



**Diaspora and Unification: The Changing Landscape on the Korean Peninsula and A  
Diasporic Community's Response—With the Focus on Korean Americans in the  
Greater Houston Area**

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*Introduction*

To return to the unified state, which is the original form of the Korean nation—this is the mantra that one hears from many South Korean commentators, professional and lay people alike. The return to one Korea, the original form, in this view, is a return also to the normal and true state that reflects the ontological identity of the Korean nation, or so the historical discourse goes. Koreans, as President Moon Jae In stated in front of the 150,000 citizens of Pyongyang on his historic visit to North Korea in June 2018, have lived together for five thousand years and have lived apart, in partition, for seventy years, the assertion being that it is wrong that one nation be divided into two separate states and that, hence, we are required to right this wrong.

Emotions aside, the breadth of the range of discussions about the possibility of unification—or the lack thereof—currently evident in South Korea is truly remarkable. Public and academic discussions are filled with propositions concerning how to

understand, approach, and attain national unification, reflecting the rapidly changing situation on the Korean peninsula that the world witnessed during 2018. Indeed, since the dawning of that year, the Korean peninsula has seen a series of unprecedented events, events that had been utterly unthinkable even as late as 2017. These have included, but are not limited to: the North's positive response to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games and the subsequent participation of a team representing the North, headed by dignitaries including Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo-jeong; the historic North-South summit in Panmunjeom in April between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un; the Singapore summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean supreme leader Kim in June, and; the September visit of President Moon to Pyongyang, which included the unprecedented spectacle of a South Korean leader making a public speech to a jam-packed stadium. Along the way, there were many firsts: the first-ever visit by a sibling of a North Korean leader to the South; the first-ever simultaneous crossing of the DMZ by both leaders; the first-ever official visit by the current North Korean leader to South Korea, and; the first-ever meeting between a sitting US President and a North Korean head of state, etcetera. Behind lots of incredulous optics, the year 2018 demonstrated that that which had once been considered unmovable could in fact move, and that people who used to be enemies could become friends—or could they? This is the question in the minds of many in South Korea today.

In this article, we firstly try to assess the current discussion surrounding unification—both in terms of the concept itself and the pragmatism involved in its realization—in South Korea. We then move on to comment on overseas Korean communities and their response to the changing situation on the Korean peninsula, with

the focus on Koreans in the greater Houston area of Texas. In order to achieve a more effective comparison, we make brief reference to the situation of Koreans in Japan, as this offers a reference point that will help us to better evaluate the Houston case. Through such endeavors, the authors intend to engage with the issues arising in the historical moment created by the intersection of the continuing Cold War in East Asia, diaspora, nationalism, and globalization, and evaluate the current temperature—both emotional and political—surrounding the possibility (or the lack thereof) of the unification of Korea.

### *Unification Seen from Both Sides of the Peninsula*

In August 1945, following Japan's surrender, the Korean peninsula was partitioned into a northern zone and a southern zone along the 38th parallel, with the Soviet Army occupying the north and the American Military Government the south. The understanding shared broadly at the time was that this was a temporary measure, and that before long, Korea would have to be made into one—again. For, Korea as a whole was ruled by the Japanese Government-General as a colony of Japan from 1910 through 1945, and it was an established fact that, prior to its annexation by the Empire of Japan, Korea had been a kingdom (Joseon, from 1392 to 1905) and then, briefly, an empire (Daehan from 1905 through 1910). It became a protectorate of Japan in 1905, before being formally annexed in 1910.

As many historians have already established, following the seminal work of Bruce Cumings, the Korean War of 1950 was an inevitable outcome of the artificial division of one nation, although the armistice, agreed in 1953, has left both halves of the peninsula *de jure* at war with each other to this day (Cumings 1981). The line drawn in 1953, and

the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that straddles it, continues to divide Korea today, more than sixty-five years after the armistice. If the Korean War was an attempt by the Northern military to unify Korea, i.e. to restore its original form, a similar desire has dominated both sides for decades since the armistice, resulting in constant espionage and sabotage, waged by both against the other side.

The two regimes on the peninsula—the Republic of Korea or South Korea, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or North Korea—have stood on diametrically opposed principles, the former as a member of the free world and a staunch ally of the US and its global hegemony, and the latter belonging to the other side of the Iron Curtain. China’s entry into the Korean War dissipated the all-out American roll-back to the northern half of the peninsula, further locking the alliance between the two nations. Following the war, it was aid from the Soviet Union (and its satellite nations) that not only kept the North alive economically, but also let it thrive vis-à-vis the poverty-stricken militarist government of the South up until the early 1970s (Armstrong 2015). In the meantime, South Korea’s alliance with the US also strengthened amidst the heightening Cold War tension often at the expense of the sovereignty, freedom, and wellbeing of its own citizens.

The rhetoric that governed North Korean policy toward the South up until the 1970s was *namjoseon hyeongmyeong* or the South Korean revolution, meaning that, under the North’s leadership, the southern revolutionary forces would rise up to topple the regime—as indeed had happened in 1960 when a student-led mass movement ousted South Korea’s first President, Syngman Rhee. As a result of this, so the thinking went, Korea would be reunified, leading to the formation of a singular national regime

contiguous to the North Korean regime. Similarly, in South Korea under the Park Jung Hee regime (1963-1979), a notoriously oppressive and die-hard anti-Communist military dictatorship extremely intolerant of oppositional voices, a view continued to be maintained of reunification as the South's conquest of the North. All in all, the two regimes on the peninsula stood in hostile opposition to each other, yet conspicuously shared identical positions, each insisting on its sovereignty over the entire Korean peninsula as well as emphasizing its conviction that the two Koreas should eventually unify.

