## Literature Review

Academicians have written extensively about the politics of the Korean War, but “remarkably little has been done to record the human, personal meanings of the conflict for Koreans, especially those living in the United States” (Liem, 2007). Given that the devastating effect inflicted on ordinary Koreans—more than three million civilian casualties (10% of the population), a decimated social and physical infrastructure throughout the peninsula, about ten million people separated from their families with no real prospects for reunion or knowing of their fate in six decades (Halliday & Cumings, 1988)—this scanty record creates a huge rift in understanding significant and enduring consequences of the war. One striking and cruel aftermath of the war is the divided families who have not seen their family members in North Korea for more than a half century. However, the divided families issue was an off-limits area in the social science field until the mid 1990s in South Korea, not because of any official policy or mechanism that banned inquiry into it, but because of scholars’ self-censorship stemming from the political and social stigma of the nations’ division and anti-communism rationale (Kim, 2004). The inauguration of the Kim Dae-jung administration in 2008 and its consistent engagement policy created a need for research on the divided families issue partly in preparation for a possible exchange (Ibid.). Thus, much work that viewed the issue from policy oriented perspectives strove to come up with suggestions for this overdue family separation problem. Amid a flood of policy-centered papers, Kim Kwi-ok’s “Divided Family, neither Anti-communist nor a Red” deals with Northern refugees’ identities and social stigma. These have undergone changes throughout the post- War time period, and Kim Kwi-ok’s paper shows another research route inquiring into the psychological aspect of the divided family issue. Kim interviewed people living in Abai (“parent” or “aged person” in the dialect of Hamgyeong province) village in Sokcho, South Korea where about 3,000 northern refugees settled, once their hope of a homecoming



in the North was dashed after the ceasefire.

Among English-language writings on the problem of divided families, two scholars' work makes a remarkable contribution for international readers; Kim Choong-soon's ethnography of Korean family dispersal, "Faithful Endurance" and James Foley's in-depth research collection, "Korea's Divided Families".

Calling himself as a "child of war" and saying "I had felt the Korean War in my very bones, witnessing the carnage with my own young eyes", the anthropologist Kim made this exceptional documentation of the tragic saga of family separation among Korean people. He conducted research during two summers and two winters from 1982-1984 in South Korea. Pseudonyms for every individual, clan, and location name mirror the political sensitivity caused by having connections to the North in the 1980s. For the same reason, his five case studies were all recruited from his relatives or friends to minimize the possible suspicion of him as an undercover agent and to maximize the fullness of each individual's account.

Kim's book contains life histories of five people he thought would represent and typify different social positions in the Korean family: an elderly woman yearning for the son she had been separated from during World War II; two single women from both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and a North Korean man - each have remained single and not remarried after being separated from their spouses; and a middle-aged North Korean man who was separated from his parents as a child.

"Faithful Endurance" also recounts the Korean Broadcasting System's (KBS's) reunion telethon in detail. Frustrated by the incompetence of creating viable tools for the dispersed families, KBS aired its reunion telethon. As a volunteer in the months-long event, Kim sketched a portrait of the desperation and frustration felt by divided families for those relatives they had briefly met or couldn't meet. Kim's direct interviews convey the deep sorrow of family separation. His vast research through the daily newspapers, interviews with

Dong-A Ilbo and many other dispersed families, Korean politicians and political insiders, intellectuals, scholars, laymen, and Red Cross officials gave a substantial body to these ethnographic records.

At the end of the book, Kim confesses the challenge of researching the issue and that he can't be just an observer:

*I cannot escape my emotional involvement...it has been difficult for me to write about myself and "my own people" and yet remain objective. In this book I have tried to maintain a balance between the "compassion" of being a native anthropologist doing fieldwork with "my own people" and the "detachment" of being a "scientist." In attempting to depict the struggles of millions of sundered Koreans, the anguish of the war that I also experienced tortured me day after day. It was painful to complete this book. Nonetheless, as Miles Richardson once asked, "If the anthropologist does not tell the human myth, then who will?"*

In another book dedicated to this issue, "*Korea's Divided Families: Fifty years of separation*", Foley details the historical, demographic and political background to the problem. He gives a chronology of the Korean Diaspora dating from the Kisa famine (1869-1875) through the armistice of the Korean War. He tries to calculate the number of the divided families by comparing several official agents' statistics with those of scholars. Foley concludes a big gap exists among agencies' numerical estimates, such as the Korean National Red Cross statistics, and the numerical estimates of scholars. The gap exists partly because of the situational impossibility to grasp the number of people who moved from their original residences between two wars—the World War II and Korean War—and partly because of political manipulation due to the magnitude of the population displacement. He shows how both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel played political seesaw with this issue ever since the first Red Cross talks in 1973.

The crux of Mr. Foley's study lies in his in-depth interviews with seven reunion participants in 2000. His evaluation, based on the interviews, maps how a future reunion program should be conducted. In contrast to the time period during which Kim researched

and wrote his book, Foley's work was written in a period characterized by a much more relaxed political landscape between the two Koreas. As Foley wrote in the book, his study regrettably couldn't include any first-hand data from the North, given the lack of access to North Korea and divided families, Foley can cover only one side of the story.

As suggested by Kim Kwi-ok, future inquiry needs to broaden its focus beyond policy-oriented issues to the psychological aspects of the divided families —not only those of the generations who directly lived through the war and national and familial division, but also of their children who indirectly or subconsciously experienced its effects through their parents' unhealed wounds. In addition, as the first-generation divided- family members are rapidly diminishing with their aging, academic efforts need to be made to examine their personal legacy and memories of the past. This will provide a valuable avenue to complement the dominant official narratives of modern Korean history.

## Overview of Korea's Divided Families

Although the issue of divided families has been brought as one of the main themes in the inter-Korean dialogues, permanent solutions to this overdue problem haven't arrived yet, for it has never been dealt with in a purely humanitarian spirit. Foley's definition of divided families mirrors the complexity of the issue:

*The divided families are those Koreans still separated from their family members by Korea's division into two rival, ideologically opposed regimes, the subsequent Korean War of 1950-1953, and ultimately by the failure of Korea's leaders to create a context in which they could be reunited with their loved (2003).*

After the armistice was signed following the three-year war in 1953, the Korean Peninsula was divided along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, leaving thousands of families separated from their homes and family members on each side of the new border. The phrase "Ten Million Divided Koreans" was coined to describe the divided families.

On the South Korean side, the total of 5 million was based on the following estimates: 3.5 million North Korean refugees who fled southward before the Korean War; 1 million North Koreans who fled southward during the war; 84,000 people kidnapped by North Koreans during and after the war; 416,000 displaced by other means (Kim, 1988). However, no data are available from the North. The return of millions of displaced persons after the liberation in 1945, subsequent partition of the peninsula by the USA and then-Soviet Union, the Korean War, and ineffectiveness of governmental administration in the aftermath of the war made it almost impossible to gain reliable demographic data (Foley, 2003).

In the six decades since the armistice and separation, there have been temporary reunions with no permanent mechanism officially established yet. Officially, 128,678 people are registered for reunion on South Korea's integrated information system for separated families. As of January 31, 2012, 78,902 were still alive and 49,776 had died. Among the living, 47.6% are 80 years old or older and more than 80% of the registrants are 70 years old

and older (Integrated Information System for Separated Families Website).