The spirit behind the first joint communiqué by the two regimes since the Korean War in July 1972 reflected this type of détente, based on the shared desire of these two similarly charged, yet oppositional, regimes to unify the nation. Although the 1972 communiqué did not lead to any substantial change, it was nevertheless significant in that it proposed a vision of federation for the first time, under the nomenclature *Goryeo yeonbang gonghwaguk* or the Federal Republic of Koryo. In 1980, during the Sixth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, the North Korean leadership once again proposed federation as a form of reunification, advocating the peaceful coexistence of North and South under the framework of *Goryo minju ryeonbang gonghwaguk* or the Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo. These two ideas for federation did not stand on exactly the same footing: Whereas the 1972 proposal envisaged the eventual union of the two separate states into one, the latter placed greater emphasis on the peaceful coexistence of two separate states within one nation. Moreover, by declaring the complete victory of socialism in the North only or *sahoejuui wanjeonseungri*, North Korea appeared to have abandoned the idea of a South Korean revolution, i.e. achieving

socialism within its current borders alone. A South Korean historian of North Korea, Yi Jong-seok, comments on the implications of the 1980 proposal as follows:

It is interesting to see that the “Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo” policy came to play the role of a conceptual bunker that safeguarded the existing North Korean regime against the backdrop of the fall of the socialist camp [in the late 1980s] vis-à-vis South Korea. If the 1970s vision of federation was intended to accelerate the reunification of North and South, the [1980 vision] worked to acknowledge the division and recognize North and South as two separate states, effectively condoning national partition, yet securing long-term peace [on the peninsula]. (Yi J. 2011: 142; author’s translation)

This shift—from federation as prerequisite for eventual reunification to federation as recognition of two more or less permanently separate regimes peacefully coexisting—reflected, as Yi indicates above, a changing international climate which was about to usher in an entirely different power dynamic. For example, there was an enormous readjustment of US-China relations during the 1970s. During the 1980s and through the early 1990s, with the liberalization of the Chinese economy during the late 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the normalization of ROK-PRC relations in 1992, in addition to the dire performance of its own economy when compared to that of the booming South, North Korea was no longer in a position to call itself the sole unifier of the Korean peninsula. It is interesting to note that it was during the decade of the 1980s that North Korean terrorist

activities were at their worst, including the Rangoon bombing targeting the then South Korean President Chun (1983), the bombing of flight KAL 858 between Baghdad and Seoul (1987), and the now infamous kidnapping of innocent Japanese citizens from Japan's shores between 1977 and 1983. It should also be noted that the North Korean nuclear weapons program started in earnest in the early 1990s. Such developments demonstrate that North Korea's proposal for peaceful coexistence with South Korea was a complex one, to say the least. All in all, the decade of the 1990s began with a very different tone from that of the 1980s, both on the peninsula and worldwide.

In 1991, North Korea and South Korea became members of the United Nations separately but simultaneously. Until then, North Korea had been opposed to joining the United Nations as a separate entity from South Korea, since this would mean acknowledging the *de facto* existence of two discrete regimes on the peninsula. From the South Korean side, it was seen as creating a deterrent to *heupsutongil* or unification through the absorption of North Korea by South Korea, as according separate UN membership was tantamount to acknowledging the legitimacy of the North Korean state (Kim S. 2018: 47ff.).

After Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, and especially after the election of Kim Dae-jung, formerly active as a dissident opposing the previous military dictatorship, as president of South Korea in 1998, notable progress was made in the improvement of North-South relations, resulting in two visits by South Korean presidents—President Kim in 2000 and President Roh Moo-hyun in 2007—to North Korea, as well as many examples of collaboration between North and South, including the June 15 Joint Declaration of 2000, the opening of the Kaesong Industrial Park in 2002, the opening of

Geungangsan mountain resort to southern visitors, and the arrangement of intermittent family reunions. What was significant about these outcomes was that they not only involved government-to-government relations, but also resulted in sizeable numbers of South Korean personnel working with their North Korean counterparts, allowing South Korea to accumulate invaluable experience and deepen its understanding of the way in which North Korea's social and organizational logic operated (e.g. Kim J. 2018, Im 2018).

While North Korea languished under Kim Jong Il, who succeeded his father in 1994 and reigned until his death in 2011, with the nation confronting acute food shortages, natural disasters, and infrastructural devastation, South Korea, too, went backwards under President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and then under the disgraced President Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) in terms of reaching out to the North. While working with South Korean Presidents Kim and Roh, Kim Jong Il struggled to establish his legitimacy, especially in the face of the famine and the dismal economic performance that his administration produced, thereby leading him to double down, borrowing from his father's legacy and declaring North Korea the Kim Il Sung nation, accentuating the unmixable qualities of North and South, and further strengthening the two-Koreas perspective (see Kang 2019). During recent years, the world has witnessed his successor, Kim Jong Il, also doubling down on nuclear armament. In South Korea, the Lee presidency scrapped the Sunshine Policy, the peaceful overture shown by the preceding Kim and Roh presidencies. Under President Park, who followed Lee, North Korea began to be seen as an object of speculation and economic exploitation, Park infamously coining the term *bukhandaebak* or the North Korean jackpot, implying that unification



would bring about an economic boom in South Korea through the exploitation of cheap North Korean labor (Mun, Jang, Jeong, and Jeong 2018: 355-356). It was also during the Park administration that a new kind of anti-North Korean propaganda was implemented in the school curriculum under the rubric *nara sarang gyoyuk* or Love My Country Education, promoted by the then ROK Patriots and Veterans Affairs Minister, Pak Seung-chun, which emphasized the cruelty and violence practiced by the North Korean regime, often traumatizing school children and implanting horrific images of North Korea in their minds, mimicking what had been done under the anti-Communist education policies of the 1960s and 1970s (Mun, Jang, Jeong, and Jeong 2018: 357-358).