The living Koreans' advanced ages lend urgency to the need for further efforts for reunion. However, government-level reunion, the major and primary tool for reunions, is a painstakingly slow process. Another post-war reunion effort, the inter-Korean Red Cross talks, began in 1971 with little tangible breakthrough for the reunion of divided families (ROKRC, 2005). The Red Cross negotiations of 1985 produced the first North-South exchange of home town visitors and art troupes. On September 20, 1985, 151 visitors, headed by their respective Red Cross presidents, arrived in Seoul and Pyongyang by way of Panmunjom to begin four-day visits (Ibid.). Excluding the art troupes, fifty members each from North and South Korea were chosen for reunions with family members, close relatives, or friends. From September 1985 until September 1999, many more dialogues took place under the auspices of the Red Cross but didn't result in any additional family reunions (Ibid.).

The stalemate was finally broken by the landmark June summit of the two Korean leaders in 2000. The summit talks initially established three rounds of reunions beginning on the national liberation day of August 15, 2000. One hundred divided-family members from each side participated in each round: South Koreans were chosen by computer lottery from among the 116,460 applicants and their northern family members were carefully chosen on the basis of their perceived loyalty to the regime (Foley, 2003).

The first home visitation event in 1985 and the subsequent 18 rounds of divided-family reunions spanning the years from 2000 to 2010 resulted in an aggregate number of 21,891 people including 3748 people via live video reunions (Integrated Information System for Separated Families Website). The talks between the Red Cross organizations of North and South Korea on further reunions have been on hold since November 2010, in the wake of the artillery firing on Yeonpyeong Island.

The accumulated talks that produced 18 rounds of reunions provide a few things to

consider for a future reunion. First of all, the problem of divided families is and should be seen as a humanitarian problem. It is highly politicized, as Foley points out:

*In the absence of any normal relations between the two Koreas, the divided families issue has provided an invaluable avenue of contact via the Red Cross societies. South Korea has played on the sympathy the issue evokes both in South Korea and in the international community and on its implicit challenge to the North's closed, secretive and tightly controlled society; the North has used the issue as a bargaining chip in return for political and economic concessions, and for other humanitarian issues which Pyongyang sees as important, such as the release from South Korean prisons of long-term political prisoners. (2003)*

Reunion amongst divided Korean families has never been outside the political realm.

There was an occasion when a scheduled reunion was put on hold; Seoul's entire military and police force were put on increased alert in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, North Korea consequently postponed plans to hold reunions of families, citing a "warlike situation" in Seoul (CNN, 2001).

A second important consideration is that a one-time, brief reunion after a half century of separation would re-traumatize the participants. Not only the meeting itself was emotionally overwhelming for elderly people, but the encounter brought back the memories associated with war and separation. The ideological differences were also a stress factor and put heavy strains on recovering familial connections. According to Foley, some participants of the reunion in 2000 received clinical treatment for deep depression and anxiety after the first and most likely last meeting with their families (2003). One solution must be to have more frequent and regular family reunions; preparation for reunions might include letter exchanges to restore long-prohibited family connections. Additionally, providing mental health services to participants could be another way to minimize stress and trauma-related disorders.

## **Korean-American Divided Families**

### **Overview**

According to the 2006-2008 American Community Surveys, the U.S. Korean population is estimated to be somewhere between 1.3 million and 1.5 million. , depending on whether the estimate includes or excludes those of mixed heritage (Lee, 2012). Until the early 1980s, about 70 percent of Korean immigrants traced their place of birth to North Korea (Yuh, n.d.). The nine case studies excerpted herein hardly represent the whole population of Korean-American divided families. The interviewees' stories showcase a great deal of the ordeal from the social upheaval caused by the Korean War. I initially tried to contact divided-family members by phone, but a combination of circumstances—reluctance to revealing their stories by those I initially contacted and physical difficulties as a result of their advanced ages—frustrated my attempts to have a deep conversation over the phone. Unexpectedly hearing of a family member's death from their children further complicated my efforts to conduct interviews. Meanwhile, as part of Saemsoni's advocacy and empowering project, they have collected life stories of their registrants. I used Chin-kook Lee's interview conducted by Alyssa Woo, administrator of Saemsoni, and Shim Jun-ho's interview done by the author. Seven interviews recruited from Saemsoni's registrants were conducted by Jason Ahn, the director of DIVIDED FAMILIES FILM, a voluntary documentary team and his team members. Jason, a Harvard medical school student, has a grandmother whose only wish on her death-bed was to see her lost sister in North Korea and that is how he was inspired to work on behalf of divided families.

### **Personal Histories**

#### *Family separation*

Korea, the land of morning calm, may be more rightly dubbed “the land of broken calm” as

quoted in Kim's *Faithful Endurance* from Shannon McCune's subtitle on his book.

Geopolitically, Korea is surrounded by the world's power players, so it was inevitable that it would be invaded by the neighboring nations. However, it never lost sovereignty until the 1910 annexation by Japan. Chin-kook's experience of learning different foreign languages shows how Korea had been heavily influenced by surrounding powers:

*When I was born, I only spoke Japanese, no Korean. I had a Japanese name. When I was liberated from Japan, I had to learn Korean. But then, I was in Pyongyang, so I had to learn Russian every day. Chinese, required - because Korean language is based on Chinese. So, look at this, five languages already. When I came to the South, I had to learn English. Three years in junior high school, I wasn't learning A, B, C. So, when I went to high school, I spelled "only" as "one-ly." Then, my English teacher said, "I never heard in my life, in my students, speaking "only" as "one-ly"*

The majority of divided families were separated during two periods: the first one is the time from liberation and subsequent division into Soviet and U.S. zones of control until the outbreak of the Korean War; the second is the Korean War period itself (Foley, 2003).

During the Japanese occupation, many Koreans left home for Manchuria, China and the Maritime Provinces of Siberia to seek and fight for freedom. At the time of Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, over 4 million Koreans—11.6% of whole population and 40% of the adult population—were outside Korea but only 2.6 million people made it back home at the liberation (Ibid.). Cha-hee's separation from her father and brother happened in the first period:

*I was born in a little mountain village called Tapuchao in Manchuria, which was Korean resistance hideout when Korea was under the Japanese rule. My father had about hundred twenty to hundred fifty men cultivating the agriculture land in Manchuria area. According to the historical record, my father provided weapons and food to the guerrilla, the resistance... When World War II was over, my family decided to return to my hometown, which is Daegu, South Korea. But my father and one of my brothers Woong-hee decided to stay in Manchuria to wrap up the business. They were to join us in Daegu in a week or so. That was the last time we saw my father and my brother. Right after we left, the border between China and North Korea was closed. And my brother and my father became trapped in Manchuria. In 1950, the Chinese government granted my father's wish, to go to North Korea. And they moved to North Korea.*



Except for Cha-hee, the rest of the interviewees became dispersed during the Korean War, especially around the big retreat by the United Nation military forces called *il-sa-hu-toi* (January 4, 1951 retreat). Chin-kook gave a vivid account of the chaotic circumstances surrounding the retreat:

*MacArthur general pushed up all the Yalu River, and then the Chinese came, so there was, ordered retreat. So, when they retreated, they were passing through Pyongyang. We all heard about it, so we packed them up and went to Daedong River. Daedong River on December 4, 1950 was frozen. There was light ice was flowing down. We went back and forth to cross the river because the bridge going south was bombed. I left home 9 o'clock in the morning. We stayed in northern portions of Daedong River until about 4 or 5 in the evening. Then, one group says, "Oh, in the Reungra Island in the north, there is a place you can walk through. It's not too deep." So, we went to the north. Then, we jumped into the water with belongings, clothes on. Walked. Then, this icy water was hitting my legs, above my pants. It took about 30 minutes. I see my bloody legs, bloody.*

Many of those who were in the fleeing rush south assumed their flight to be temporary; they fully expected to return to their homes after the fighting ended. Thus many left not just property and heirlooms, but also close relatives without knowing that the separation would last forever. That split second decision separated Won-kuk from his grandmother and younger sisters for eternity:

*My parents, grandfather and boys left first, but I found out later that my grandmother said "Take the boys first, and leave the girls behind because communists will do less harm to girls. I will take care of the girls and the house while you're gone." We thought we would see each other again after two weeks or so when the war ends, and parted. Then, we haven't seen each other for 37 years.*

Heavy bombings by the United States air forces were a big reason that North Koreans fled to the south. As Bruce Cummings (2010) described, the U.S. "carpet-bombed the north for three years with next to no concern for civilian casualties" (p.149). The United States dropped more bombs in Korea (635,000 tons, as well as 32,557 tons of napalm) than in the entire Pacific theater during World War II (Ibid.). The aerial bombing campaign resulted in a huge number of innocent civilian casualties. Many interviewees vividly remembered the

sound, intensity and indiscriminate nature of the bombing spree:

*When I left Pyongyang on December 2, downtown Pyongyang was burned entirely. It's like the fall of the burning Roman Empire in the movie, "Quo Vadis". The U.S. Army shipped shells from the Pyongyang airfield and spread them up on the street. Then they fired on the shells when they were retreating. Pyongyang was in flame. I felt how miserable the war was and trembled with fear.*

Jun-ho who is from South Korea and had lost his father and brother during the war showed a different context of separation. While his father became the victim of a mass killing before the Korean People's Army (KPA) retreated, his eldest brother volunteered to join the KPA with a hope that his joining would save his incarcerated father. After his brother left home for the army, his family never heard from him except for one neighbor's testimony about him being dead at a creek around the Nakdong River, the southern perimeter and the fierce battle field. Dramatically, Jun-ho reunited with his allegedly "dead" brother 50 years later through the reunion program in 2000:

*As I said, my family suffered a lot during the war. Since my father served as a mayor in the township, he was labeled as a bourgeois and arrested by the communists. Meanwhile, the communists publicly announced that the men who enlisted in the military first were to be trained and could return home after the training. In fact, there were quite a few who came back. So my brother volunteered in the hope of saving my father, but didn't make it back home. He must have been strong. He was dispatched to the Nakdong River battle line, although we had no idea of his location at that time. When Seoul was recaptured on September 28, 1950, my father was unfortunately waiting for trial. As the communist army retreated, they put eighty some prisoners into the air-raid shelter of the Imsil county office and killed them all.*

#### *After the Korean War*

The Korean War ravaged the entire peninsula, claiming the lives of at least three million Korean civilians. More damage was done on the Northern part of the peninsula than on the Southern part because of the bombing; bombing campaigns targeted five major dams north of Pyongyang, designed to destroy the North's rice crop, with collateral damage including the flooding of villages, supplies and infrastructures (Halliday and Cumings, 1988).

The hardship suffered by the Korean people is still vividly carved in all interviewees' psyches. Making a living without going hungry was so challenging that they couldn't even take time to grieve over their lost families. Won-kook's account reveals that basic subsistence was challenged in the post-war Korea:

*There were not many jobs and it was difficult to find food. My brother worked as a "US Army House bus boy" meaning he would go into US Army base to work. We would dig into US Army waste dump to look for leftover food in cans.*

Besides the struggle to rebuild their lives in despair of post-War Korea, refugees from the North were even more challenged not only by their northern heritage, but because of their lack of family or community support system. Relatives of those who went North during the Korean War also had to face deep distrust and unfair treatments on the part of the South Korean authorities (Foley, 2003). The discrimination is referred to as *yeonjwaje* (literally, 'guilt by association' system). Jun-ho, whose brother joined the KPA, faced overt rejection in every attempt he made, from job application to leisure-related activities like getting a gun license:

*I finished schooling in Jeonju and went to Seoul for college. After graduation, I applied to the construction department at the Seoul metropolitan government office and passed the first round. I learned that someone who performed worse than me got the job; I didn't. I tried the district office after that and again passed the first round but not the second. At that time, there was an investigative division of the police dealing with communist intelligence. I learned that I was screened by that division. I confronted them about it and they said it was ordered "from above". I asked what "above" was. It was the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). The KCIA was not as accessible as was the police.*

The series of hardships resulting not only from the lack of financial means but social ostracism made many separated family members unable to envision a future in Korea. They had no choice but to emigrate to the United States to look for better future.

## *Emigration to the United States*

Korean emigration to the United States dramatically increased after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Cheng, 2005). Since 1965, five main factors have influenced Korean emigration to the United States: Korea's division; the U.S. government's involvement on the Korean peninsula in political, military and economic issues; the rise of the new middle class in Korea; the development of a new international division of labor; and the migration policies of both the United States and Korean governments (Park, 1997). The most important reason for emigration of middle-class Koreans has been an economic one (Ibid.). Until the early 1980s, the value of the dollar was very strong against the Korean won, and the annual average income of Americans was almost ten times that of Koreans (Ibid.).

However, economic incentives are not the only pull factor for Korean emigration. Dubbing it "American fever" in her paper, Park highlighted the deeply penetrated American influences on politics, economy and culture after the nation came under U.S. military rule from 1945 till the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 (1997). Seung-yup just touched on the pursuit of the American dream in an anticipation of a freer and safer life for himself and his children:

*I arrived in America in February 1971. It would have been nice to stay in Korea, but at the time our circumstances didn't allow us to live properly, and we couldn't afford to send my kids to school. We wanted our kids to have a proper education, at least. America was the destination of our dreams. People would say America was heaven on earth and at that time over 90% of people thought that way.*

Not only the U.S. influence on Koreans, but the nation's authoritative, oppressive nature during the 1970s and the early 1980s and severe tension between North and South Korea led people to seek to move to the United States (Ibid.).

For North Korean refugees, especially Christians, the United States was a more attractive place. All the interviewees were of the Christian faith, with one being converted a

few years before the interview. Church offered a venue for children's education, building business contacts and social networking. Yong-sik, an elder at a Korean church in New York, is an exemplary figure whose lifeline was closely connected to church for his daily living as well as his spiritual wellbeing:

*When I first arrived here, American appeared very alienated. I had no idea how to begin. Fortunately, I had help from Korean compatriots who came earlier. Also there were Korean churches already here. I could go to church and get close to other compatriots. Thanks to that, I could lead a new life without being too intimidated by new surroundings. Church helped me get a job and move along with everyday life without difficulties.*

The American dream, however, wasn't easy to achieve. Though many of the interviewees were college-educated in Korea, they had to take any kind of job that was available for them. Many had to face lower-status job mobility, but they took pleasure in the fact that they didn't go hungry and were able to put their children in school. Hyun-jun's recount shows how much he tried to earn a living and support his family:

*As soon as came here, I worked as a laborer, even until now. I did all things. I did a dishwasher at restaurant and cleaned up the trash innumerable times. Even I worked the middle of the night. I worked full-time and took a part time job like bank cleaning, too. Then I could earn an extra income. I took pleasure from it and worked really hard. So now I could put my children through university by myself. 30 years just flew away.*

### *Family Reunion*

In the late 1980's, North Korea expanded propagandistic activities among the Korean communities overseas, while South Korea was receiving international recognition by hosting the Seoul Olympics in 1988 (Kim, 2006). Their ability to approach to Koreans in the United States was aided by the U.S. Administration's lifting of the travel restrictions on a number of countries, including North Korea, in 1973 (Ibid.). In the same year, the set-up of the Permanent Mission to the UN of North Korea in New York was another opportunity for North Korea to reach Koreans in the United States (Ibid.). One of the ways to attract Korean-

Americans as pro-North Korean was to invite them to Pyongyang in the name of either family reunions or as visiting teams for an interchange with the homeland (Ibid.). With this backdrop, three interviewees won the tickets to Pyongyang to get reunited with their families. Seung-yup unexpectedly reunited with his mother through the UN embassy of North Korea:

*A man who knew I was a North Korean refugee said, "I will send you a Telex address and you should send an application there with a request. Then they will look for your family. That's how it happened. I only learned later that that guy was connected to the UN embassy of North Korea. As I was going through the process, I found that if the UN embassy didn't connect me to the Chinese embassy, the Chinese embassy wouldn't give me a visa.*

However, such a fortunate moment didn't come to the rest as easily as in Seung-yup's case. Most interviewees invested time and money to find the fate of their remaining family members in the North through private brokers, church pastors or Korean Chinese living near the border of North Korea and China; some were successful but some others ended up being swindled. Here are examples of those two opposite fortunes from Won-kook and Kwang-jo respectively:

*We started searching my two sisters when my parents were both alive. They would go ask people from North Korea. But they were told that all family members of a pastor were killed somewhere in Hamkyung Province. My parents passed away believing that they were dead. Then, about 2 years ago (2007), I heard about an organization working for divided families in Canada. I went all the way to Canada and met someone named Chun Sun-young. I gave all the information to her. She went to North Korea to look for my sisters. It was probably February. I received a fax from North Korea. The fax said, "Won-ja and Won-shil are dead." It was nothing new. We have believed for so long that they were already dead. Then two weeks later another fax came. It said, "Your sisters are alive, so come meet them during Kim Jong-Il's Birthday". Then I started the process to visit North Korea.*

*I built houses and managed my own shop. I hired a Korean-Chinese. He told me that he could find my family instead of me. So he left and said to go to North Korea to find my family. So I just believed him. But I should not have done it. A few days later he told me that he found them and asked me for money. And I just sent it to him. I talked to my cousins but the people he found as my cousins didn't know their father's name or even the hometown. It turned out to be wrong. So I asked him what happened and how my cousins couldn't know anything. From that time, the communication was cut off. He changed the phone number. He never contacted me anymore since that time. Before that, he made phone calls to me several times that he met my family and bought them food, TV, rice or so. And then asked me for money.*

*How could I refuse it? So I gave it. But actually it was a lot. At that time, five or six years ago, \$16,000, it's pretty much a lot in China.*

Three interviewees' reunion experiences displayed a wide spectrum of human feelings, from extreme joy to estrangement resulting from the long span of separation under different systems. Won-kook's reunion was described as if he was walking on the moon. His reunion fulfilled his late parents' wish, which gave him a great pride. His action of burying his sisters' hair piece in their parents' grave showed how much his parents wished to get together with them:

*I was excited the whole time. It felt like dream, I can't still believe that I met my sisters. I couldn't believe then but felt like walking in my dreams. I was there for three days and talked a lot with them. I brought a movie recorder with me and taped everything. I have taped what we said about grandma, aunts, and everything they said was what I knew already. I had good times with them for three days. When I had to leave, I was very sad, they cried a lot too....My parents used to cry a lot after they came to South Korea. They cried every night. I didn't understand them then, but now I have my own children, I feel their pain. I did not know why they were crying every night, but as I get older and have my own children, I can understand their pain and agony. That's one of the reasons I went to North Korea, to fulfill my parents' wish. I told my sisters that if they give me little piece of their hair, I will bury it at our parents' grave. They cut small pieces of their hair and gave me. I buried them at my parents' grave hoping my parents would like and take pride in me. I told my sisters what I did in the letter and they were happy, too.*

In contrast to the experience of Won-kook, Seung-yup had hard time connecting with his mother and younger brother. He thinks that the strict Northern regime removed their ability to share feelings and ideas of their own:

*Her age wasn't the major problem in meeting her. People are not allowed to think by themselves under the system there. And it's also a poor country where the citizens barely have two meals a day. Living under those circumstances, they can't think by themselves. That made it hard for us to have ordinary conversation. And my brother was strictly educated by the closed system of North Korea. They only know what they are asked to know and they have no ideas about anything else. They talk very formal as like they thank Premier Kim Il Sung for making us meet and it was possible by all his courtesy. So to speak, they are religious to Kim Il Sung. They idolize him. So we couldn't talk about anything other than formal things.*

## *Last Wishes*

The desire of the first generation of divided families to see their relatives is more profound and desperate than one can imagine. Most of all, they want to know the fate of their family members; whether they are still alive, and if not, how they led their life until the end and whether the ending was peaceful. They have great concern that their loved ones passed away in pain and hunger. They also want to visit their home where they grew up having fun as a child. A visit to their parents' grave is one last filial duty that they want to accomplish. After years of searching, Chin-kook finally found out that his mother was alive. He made his homage journey to Pyongyang to hear that his mother passed away two months before his visit. However, he at least could visit home and his mother's grave. This freed him from internal conflicts of guilt associated with failure in meeting filial piety and the unsettled life-time task of reuniting with long-lost kin. He told that a brief reunion may not be ideal, but would give good respite to the bottomless yearning:

*My brother who died in Auckland was telling me, "At least, you did your duty as a son. Look at me, I couldn't go, but you went for me, I am thanking for you."... When my father died in 1987 in Seoul, he kept saying that, "I wanted to visit my homeland and see your mother, I wanted to visit, but I couldn't do it," and he died. My brother, same thing. He really wanted to go home and see, but he couldn't do it. I left North Korea at the age of 13 and I am now 74. You saw reunions in Seoul, I mean Kumgang resort. Look at how old they are. Of course, it's tragic that they have to say bye-bye again. However, before they die, at least they see, "Oh, you're my son," "Oh, you're my dad," "Oh, you're my sister." And then, I think there are so many Korean Americans who are looking for this kind of situation.*

Above all, they want to see ultimate peace reign on the Korean Peninsula. They want to visit home freely, share small episodes of life with their family members and enjoy the beauty of the mountains and rivers that surround their childhood home. Yong-sik expressed how much he misses his older sister and how much he looks forward to a unified Korea:

*In those free countries like South Korea and America, if all family members are apart, they can contact each other. Ah, if we live in Florida, or if I live in South Korea, We can call each other. How are you, something like this, but actually I can't do it with my older sister, so I miss her dearly. I want to see her, and know about her especially*



*because she lives in the country where people are starving. Their life must be painful. Because of that, I want to see her more and more.  
If we were to stay in touch, I can send some stuff that she needs freely, but I can't...  
We are getting old. My memories become unclear. So, please find them now when I can still recognize them. It is thankful that the U.S. government would make our wish come true. We used to sing a song, "Our desire is unification" all the time. If Korea gets to unify, we will become a beautiful and wealthy country, but now half of Korea is in darkness. It makes my heart so painful. This pain makes me wake up in the middle of sleep.*

### **Concerns about Unofficial Channels of Contact**

An unofficial reunion arrangement is expensive and often ineffective. According to Choi's research on South Korean separated family members, reunions arranged by private agencies show relatively low success rates compared to arrangements by Koreans living overseas, especially Korean-Chinese (2000). In addition, they charge high commissions for their arrangement services and the commissions fluctuate according to degree of wealth of the divided family members, the locations of their North Korean families, etc. (Ibid.). An average of 2,000 dollars is charged for identifying the fate, 3,000 dollars for exchanges of letters and 5,700 dollars for contacts (Ibid.). Because of such high costs, pursuing private-level contacts is limited to those who can afford it. Besides, procedures for such contacts are very complex and time-consuming. Cha-hee, the executive director of the Coalition to Reunite Korean-Americans with their North Korea Families, clarifies that locating a family is all about making money:

*Several months ago, a broker from South Korea contacted me through email. He told me he could help me with a few cases. So I asked the Korean consulate general's office to find out about this man. He, according to them, is a legitimate broker. He is registered in the Korean government. He has been working since the late 1990s. I checked the price, and this guy said for information, \$5000. For more than that, it was \$10,000. You got to put down cash. Cash up front!*

Moreover, as previously described in Kwang-jo's unfortunate incident, many divided families fall victim to exploitation by profit-seeking brokers. The desire to see their loved one was so desperate that they may end up losing their judgment on any offer of help with their

family search, which makes them especially vulnerable to the risk of fraud.

A second concern is that some people feel uneasy and insecure about visiting a nation where there are no diplomatic relations between their country and the other country. The lack of diplomatic relations between the two nations leaves visitors without their government's protection. Also, a lingering cold-war mentality still haunts them; some worry that their visit to a communist country and any connection to it might damage their children's or grandchildren's career. Such a cold-war shadow was still so real that one registrant of the Divided Families Foundation wanted to withdraw her application for a possible reunion because her grandson had been accepted to the West Point Military Academy. The grandmother didn't want to harm her grandson's future career as a U.S. Army officer by any perception of a family connection to a communist nation.

Lastly, Seung-yup's account brought up another concern that one may expect when they get to meet with their long-lost family members. In case of Seung-yup, the northern regime and his family became a financial burden. From the Northern perspective, compatriots living in the U.S. were seen to enjoy prosperous lives so that they were obligated to share their wealth with their motherland. He felt extreme guilt since his family members in North Korea could have received harsh treatment for not receiving and giving to the North Korean government any money his family members living in the North asked him for:

*In 1987, the North was in a very bad circumstance. And somehow, lots of people from the States visited north to meet their family at that time. People helped their family in various ways and fortunately, that gave the North big financial assistance. North Korea went pretty blunt about asking for help. They meant "Don't you have to give help to your brother and to your homeland? This meeting was possible by the acceptance of supreme leader Kim Jung-Il. You probably should express your appreciation in financial ways. And we are also pretty aware that you have a successful life in the States." Since I wasn't able to give them what they want, I was afraid that my family might be punished... My brother also asked me to buy him a truck which he could drive for a living in a blunt manner... Every contact with my brother was cut off since I couldn't assist him in any way. I am worried that my brother might be starved to death or punished for not gaining anything from me and went to a coal mine or somewhere similar. I do regret going there and also, people*

*criticized me for visiting my brother with no ability to help.*

All these concerns can be eliminated if a reunion program between Korean-Americans and their families in the North is officially arranged between the United States and North Korea.

### **Actions Taken by the U.S. Government**

The divided families issue hadn't often been in the public's eye until after the summit of the two Korean leaders and subsequent official family reunions in 2000. Korean Americans, headed by the Korean American Family Reunion Council, had been working tirelessly to collect more than 100,000 signatures in support of Korean American reunions (Rep. Royce, 2001). These complex efforts bore fruit in November 2001 with the passage of House Concurrent Resolution 77 (Rep. Xavier Becerra and Rep. Ed Royce) and Senate Concurrent Resolution 90 (Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Sen. Barbara Boxer and Sen. Charles Hagel). The resolution calls on the Congress and the President to "support efforts to reunite people of the U.S. of Korean ancestry with their families in North Korea" and "such efforts should be made in a timely manner, as 50 years have passed since the separation of these families" (Rep. Royce, 2001). The resolution only expresses the 'sense of Congress' and thus does not require any legally binding action on the part of the U.S. government (Foley 2003). In 2006, Saemsoni, a project of the EugeneBell Foundation, began its advocacy work for Korean American reunions as a result of numerous requests from its donors and other Korean Americans. Their lobbying efforts moved Congress to form "the U.S. Congressional Commission on Divided families", the first official U.S. government mechanism to advocate for the reunification of Korean American divided families, co-chaired by then Rep. Mark Kirk and Rep. Jim Matheson.

The next legislative action occurred with passage of H.R. 4986, "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008" (Section 1265), which directs the President to report

to Congress on family reunions between U.S. citizens and their relatives in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (H.R. 4986, 2008). The Report required “not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall transmit to Congress a report on family reunions between U.S. citizens and their relatives in the DPRK (official name of North Korea)”. However, the Executive Branch report did not include a description of any progress on this issue. Part of report states that:

*The US currently does not have diplomatic relations with North Korea. Government-to-government facilitation of family reunions may become possible with the normalization of relations between the countries. As part of the six-party talks on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, the U.S. and North Korea agreed to begin bilateral talks aimed at moving toward full diplomatic relations. The U.S. has made clear that progress toward the normalization of U.S.-DPRK relations is contingent upon progress on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, which is the agreed upon aim of the six-party talks. At an appropriate time, normalization talks are expected to address the establishment of diplomatic missions. The role of any U.S. diplomatic mission in Pyongyang, including an appropriate role in facilitating family reunions, would be addressed at that time. The U.S. fully supports South Korea's reunification efforts, but the role of the US government is limited by current legal and diplomatic circumstances.*

The latest congressional efforts resulted from enactment of H.R. 3081, the “State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill 2010”, which urges “the Special Representative on North Korea policy as the senior official handling North Korea issues, to prioritize the issues involving Korean divided families, and to, if necessary, appoint a coordinator for such families”(H.R. 3081, 2010).