Once Kim Jong Un became Supreme Leader of North Korea in 2011, the situation continued to worsen. Both the sinking of the Cheonan, an ROK Navy corvette, and the bombardment of Yeongpyeong Island during the previous year had been widely seen as demonstrations of power by the then heir apparent of North Korea. Kim was on record on multiple occasions as having denounced Lee and Park as national traitors and enemies of the Korean nation. Even after Park was ousted in the wake of historic peaceful protests by massive numbers of South Korean citizens, in which millions participated in candlelight protests week after week demanding that the corrupt Park government be disbanded, and after the election of Moon Jae-in, by far the most progressive president the country had seen, in 2017, North Korea continued its missile tests, in November of that year successfully carrying out a test deployment of an ICBM with a range of 13,000 kilometers. During this process, Kim Jong Un more than once tangled with newly-elected US President Donald Trump, with each calling the other names and, more seriously, creating the possibility of a real military crisis in the region. Change, however, came

unexpectedly. In his 2018 New Year's message, Kim expressed his willingness to respond positively to the Pyeongchang Olympic Games, marking the beginning of a year that would be filled with surprises, as noted earlier. Today, after multiple meetings with Kim, including the historic meeting in the DMZ in July 2019, Trump would depict his relationship with Kim Jong Un as some kind of romantic connection and friendship, a truly unthinkable turn considering that Trump had called Kim a "rocket man" on "a suicide mission" in his speech at the UN Headquarters in September 2017 (Shelbourne 2017).

*Unification as a Return to the Original?*

Today, most South Korean commentators appear to be of the opinion that no matter where you stand, whether you are conservative or liberal, a pessimist or an optimist, Korean political forces are in agreement that, one way or another, unification has to happen (e.g. Choi 2018, Jeong I. 2018, Sa 2019). Experts and researchers from diverse areas of specialization are now participating in a discussion about possible unification, its consequences, the best method of achieving it, or the forms of civic participation. A lively exchange of ideas and an exploration of how to understand and prepare for imminent unification can now be found not only in traditional academic research, but also in domains as diverse as construction, architecture, traffic control and public transportation, community activism, labor, literature and poetry, history and public memory, the military, broadcasting and media, children's literature, tourism, education (especially moral education and civic education), and energy and power, to list but a few (e.g. Chung 2018, Yun 2019, Sa 2018, Pak Y. 2018, Yi S. 2018, Yun, Kim, Choi and Ryu

2018, Im 2019, Kim Sa. 2019, Jeong J. 2018, Jeong I. 2018, Song, Yi, Byeon, and Kim Jin-hyang 2018, Kim and Kim 2019, Ma 2018, Byeon 2018, Kim Se. 2018, Kang 2018, Shin 2018, Kim, Yang, Choi, Kwon, and Park 2018, Park, Kim, and Song 2019, Yun 2018, Yi J. 2018, Han 2018, Pak T. 2018).

Statistically speaking, overall, the majority of South Korean citizens support unification. The South Korean government has regularly conducted *tongil uisik josa* or unification consciousness surveys since the 1990s. Of the 1,002 respondents in the 2018 survey, there was a thirteen-percent jump in the proportion responding positively to the idea of reunification when compared with the previous year (2017), as well as an eight-percent jump (to 29.3 percent) in the proportion responding that they were optimistic about the prospects for reunification. Overall, the younger the respondents, the more pessimistic they were about unification, while there was a gender difference among younger respondents too, in that younger women were more optimistic than younger men about unification (Koo and Choi 2019: 55, 62; also Yi 2014). This survey also showed that 20.6 percent of respondents viewed the North Korean government under Kim Jong Un positively, a massive jump from the figure of 1.8 percent recorded in the previous year (2017), while the percentage of those holding a negative view of the North Korean regime fell dramatically from 88.9 percent in 2017 to 35.4 percent in 2018 (Park, Kim, and Song 2019: 184). Also, 45.6 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: “If there is not going to be an enormous burden, it would be better that Korea be unified,” and 20.4 percent opted for the statement: “No matter what, Korea must be unified” (Park, Kim, and Song 2019: 185). According to a separate survey among Seoul National

University students conducted in 2018, more than one half of the respondents trusted the current North Korean regime (Park, Kim, and Song 2019: 185).

A generally positive view toward unification is also found in North Korea. Of course, in official North Korean discourse, the regime has consistently insisted on unifying the divided halves of the nation ever since its foundation. However, as can be seen in the previous section, its strategy has shifted from one of attempted armed conquest, as seen in the Korean War, to one of instigating a South Korean revolution or *namjoseon hyeongmyeong*, from one of proposing federation as a transition to the eventual achievement of a unitary nation-state to federation as a means of securing the peaceful coexistence of two separate states. Nevertheless, a desire for unification has been singularly sustained amongst the North Korean population, as documented in a longitudinal study carried out among defectors in the South. Interestingly, according to a study of 798 defectors between 2011 and 2016, the more extensive the exposure of respondents to South Korean society and culture, the stronger was their desire for unification (Jeong 2016). Defectors have consistently shown high hopes for unification and an eagerness to contribute toward its achievement (Jeong 2013).

For South Koreans, however, the logic or foundation for the need for unification is far from clear, even among those who actually think Korea needs to be unified. Writing to the journal *Changjakgwa bipyeong* or *Creation and Criticism*, a reputable left-leaning journal, Jeong Yong-jo, a reader, writes: “When I think about the unified future of Korea, I get nervous. I’m nearly fifty years old, and yet if someone were to ask me, ‘Why do we have to unify Korea?’ my answer would simply be that the same nation must become one. Beyond this position, I don’t have a very persuasive explanation that I can give to

my children and the younger generation” (quoted in Jeong, Seong, Yi, Gu, Jung, and Kim 2018: 9; author’s translation).

A similar ambiguity exists in the current South Korean Constitution (amended in 1987). Under the General Provisions, Article 3 reads:

The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands.

Meanwhile, Article 4 reads:

The Republic of Korea shall seek unification and shall formulate and carry out a policy of peaceful unification based on the principle of freedom and democracy.

Scholars have debated and continue to debate the implication of the mutually contradictory nature of these articles in the face of the possible unification of the two Koreas, for while Article 3 recognizes the entire Korean peninsula (i.e. including North Korea) as the territory of South Korea, Article 4 declares that South Korea’s mission is to strive for the peaceful unification of Korea (Jeon 2019). Some legal scholars are critical of the way in which Article 3, the so-called territory article, is written, in that it dictates that Korea’s unification take the form of *namhanjudoui heupsutongil* or unification via absorption by the South (e.g. Yun 2019: 55). The North Korean Constitution does not refer specifically to national territory. Similarly to South Korea, however, its official rhetoric has consistently claimed that its territorial sovereignty extends to the entire

Korean peninsula. Thus, we are back to the idea or the assumption that what was once one must become one again, a notion that has been, in turn, historically burdened with the discrepancy between the reality of the existence of two nation-states and the respective claims by each regimes that only one has legitimacy.

Current public debate in South Korea reflects such ambivalence. Left-leaning commentators are skeptical toward and particularly critical of the stance crystalized in the term *bukhandaebak* or the North Korean jackpot, used by disgraced President Park Geun-hye while she was in power (2013-2017). Their concern is directed toward the tendency to regard unification as an opportunity to enhance economic returns for South Korea's corporate capital and speculative investment, without sufficient attention being paid to the wellbeing of North Korean citizens (Mun, Jang, Jeong and Jeong 2018). Others pay attention to the potential for raising (unified) Korea's global standing through unification. Indeed, according to one calculation, unification would lead to Korea moving up to tenth position in the global rankings of national power (Sa 2019: 156). Just how and what kind of unification should be desirable remains a constant point of contention in South Korean public discussion.

Particularly notable in this area is the disagreement between two intellectual giants, Choi Jang-jip and Paik Nak Chung, both holding the status of professor emeritus at leading national institutions and both highly regarded in their own right, in Korea and abroad (see Pak and Yi 2018). Choi's position is that the peaceful coexistence of North and South Korea is not necessarily a prerequisite for unification, that it would not have to lead to it, and that, in fact, the future of the Korean peninsula after the establishment of peace is open to question. He argues that the scenario of permanent separation of the two

states is not an impossible one, mainly due to the fundamentally different quality and structure of the two societies, and that, thus, it would be more sensible to preserve the different systems as they are, rather than trying to force unification (Kim Jin-u 2018; Cheon 2018). In critiquing Choi's position, Paik calls it a theory of the status quo. Choi's position, according to Paik, offers no solution for the denuclearization of North Korea, and therefore no possibility of bringing lasting peace to the Korean peninsula. Instead, Paik proposes gradual union or *yeonhap* of North and South Korea, eventually leading to unification, *tongil*. Paik emphasizes that such a route can only be attained through true civic participation, the best example of which was shown during the candlelight vigil and peaceful mass protests that lasted for weeks and eventually led to the toppling of the Park Geun-hye regime in 2017 (Paik 2018). In summary, while Choi envisages two states and one nation, Paik looks ahead to the achievement of a unitary nation-state.

Given that unification no longer remains an issue for the two states on the Korean peninsula to resolve solely between themselves, and given that the role played by other forces, including the US and China, is of continuous as well as increasing importance, it remains to be seen exactly which way the Korean peninsula will move. Furthermore, in theory, a third way may exist, one that reflects neither Choi's vision nor that of Paik. Minimally, we can safely say that South Korean public opinion is no longer manipulated by a military dictatorship, and that while the effects of ideological oppression and anti-North brainwashing still linger, citizens are far better informed, far more critical, and have far stronger global sensitivities compared to the past decades. As such, they are seeking a logical explanation and a politico-economic as well as moral reason for unification.

*Koreans in Japan*

Before we move onto a more in-depth exploration of how the changing situation regarding Korea's unification affects the Korean American population in the greater Houston area, let us briefly make reference to the current situation for Koreans in Japan. This case will offer a useful point for comparison that will help us to grasp the response of Koreans in Houston. Unlike Koreans in the US, Koreans in Japan are predominantly the descendants of first-generation immigrants/migrants to Japan from the Korean peninsula during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945). When the Japanese Empire surrendered and World War II ended, there were more than two million Koreans residing in Japan in diverse capacities. Some had come in search of better job opportunities, others in order to pursue higher education, and thousands more were brought to Japan under wartime mobilization during the Pacific War to work on military construction projects and in ammunitions production. Once the war was over and Korea liberated, tens of thousands of Koreans rushed back home, even though Japan and the Allied Powers that occupied Japan from 1945 to 1952 did not provide them with adequate means of repatriation. Within a year or so, the number of Koreans in Japan had fallen to around 600,000. For one reason or another, they remained in Japan, having established the basis for a meager livelihood, for example, even though they found themselves utterly stripped of nationality, citizenship, and a broad swath of civil and residential rights in Japan (Morris-Suzuki 2012).

Reflecting rapidly rising tensions on the Korean peninsula, which resulted in the partition of Korea into Soviet and American zones, Koreans in Japan, too, came to be



separated into a left-leaning, North-supporting group and a corresponding group that supported South Korea. This development requires some explanation, since the absolute majority of first-generation Korean immigrants to Japan during the colonial period came from the southern provinces, regions belonging to today's South Korea. Two factors need to be stressed here. Firstly, they (as well as many others in the world at the time) believed that the partition of Korea was temporary, that Korea would soon be unified, and that they would therefore soon return to their ancestral home. Secondly, they were fervently nationalistic and anti-Japanese, and the way that the US military governed South Korea was thus far from appealing, as it relied heavily on the governing tools of the Japanese colonial authorities in order to bring order to the chaotic situation. This situation made the North look more attractive in the eyes of Koreans in Japan—Soviets placed native Koreans center-stage, leaders that included the then 33-year-old Kim Il Sung, whose legendary anti-Japanese guerrilla activities had long been known among sections of Koreans in Japan. By way of contrast, in the South, the American returnee Syngman Rhee became the first President of the Republic of Korea. As opposed to Kim Il Sung, in the eyes of Koreans in Japan, Syngman Rhee looked utterly inauthentic a national leader. North-South confrontation soon erupted into all-out civil war (the Korean War 1950-1953), which permanently divided the Korean expatriate community in Japan into irreconcilably opposing camps (Ryang 1997: Ch.2).