After passage of the resolution, the reunion issue was raised in bilateral meeting in July and October of last year, along with other humanitarian issues in talks focused primarily on how to resume multilateral negotiations on Pyongyang's nuclear program (Kim, 2011). However, talks haven't yielded any specific results on reunification of separated families or nuclear disarmament. On August 8, 2011, the State Department daily press briefing reiterated the U.S. government's positive support of the Korean- American divided families issue:

*The United States remains concerned about the issue of Korean-Americans separated*

*from their family members in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.) since the end of the Korean War. We continue to do all that we can to raise this issue in relevant fora. We regularly meet with the American Red Cross (ARC) to discuss possibilities and modalities to reconnect Korean-Americans with relatives in the D.P.R.K. As part of their humanitarian mission, the ARC facilitates reconnecting families around the globe. We refer you to the ARC for more details on their Restoring Family Links services.*

Near the end of 2011, the ARC sent out a 90 year old Saemsoni registrant's letters to his wife and two sons in North Korea through the Restoring Family Links services.

According to a staff member in the ARC, *"Delivery is not certain and the process to deliver a message can often take months. Sometimes, no reply is received and, even when a reply is received, it may take additional months for the reply to be received back in the United States"* (Ghali, personal communication, January 10, 2012). In the face of the unforgiving march of time, he may not be able to wait months to hear from his family for the first time since the ninety year-old Korean American and his family were separated amid the chaos of the war.

## Relevance of the Reunion Issue

### Basic Human Rights

The Report on the ‘*Restoring Family Links*’ strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement’ clearly stipulates that individuals’ dignity and happiness are inseparable from and secured by the connection to their family units:

*Respect for the unity of the family is an integral part of a broader respect for human dignity. Our individual well-being depends to a great extent on our ability to stay in touch with our loved ones (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2007).*

However, hundreds of thousands of Korean-American divided families have not yet been the beneficiaries of the fundamental privilege that many other human beings enjoy. Not disputable is the role of family as a sustaining factor in preserving the basic unit of society and a crucial role in developing humanity.

While “family reunification is best understood as a *humanitarian principle* and not as a *human right*”, there is nearly universal agreement that there is a right to family reunification under international law (Nessel, 2008). The United General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Though not legally binding, it established important principles and values which have been developed in legally binding UN treaties since then. Article 16 upholds the family as the natural and fundamental unit in society, which is reiterated in the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights: “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”(Ibid.).

The 1949 Geneva Convention relating to Protection of Civilians in time of war clearly elaborates that family rights should be restored if severed by outer forces: “Respect for family rights implies not only that family ties must be maintained, but further that they must be restored should they have been broken as a result of wartime events.”(Geneva Convention, 1949)

The customary international law may not mandate that the U.S. government restore severed family ties and functions, but the United States has a moral obligation to make efforts to bridge the broken family links, as the division was externally imposed by the conflict that the U.S. was deeply involved in. The dispersed families weren't able to proclaim their family rights in the presence of the cold-war stand-off. Their rights have still remained infringed by the political impasse of the two states. The divided families' family rights won't be restored and protected unless the United States acknowledges the gravity of human suffering and takes the initiatives in reconstructing family functions.

### **Catalyst for Changing the Course of the U.S.-D.P.R.K. Relations**

In the 2006 endorsement of Saemsoori's divided family project by then-Senator Joseph Biden exactly captured how this issue can be utilized to change the course of the U.S. government's policies and public sentiments toward North Korea: *"For hundreds of thousands of Korean Americans, North Korea is as real as the face of a missing daughter, a childhood home, or a father's gravestone."*

The North Korean nuclear crisis has put strains on the last three consecutive administrations, but hasn't brought any substantial progress. Among many reasons for the stalemate is a narrow focus on the denuclearization of North Korea which resulted in stop-gap measures including sanctions and containment. These failed to stop North Korea's hostile activities and only increased Northeast Asian regional instability. Compared to the "largely successful, coordinated and multilateral engagement of 1994 to 2000" (Costello, 2011), the confrontational approach during the Bush administration proved ineffective and inappropriate. The hard-driven strategy led to the Agreed Framework's collapse and was followed by a series of actions by the North: denouncements of the purported U.S. failure to live up to its obligations under the Framed Agreement, the removal of IAEA monitors from the Yongbyon

plant, the expelling of IAEA inspectors from the country, the removal of fuel rods from the storage pond, and withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Thomas, 2010). Recalling the lessons learned from the ‘five lost years’ of the George W. Bush administration, proposed and actual U.S. policy options toward North Korea such as sanctions, preemptive strikes and regime change end up allowing North Korea to maintain a recalcitrant foreign policy and exacerbating an already dangerous climate on the Korean Peninsula. In addition to the effect on separated Korean families, the policies of the “lost years” weaken U.S. security and economic interests in Asia and elsewhere.

The very recent agreement of Pyongyang pledging to suspend its nuclear weapons and uranium enrichment and to allow international inspectors to monitor activities at its main nuclear complex raised the possibility of ending a diplomatic impasse (Myers and Choe, 2012). However, this “modest step”, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the result of three rounds of bilateral negotiations, was halted by the satellite launch on April 13.

At the speech on the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Kim Il-sung, two days after the rocket failure, Kim Jong-un, the new leader, honored the achievements of the two previous leaders who developed nuclear weapons as a deterrent against American invasion by saying that “the days are gone forever when our enemies could blackmail us with nuclear bombs” (Choe, 2012). As shown by Kim Jong-Un’s first public speech, North Korea will not drop its nuclear ambition until they feel safe from the U.S. forces.

The North Korean conundrum needs to be addressed in a peaceful way before a revival of a second Korean War occurs. Peaceful reconciliation between the North and the United States could begin when the two long-standing grudge holders can overcome decades-old mistrust and build up mutual confidence. To change the negative undercurrents running deeply on both sides, a key to the North Korean issue would be a substantive paradigm shift by stakeholders. The U.S. needs to broaden its perspective on the North and view the once-



called ‘axis of evil’ as a home of origin for hundreds of thousands of its citizens and a country where Korean -Americans’ missing loved ones are living. Imagine people able to travel to their childhood home and their North Korean family members being able to visit ‘the land of freedom’. The revived family link will accelerate people-to-people diplomacy, which proved more resilient and effective and therefore should be the choice of the U.S. in its North Korean policies. The door for this chance won’t be open forever as separated family members continue to die.

### **Living History and Lessons for a Future Generation**

#### *The Tragedy of War*

Since the September 11 attacks, the U.S. has been at war on many fronts; not only against terrorism but also against nascent and long-standing anti-Americanism; the U.S. has incurred soaring human and financial costs. War may be effective and efficient to achieve short-term goals in a limited time, so that it is sometimes chosen as a mechanism of securing peace. However, those who have personally experienced war firmly say a war cannot be the answer at any circumstances. The United States participated in the Korean War under the banner of the United Nation to defend South Korea's freedom. However, when the U.S. was carpet-bombing Pyongyang, one interviewee, then a child, recalls keeping his head to the ground in an extreme fear of death.