In 1955, the North Korea-supporting group organized itself into a unified coalition of organizations as the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, or Chongryun in its Korean abbreviation. Reflecting the lessons learned from the previous decade, in which pro-North Korea activities often doubled as anti-Japan ones, and thus,

suffering an enormous damage due to the Japanese government's direct oppression, Chongryun made a strategic pivot, declaring itself as the overseas organization of North Korea, thereby renouncing demands made to the Japanese government relating to civil rights, including residential security, civic participation, and access to much public funding. This was a convenient pivot from the Japanese authorities' point of view as well, for this would mean that, as far as the Japanese government were to leave Chongryun alone, the latter would not engage in the anti-Japanese subversion.

At its peak, Chongryun enjoyed broad support among Koreans in Japan with its robust organizational structure. It boasted more than 150 independent Korean schools offering education at all levels, from kindergarten classes to graduate programs, according to the North Korean curriculum. In addition to its schools, its nationwide prefectural headquarters and its local branches, Chongryun also had its own credit union networks, its own publishing house, issuing daily newspapers and periodicals in five languages as well as publishing its own textbooks for its own grade schools, its own football team, film production crew, art troupes, theatre group, and other specialized professional organizations, and so on. Notably, its school curriculum is independent of the scrutiny of the Japanese education authorities, because Chongryun strategically sought non-degree-conferring, special education status for its schools. In exchange for enjoying relative autonomy in terms of the educational and pedagogical content of its classes and school activities, Chongryun schools were not eligible to receive Japanese educational subsidies and funding. All in all, from 1955 up until the late 1980s, Chongryun operated a remarkable system according to which the fatherland, North Korea, was ideologically supported from enemy territory, Japan (Ryang 2016).

Compared with its pro-South Korea counterpart, Mindan, Chongryun enjoyed far more robust support and enthusiasm among Koreans in Japan and was more overtly supportive of the eventual unification of the two Koreas.

From the 1990s, however, there was a visible decline in the level of mass support for Chongryun among Koreans in Japan. This development was related to many factors, not the least among which was the changing global Cold War environment, starting with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union and the former Soviet-influenced Eastern European political systems. Internally, expatriate support for Chongryun faced a serious crisis after the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, the original North Korean Great Leader: Sections of activists left Chongryun ranks, disillusioned by the nepotistic succession of Kim Jong Il, while many revised their support for North Korea and Chongryun after learning first-hand about the grim situation faced by Koreans who had been repatriated to North Korea. Starting in 1959, a little over ninety thousand Koreans had chosen to be repatriated to North Korea with the hope of creating new lives and bright futures for their families, since Koreans at that time were suffering from dire levels of poverty in Japan (Ryang 2012). Yet, the post-repatriation reality was one of suspicion and distrust by North Korean authorities and North Korean society at large, with repatriated individuals often ending up in reeducation camps or other correctional facilities (Morris-Suzuki 2007; see also Kang 2005). After Japan's ratifying the United Nations Refugee 'convention in 1981, Chongryun Koreans were able to obtain the re-entry permit to Japan, with which they traveled to North Korea to be reunited with their repatriated families. This opened the floodgate of the information hitherto hidden behind the euphemism contained in the occasional letters from the repatriated families, sent via

the Eastern Europe, taking months to get to the families in Japan. Furthermore, the 2001 revelation that Japanese citizens had been kidnapped by North Korean espionage agents during the 1970s and 1980s helped worsen the image of North Korea amongst Koreans in Japan. But, most importantly, generational change—the Korean population in Japan now encompasses five generations—as well as improved residential security, economic stabilization, gentrification, and assimilation to the Japanese main stream society have all played a significant role in moving Koreans away from Chongryun and North Korea—and from the Korean peninsula itself, for that matter.

The inevitable reality that Koreans in Japan will not “return” to either North Korea or South Korea, but will, instead, live and die in Japan is sinking in within the immigrant community and has been doing so for some time by now, pushing families and individuals to seek measures to secure their future in Japan, measures which certainly do not include getting closer to North Korea or Chongryun. Today, both the quantity and quality of Chongryun schools have fallen significantly. A mere thirty schools remain, all much smaller than their predecessors—and its prefectural headquarters are headquarters in name only. While its high-ranking officials still have close ties with North Korea (including some individuals who are “elected” to the Supreme People’s Committee), the visceral and passionate support it enjoyed from the massive Korean base in Japan from the 1950s through the 1970s is long, long gone. In recent decades, every year, an average of about ten to fifteen thousand Koreans are naturalized as Japanese citizens. At this pace, in a few decades, Koreans in Japan, the descendants of those who moved from colonial Korea to Japan and then supported North Korea during the Cold War period, as well as

their Japan-born children and grandchildren, will completely disappear, as they will have been absorbed into the mass of Japanese citizenry (Ryang 2010).

So, how do the Koreans in Japan today view the situation that unfolded on the Korean peninsula during the historic year of 2018? According to research conducted by the authors in 2019, it is possible to conclude that there was a clear generational divide. The authors chose to interact only with Chongryun-supporting Koreans in Japan or Koreans who used to live in the Chongryun-influenced sphere by, for example, having attended Chongryun schools. Compared to the heyday of Chongryun, this group of Koreans has drastically diminished in number. However, compared to Koreans in Japan, who are more assimilated into Japanese society and who would have been educated according to the Japanese school curriculum (which does not include education on ethnic identity), Koreans with Chongryun connections were exposed to the idea of espousing their ethnic identity, looking to the Korean peninsula as their ancestral home, and envisioning the unification of Korea as their utopic goal.

Members of the numerically diminished first generation, aged roughly seventy five or above, regardless of their degree of prior involvement with Chongryun and different educational levels, is interested in and positive about the prospects for Korea's unification. For this generation, Korea was one nation when they left it for Japan, and therefore, it would only be right and just that Korea return to its original form of being one. This idea, as it were, does not come from this generation's involvement with Chongryun. Typically, the first-generation of Chongryun Koreans was not educated at Chongryun schools; they built and ran them. They were the authors and practitioners of Chongryun's support for North Korea and have therefore remained committed, on the

level of affect, to the unification of Korea, this commitment in turn enabling them to return to the ancestral homeland that they left behind. Their “one Korea” perspective corresponds to public opinion broadly held in South Korea today—that since Korea was and has always been one nation, it would only be natural that it return to being one nation.

This position, however, is not free from the grips of historical ideology. Frankly put, when and for how long was Korea “one” during its history? If, as both North and South Korea claim, Korea is to be understood as a nation with a “five-thousand-year history,” we are going to have to start from the ancient proto-states of Joseon (2300 B.C.), Buyeo (second century, B.C.—494 A.D.), and Jinglyk (third to second century, B.C.). These three political entities consisted of diverse clan-like, tribal, and ethnic groups, with only the third, Jinglyk, roughly occupying the southern part of the peninsula, the former two spreading out in an area corresponding with today’s northeastern China. These facts are not hidden—a perusal of any Korean middle school history textbook can attest to this. The unification of the political entities on the Korean peninsula had to wait until the seventh century A.D. when Shilla conquered the adjacent rival kingdoms of Koguryeo and Baekje, requiring the assistance of non-Korean forces. The oft-invoked reference to Korea’s five-thousand-year history is itself a myth. Still, it is notable to register that, across the Japan Strait and beyond the temporal divide, Koreans of different backgrounds and personal histories broadly supported the idea that Korea was one and therefore, has to return to one.

The story is very different when we turn to the Japan-born generation that is a few decades younger than this first generation. It is this generation—individuals in their

fifties and sixties—that is most negative, even compared to members of the younger generation (see below). They are the ones who received their formative education at Chongryun schools, the orthodoxy of which was that Korea had to be reunified under the banner of North Korea’s leadership. They are the ones whose indoctrination was intense, a process which coincided with overt institutional and social discrimination against Koreans in Japan that were prevalent at the time in Japanese society. They grew up fearing the Japanese authorities; if a police officer stopped them on the street and discovered that they had failed to abide by their legal obligation to carry their alien registration certificates on them at all times, they would be locked up, for example. They grew up as stateless persons, their residential status meaning that they did not have any form of permanent existence in Japan until 1982, until after Japan’s joining of the United Nations Refugee Convention (see above). This situation, in turn, augmented the urgency to unite inside an ethnic enclave organized around its support for North Korea. Today, the majority of members of this group of Koreans in Japan holds South Korean nationality—a special kind of nationality that allows them to carry South Korean passports, but does not allow them to vote or participate in South Korean domestic affairs in exchange for exemption from domestic taxation and military service requirements (for males). They matured and became parents while North Korea’s *raison d’être* as their “fatherland” crumbled right in front of their eyes. Yet, due to their upbringing, confined in an ethnic enclave and living in accordance with Chongryun’s organizational norms, they feel that they were inadequately prepared to do well in Japanese society in terms of job security and economic advancement. They therefore harbor strong feelings of resentment, feelings often expressed as something akin to victimhood, regarding themselves as the lost

generation of the Cold War, and expressing wariness, at times repugnancy, when it comes to even talking about Korea, let alone its unification. In a word, respondents from this generation reacted to any questions regarding Korea's unification with indifference at best and hostility at worst.

Members of the younger generation, in their twenties and thirties and typically belonging to the third generation or later, can be roughly divided into those that are interested in and positive about Korea's future and those that are indifferent, yet not negative. Understandably, this generation of Koreans is most assimilated into mainstream Japanese culture. Its members are typically either unmarried, married to a Japanese person, or in a relationship with a Japanese companion, work for Japanese-owned firm and inhabit Japanese-dominant environments. They have typically received only part of their education at Chongryun institutions, many of them having switched to Japanese schools in middle school or high school. Their reaction to the events of 2018 on the Korean peninsula was that of someone viewing them as part of global events, rather than as events pertaining to their own nation and they do not regard what is happening in Korea as something that concerns them personally. But, they affirm that peace in northeastern Asia is a good thing and if the armistice were to be transformed so as to achieve a formal end to the Korean War, this would be a great step forward in peacemaking.

The sample size of Koreans in Japan is very small—a total of eleven individuals—and thus cannot be taken as the basis for general statements concerning the broader population. Nevertheless, seen against the backdrop of historical change that Koreans in Japan have gone through, the findings above are indicative of corresponding



generational difference. But this will offer an interesting point of comparison to the pages below, where we present a case of Koreans in the US and include more extensive data and in-depth interpretation.

*Koreans in the US—with the Focus on Houston Area Residents*

To better grasp the changing situation on the Korean peninsula through the experiences of Koreans in the greater Houston area (including the city of Houston and surrounding locations in Harris County as well as the adjacent Fort Bend County of southeastern Texas), we must situate this group within the broader framework of Korean American diasporic history. From the outset, modern Korean history has been transnational, not least due to its having been colonized by neighboring Japan, first as a protectorate in 1905, and then through the annexation of 1910, after centuries of vassal-tributary relations with China (Abelmann and Lie 1997: 49, Park 2005, Kim 2010, Lee 2010, Ryang 2016, Park 2019). Key nationalist movements advocating Korea's sovereignty were waged outside the established boundaries of the Korean peninsula from the beginning of the twentieth century, their activities including the 1909 assassination of Itō Hirobumi by An Jung-geun in 1909 in Harbin, a Chinese city bordering Russia, the 1919 March First uprising against the Japanese Government-General's grip on the colony, which coincided with the establishment of a Korean provisional government in exile in Shanghai, and widespread armed resistance in northeastern China during the 1940s by Korean guerrillas, including the unit led by Kim Il Sung (Kim 2007; Suh 2017; Suh 1995). Pre-colonial and colonial immigration and migration of Koreans to Russia's Maritime Province, Manchuria, and Japan need to be seen against the backdrop of the

growth in Korea's national consciousness, not simply within but across Korea's geographic boundaries; that is to say, in the journeys, relocations, and made by millions of Koreans in and out of Korea's borders.