The first-generation Korean Americans have a true story, more dramatic than any fiction tellers can offer. As Liem’s exhibition project “STILL PRESENT PASTS” shows, their stories “provide a bridge to an ever-present, yet unfamiliar history for younger generations. For everyone in this contested global era, they evoke memories of other conflicts, promote dialogue as the principle means for resolving hostilities” ([www.stillpresentpast.org](http://www.stillpresentpast.org)). First generation Korean- Americans unanimously told me that any horrible fratricidal war like

Korean War must be avoided at all costs. Chin-kook's last few words in the interview, "*The tragedy of the war... tragedy of the war, that's what I think people should learn*" carried more weight because the remark came from his lived experience where he stood at the junction between life and death.

### *Family Values*

Family instability has come to be a dominant feature of our time. In a research study on family trends for three decades from 1960 to 1990, Popenoe found a "widespread decline of the institution of the family". Part of her finding shows that "the value placed on the family in the U.S. culture has diminished." That is, "the belief in a strong sense of family identification and loyalty, mutual assistance among family members, a concern for the perpetuation of the family unit, and the subordination of the interests and personality of individual family members to the interests and welfare of the family group" is getting less important though most Americans still loudly proclaim family values (Popenoe, 1993).

The loosening value of the family unit brings about many problems, and put more strains on society to take over such newly created responsibilities as caretaker of children and the elderly. Amid this seemingly irreversible trend of diminishing familial bonds, the divided families who were forced to be severed from their loved ones and have been longing to reunite with their family members lead us to re-adjust the value of family that we all take for granted. The story of Chahee's father, who ran a marathon in his 60s in order to let his family in the South know of his existence in North Korea, gives a sobering reminder of how we have to appreciate the warmth and care we can only earn from a family:

*He ran marathon -- with lot of his silver hair was waving while he was running marathon. That was his way of trying to beat time. But he died from food poisoning. On his death bed, he didn't accept the fact that he was dying. He had beaten so many odds, he had achieved so many things in his life that he could've beat his death, so he struggled. His family members told him that it was okay, he could go, but didn't give*

*up until the last minute. But when all the struggle was done, he realized that that was it. So he asked Woonghee (Chahee's brother) to bury him on a hill where he could face the South. When my nephew, Sunhyup was in North Korea, Woonghee told Sunhyup that my father tried very hard to let us know in South that he was in North Korea. He was in the magazine articles and a lot of publications. He tried very hard to get in the publicity with the mind that -- To send us a message that he was still alive and healthy.*

## **Implications for the U.S. Policy and Civil Society Initiatives**

### **Strong Initiative from the U.S. Government**

In the past, South Korea had relied on the inter-Korean Red Cross talks to solve the divided family issue, with little progress except for the exchange visits in 1984 (Choi, 2000). A turning point was reached after the inauguration of the Kim Dae-jung government and President Kim's top-prioritizing this issue over any other inter-Korean matters. President Kim implemented very progressive and extensive legal and financial measures to facilitate family reunions. The relaxed policies cut red tape such as getting permission before making a contact with Northern families, and also provided financial aid for low-income families (ROKRC, 2005). Other technological additions to the face-to-face meetings expanded the breadth and depth of the reunifications, allowing for greater participation; live video reunions were adopted for those elderly family members who were unable to make the trip to the North (Ibid.). Due to the bold and persistent drive from the government, the reunions have been held on a regular basis from 2000 until 2010 and the fate and whereabouts of some 53,000 individuals have been confirmed (Integrated Information System for Separated Families Website). Furthermore, the Kim administration struck an agreement with the North with the construction of a family reunion center where the divided families would be able to meet without any restrictions (ROKRC, 2005). All the progress concerning this matter was only possible through the Kim Dae-jung administration's keen sense of urgency over this human tragedy. Aggressive but mutually beneficial strategic plans, strong faith and vision may prompt social integration in this divided nation, and also heal each individual's wounds.

Likewise, without the U.S. government's intervention, the Korean-American divided family problem will not be solved. Although this issue is portrayed as a humanitarian issue, a humanitarian approach through the Red Cross society without the U.S. administration's substantial support will have limitations in making real progress.

A North Korean government spokesman, on August 11, 2011, gave a positive outlook on the U.S.-North Korean family reunion issue, mentioning that North Korea would be willing to allow face-to-face meetings of families that were split by the Korean War between the U.S. and North Korea, as an effort to utilize this humanitarian issue as an impetus to improve the relations with the U.S. (Son, 2011).

The United States also revealed its commitment to keep this humanitarian project intact even amid soaring tensions over North Korea's move to blast a long-range rocket in April (Lee, 2012). The quote from Yonhap News Agency's interview with a State Department officer in late March reflects the administration's intention:

*The United States supports efforts to reconnect Korean-Americans separated from their family members in the DPRK (North Korea) since the end of the Korean War. This is a humanitarian issue and we continue to do all that we can to raise this issue in relevant fora (Ibid).*

Amid newly arising tensions and international condemnation prevailing in the wake of the failed rocket launch by the North, the continuous efforts to rebuild family connections will show to the world that the true spirit of humanitarianism is still alive in the midst of political wrestling. Successful reunions could also help create a new diplomatic relationship with this hostile communist country.

First of all, the U.S. government might set up a family reunification bureau in the State Department which would be exclusively in charge of Korean American/North Korea reunion matters. Its work would be greatly enhanced by having a precise database of divided families' demographics; the demographic character will help determine the best reunion mechanism. A next effective step would be locating Korean Americans' kin living in the North. Considering North Korea's limited technical infrastructure, the United States may need to offer its advanced information technology to expedite locating family members. Letter exchanges between divided family members would be an important step to prepare

separated family members for a potential emotionally overwhelming moment. Then the actual reunion would be arranged. It may be held in the United States or at the reunion center at North Korea's Mt. Kumgang resort or a third country. The reunion should offer maximum privacy for participants. As Foley's research in Korean reunion indicated, observation by the press was a big obstacle to unpack decades-old baggage of emotions (2003). As recommended by U.S. mental health teams who assist returnees and families of those missing in action and prisoners of war, preparatory assessment, debriefing process and ongoing support services will be effective to minimize mental and emotional stress (Lee, 1992).

### **Collaboration of Civil Society beyond the Korean American Community**

Behind all progress made in the U.S. Congress on this matter were desperate voices of individual Korean -Americans and the Korean -American community's solidarity. It was Chahee who visited then-Representative Mark Kirk to inform him of this issue, so that he could mention her case on the floor of the House in 2000. It was the collective voice of 100,000 Korean-Americans that made the U.S. Congress pass the resolution in 2001. It was the Saemsoni's initiative and persistent lobbying efforts that ushered in the forming of the Congressional Commission on divided -family reunions. This issue needs stronger people power to inform policy makers and the general public of the urgency of this matter and to lead them to work for it.

The first generation Korean-Americans are at a disadvantage. They don't feel confident enough to be able to convey their message clearly, due to their lack of English proficiency. In addition, the elderly divided- family members are too pessimistic about the possibility of a reunion and fatigued by their long waiting. More sadly, they are so accustomed to enduring their ordeal that they don't know how to break out of their silence. Chahee points out this generation's frustration:

*We, the first generation have language and cultural barriers and we, for a long time, for years and years, we went through the cold war era. That was one of the problems but the bigger problem was that we just didn't know how to deal with this, with the U.S. government...There, they have gotten old physically and mentally and when you're very old, when you're sick, you just cannot take, cannot deal with this heavy issue anymore. "Ok. I'm ready to go." So this is the mentality that you're going to deal with.*

The Lack of cultural adaptability of first generation Korean-Americans greatly hampers the efforts to make their voice heard. That is why their children and grandchildren should come forth to serve as agents to deliver their grandparents' voice. Jason Ahn and Eugene Chung's documentary film, *Divided Families*, which held a congressional screening in October of last year, and Korean-American high school students' collaborative story collection of divided- family members, *Lost Family*, were great examples of how second-generation Korean- Americans can serve as messengers to convey the messages of the first generation to the bigger world.

Not only Americans of Korean ethnic background, but also the general U.S. public needs to be supportive of this matter. For that purpose, the divided-family issue needs to be reframed as "the universal right to family reunion" to attract "the interests, passion, or sense of political or moral purpose of both Koreans and those without Korean heritage" (Moon, 2012). It can thus draw the empathy and organizational interest of human rights organizations and individuals in the United States and around the world (Ibid.). The issue of the "Comfort women" was an exemplary success which earned congressional acknowledgment and approval when it was reframed "from a focus on Korea, Korean victimization, and the Korea-Japan conflict to a broader focus on the universal issue of human rights, violence against women, and post-war reconciliation" (Ibid.). Similarly, a reframing of the divided- family issue, so as to appeal to activists and advocates with varied ethnic and political backgrounds, has the potential to stimulate greater political traction in Washington (Ibid.).

Beyond the advocacy movement, the general public's comprehensive understanding on the divided families issue will help bring reconciliation to those who survived fierce civil war, were uprooted from their origin of place and family and were silenced by the state and the community in the prevailing cold-war paranoia. Liem, a professor of psychology at Boston College, expressed succinctly in his paper why the divided- families issue needs public acknowledgement for the true healing of an individual trauma:

*Korean War survivors have not forgotten their wartime pasts but their experiences of the conflict have been relegated to private memory in the face of a national consciousness of the Korean War as a forgotten chapter of the Cold War era... Erasing the Korean War from collective memory and public dialogue is an ideological achievement of the state reinforced by the chilling effects of residual Cold War tensions in the Korean American community, and interpersonal and individual responses to psychosocial trauma (2007).*

For that purpose, a broad spectrum of disciplines and professions—media, performance and visual arts, the humanities—can cooperate to generate new forms of public intervention that can evoke empathy and feelings of solidarity as means to foster healing and reconciliation (Ibid.). As with other successful social movements, Korean-Americans might form common cause with other Americans and/or permanent residents who have been separated from their families as a result of civil wars.



## **Conclusion**

The United States' involvement on the Korean peninsula dates back to 1905 when the U.S. acknowledged Japanese control of Korea through the Taft-Katsura Agreement (Chon, 2002). It played a lion's share on the division of a nation, and led the armistice efforts to end the fratricidal War as a member of the UN forces (Ibid.). At present, the United States has the second biggest population of Korean heritage outside the Korean peninsula. There is no doubt that the United States' foreign policies on the Korean Peninsula will heavily influence the establishment of a permanent peace between the two Koreas or a united Korea in the future.

There are still hundreds of thousands of elderly people in the U.S. who have wept in pain over not seeing their loved ones in North Korea for six decades. Standing at the last chapter of their life, they just wish for that which we all take for granted: holding the hands of their own flesh and blood, visiting their childhood home and paying homage to their parents' grave, or if that is too much of a desire, to find out the fate of their loved ones.

With the relentless march of time, a few Korean- Americans have pursued homage visits to the North which were arranged by private agencies, organizations working closely with North Korea or Korean Chinese living on the Korea and China border. The process of locating their family members through those routes turned out to be quite costly and time-consuming. Some people pursuing homage visits or reunion visits have been targets of fraud. For this matter, the U.S. congress and government showed sympathy and support, but still there has been no tangible progress made on this issue.

The American Red Cross started sending out "Red Cross messages" to North Korea as part of a "Restoring Family Link program". The process is still very preliminary, and requires quite some time to see the validity of the program. The divided- family issue is like a race

against time. The first- generation divided families are in their 80s and 90s. Separated Korean American's advanced age gives urgency to this issue and is an important reason many sectors of U.S. society—including the government, national and international humanitarian organizations, corporations, academics and general public—need to collaborate to come up with solutions to terminate this human tragedy.

The Obama administration needs to address this issue on truly humanitarian principles. Amid the highest periods of tension between China and Taiwan, each government allowed dispersed families to travel between the divided nation, since each government made a clear distinction between political matters and humanitarian affair (Kim, 2009).

Bipartisan support on this issue needs to crystallize as a legislation that can weather any changes of political landscape between the United States and North Korea. It should mandate that the executive branch of government provide fiscal and personal resources to proceed in this matter.

Above all, the ultimate solution for the separated -family issue is to normalize the relationship between the two nations. In view of the USA-China detente in 1970, American Ping-Pong players' visit to China gave momentum to begin to open previously deadlocked political situations (Chen, 2003). Likewise, when government-to-government diplomacy goes nowhere, another version of Ping-Pong diplomacy could encourage hope that Track II contacts might be a first step on a path of rapprochement between the U.S. and North Korea. Track II exchanges are already happening both ways as reported in the op-ed column of Korea Times (Kim, 2011): "North Korea sent scientists, trade specialists and agricultural officials to the U.S. when they are invited by private institutions, including Georgia University, New York University at Syracuse, and University of California at San Diego." A delegation of 12 North Korean economic envoys toured such representative U.S. companies and industry as Google, Home Depot, Citigroup, Sempra Energy, Universal Studios, as well

as a mushroom farm, a seafood wholesalers and the Port of Los Angeles and learned trade infrastructure by the invitation of Susan Shirk, director of the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation at the University of California (Lee, 2011). The business sector's economic cooperation will definitely be helpful, too. The Rajin-Sonbong Free Trade Zone can be an ideal location for manufacturing plants (Choe, Cho & Kwon, 2005). Though the experience of North Korean workers is limited, the labor-cost is less than half of the Chinese wage and they are highly disciplined (Ibid.). American companies can offer strong capital and high-end technology, which will boost North Korean markets. All these interactions could help change the popular sentiment toward North Korea and gather momentum to normalize the relationship with North Korea.

North Korea is the country of origin for thousands of U.S. citizens and the home of their family members. The U.S. needs to keep open a channel for dialogue as a step to lead up to full-fledged diplomatic relations instead of just beefing up a military presence in and around the Korean peninsula. The beginning of rapprochement might be to restore the family connection. Let people of the United States visit their childhood home under the protection of their nation and invite their family members to the U.S. Only with imaginative vision and assertive action might a first-ever Korean American-North Korean family reunion happen. It could be costly, but the reward would be immense. I offer the last space of this paper to Chahee who has been devoting her life to this mission of reunion. I hope her desperate voice would be heard by the general public of the U.S. and would encourage Washington to say YES to it:

*Most of us have been living in the United States for more than thirty years. And this is our home now--this is our country. We are proud to be Korean-Americans. But we have lived with black holes in our hearts. People who left their spouses or children in North Korean are in their seventies eight--and eighties now. Within ten years, there won't be such a thing as divided families on the earth. Time is zeroing in on us as it did on our parents. Time is running out.*

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