Korean immigration to the US needs to be understood within this transhistorical and transnational movement of millions of Koreans that involves not simply the one-sided journey of leaving their homeland but also as part of larger geopolitical developments and shifts in global power relations, weaving a complex tapestry of transmigration, temporary sojourns, and multiple departures. According to Kyeyoung Park, Korean immigration can be seen as "one outcome of American political, economic, missionary, and military involvement in Korea since the late nineteenth century" (Park 1997: 7). Of our immediate concern is the peculiar nature of US immigration policy, which was comparatively more relaxed and accommodating towards diverse groups than that of Japan. Nevertheless, the approaches taken by US immigration authorities towards Asians have historically demonstrated ongoing contradictions, such as in the contingent acceptance but also unprecedented exclusion of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a watershed in US immigration history, which was not only the country's first significant restrictive immigration law, but also the first law to exclude a specific immigrant group based on its race and class (Lee 2002). Indeed, the US immigration policy and its history need to be considered in tandem with the white supremacy and the American race politics ever since the nineteenth century, if not before, which was built with the obsessive subtext of purifying the white race, altogether denying citizenship to anyone seen as non-white (King 2019: Ch.6).

Although initially primarily directed at the Chinese (lower-class male laborers, to be precise), the Chinese Exclusion Act and subsequent anti-Asian exclusionary laws profoundly shaped the size and identity of the Asian population in the US. When Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, it effectively banned all Asian immigration except that by international students, members of the elite, and political refugees (Kim 2004). The arbitrariness of ethnicity and nationality-based US immigration policies would continue into the present, shifting according to changing geopolitical circumstances in Asia as well as changing economic and political needs in the US. Consequently, unlike Korean immigration to Japan, Korean immigration to the US can be divided into not one but three major periods, an initial wave between 1903 and 1949, a second wave between 1950 and 1964, and a third wave after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Park 1997).

The first wave mostly consisted of cheap laborers fleeing political turmoil and food shortages in Korea to work in Hawaiian sugar and pineapple plantations at the turn of the century (Patterson 2000). By 1905, more than 7,226 Koreans had arrived on the island—this time, their number including religious refugees—later to move back to Korea or the US mainland as immigrant entrepreneurs (Choe 2003). This figure does not include the very small numbers of students, politicians, and diplomats from Korea during the 1880s, such as the first Korean student in the US, Yu Kil Chun (1856-1914) (Choy 1979). The second wave occurred shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War (1950-1953). The War Brides Act of 1945 granted the fiancés of American servicemen special exemption from the usual immigration quotas. Nearly a decade later, the anti-Communist-informed Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (The McCarran-Walter

Act) sought to revise the earlier Immigration Act of 1924 (Hing 2004). Although the former did little to alter the most draconian exclusions of the 1924 law, it did implement a new system of preferences that favored individuals with special skills or families who already resided in the US. Under these relaxed conditions, the second wave witnessed the arrival of Korean War brides of American servicemen, Korean adoptees, Korean students, and Korean professionals (e.g., doctors, lawyers, and professors). The third wave ushered in unprecedented levels of immigration, not only from Korea but from all over the world, particularly from Asia and Latin America.

Coinciding with broader decolonization movements in Asia and Africa, and inspired by calls by the Civil Rights Movement for the removal of all forms of legal discrimination based on race or national origin, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished the restrictive national origin quota system that had been in effect since the 1920s. The law's effect on Korean immigration was equally profound. The Korean population in 1970 was likely to have been less than 100,000, yet within two decades had skyrocketed to 700,000 (Kim and Min 1992: 122). In the context of South Korea several factors led to increased Korean emigration to the US after 1965: the continued political, military, and economic involvement of the US in the Korean peninsula; South Korean democratization after 1987; the rise of a new middle class in South Korea; the development of a new international division of labor and the improved status of South Korea within this new system; globalization and relaxed travel restrictions in South Korea after the Seoul Olympic Games, and migration policies created by the US and Korean governments (Park 1997: 7).

*Houston, Texas: “The Rural Part of Korean America”*

According to the US Census Bureau, approximately 1.8 million Korean Americans resided in the US in 2017, accounting for 0.5 percent of the entire US population. Of these, the total number of Koreans in Texas was 71,772, including 10,923 in Harris County (which includes Houston), this figure including 6,482 in the City of Houston itself (US Census Bureau 2017; Pew Research Center 2017). Considering that the population of the City of Houston is two million, and that of the greater Houston area four million, local Koreans cannot be considered to make up a sizable Asian American community. Houston is a rapidly diversifying city, with Asians making up 7.2 percent of its total population, a proportion that exceeds the national average of around six percent (Egan 2018). However, its Korean community is much smaller than that of cities on both coasts of the US that are known for their large Korean communities, such as Los Angeles or New York City.

The mid-1970s was “Houston’s Golden Economic Age,” a period that witnessed the growth of major international and national oil companies in the area as well as the development of nearly five additional oil and gas companies and support firms (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000: 20). The enormous demand for labor during the mid-1970s helped to attract highly-skilled workers and professionals from around the world, including from South Korea. Until the energy recession of the 1980s, economic booms from nearby oil fields boosted Houston’s reputation as an oil (and later energy and chemical) industry hub. Its port and maritime access, robust infrastructure, cultural and academic institutions, world-class medical facilities, and technology, especially its space technology while NASA’s Johnson Space Center was in full operation, further enhanced

Houston's appeal as an immigrant destination. In addition to skilled professionals, another group of less-privileged, "low-skilled" Korean immigrant laborers found employment in the service industry sector working at motels, beauty salons, and gas stations. Koreans formed part of an extremely diverse Asian population in Harris County, its largest subgroups being the Vietnamese (95,590 in 2017), Asian Indian (65,494 in 2017) and Chinese other than Taiwanese (50,865 in 2017) communities (US Census Bureau 2017).

Most Korean immigrants in the US who constitute today's first, second, and occasionally third generation hail from upper-middle class and middle-class segments of South Korean society (Park 1997: 12; Kim and Min 1992: 125). Correspondingly, most of Houston's Korean American arrivals, including most of those featured in this article, possessed skill sets and credentials related to the highly-skilled professional fields preferred by post-1965 US immigration policies. Whereas other major metropolises such as Los Angeles and New York exhibited high levels of class stratification, according to this article's research subjects, Houston maintains less uniformity. Most respondents made a point of highlighting this apparent fact, particularly the contrast between Houston and cities like Dallas (where many Houstonians migrated to during the 2000s) and Los Angeles, which had larger but arguably more class-stratified Korean migrant populations (especially in the case of working-class members). Some older respondents in their sixties went so far as to repeatedly claim that Koreans in Houston were "higher class" and "more professional and polished" than those in other cities. This countered the stereotypical image of the working-class Korean immigrant entrepreneur, unassimilated and relegated to socially marginalized ethnic enclaves.

Not unlike the case for our data on Koreans in Japan, our sample size of Koreans in Houston is statistically small. As a result, the ethnographic findings of this study can only be used as a partial data, while nevertheless providing a solid starting point for further investigation. Despite the considerable historical, political, and social contrasts between both small sample groups, both diasporic communities—of Koreans in Japan and Koreans in Houston—exhibit meaningful similarities (corresponding generational distinctions and a general desire for reunification) as well as differences (political sensibilities towards North Korea, South Korea, and their adopted or inevitable homelands) that illuminate ongoing and diverse discussions around unification and the changing situation on the Korean peninsula. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-two Korean Americans aged between twenty and seventy across the greater Houston area. The research subjects for this article also varied in terms of their ages of arrival in the US and level of American acculturation. Most of the respondents were professionals, such as doctors, attorneys, engineers, professors, bankers, government officials, business owners, entrepreneurs, real estate workers, computer programmers, community volunteers, and religious officials, although the group also included middle-class homemakers and retirees. Several others were former international students. Most of our subjects had been long-term residents of Houston, with only a select few having arrived within the previous ten years, either as international students or immigrants. The authors also carried out participant observation in the area at locations that included churches, temples, professional and academic events, social gatherings, and cultural festivals between July 2018 and May 2019.

Many of our research subjects initially exhibited little to no personal identification with Houston, unlike Korean Americans in more prominent diasporic destinations like Los Angeles, New York, or even Chicago, who tended to identify themselves with local and regional characteristics. They hinted at a degree of serendipity in their fate, many first having arrived in other regions such as the West Coast, the East Coast, or the Midwest before permanently settling in Texas. K. Casey Youn, a former Shell Oil Company researcher, founder and president of WEECO International, and an active Korean American community organizer member in his seventies, described how he had felt first coming to Houston in the 1970s: “It was a shock when I arrived. It was bloody humid and hot. At that time, there were only around three hundred Koreans in the area. Whenever there was some sort of Korean party, it would be in someone’s backyard.” Many research subjects, both young and old, echoed the sentiment that Houston, despite its size, was more homegrown and somewhat parochial than other Korean American cities. Youn explained, “Here, we all sort of know each other, [as we are all] from the same schools, churches, or social and business circles. So, we’re not so much into having to show off to one another—something you might find in cities like Los Angeles or New York where it’s so competitive and you also always have this influx of Koreans coming from somewhere else.” Another interlocutor, attorney, board member of the Korean American Society of Houston and Korean Chamber of Commerce Houston, and long-term Houston resident Kristopher Ahn, in his fifties playfully described Houston as “the rural part of Korean America.”

The Korean community constitutes the sixth-largest Asian minority in terms of population in the city of Houston (6,842 in 2017), after the Vietnamese (38,664), Asian



Indian (35,689), Chinese (32,483), Filipino (10,108), and Pakistani (9,572) communities (US Census Bureau 2017). Reflecting the size of Houston's Korean population, several older residents in their sixties and seventies mentioned that American-born Korean youth typically viewed members of older generations of the Korean American community as being too insular and conservative, both socially and politically. Perhaps also reflecting the size of the community, many respondents shied away from being overly critical of the Korean community.

But, precisely this point—that people tended to be reticent about being critical of the Korean community—became a point of contention for some Koreans, as they interpreted a tendency to avoid conflict and avoid the discussion of more controversial viewpoints (including those related to Korean unification and the expression of views more sympathetic toward North Korea) as indicative of the community's complacency, which was in turn preventing the community from growing. Young-mi Lee (pseudonym), an active community organization member and businesswoman in the financial field in her sixties, expressed such a view, also observing that the Korean community in Houston had less political power than other ethnic groups in the city:

Compared to other Asians in Houston like the Chinese or Vietnamese, Koreans don't have any real political clout. Koreans still mostly stick together. But, they should get more involved with local community issues and politics. They absolutely need to. How else are we going to get any other power? (interview with the authors)

Youn echoed this sentiment, while highlighting the responsibility of younger Korean Americans in Houston to “carry the torch”: “I’m an American citizen and I’m going to live here. My kids are in a similar situation, so we all should get involved more in American politics” (interview with the authors). The limited influx of Koreans can also be a source of frustration for many Korean American organizational leaders and local boosters. For example, since the 2010s, many respondents worked hard to establish a Korean Air flight between Seoul and Houston, only to see it unceremoniously discontinued in late 2017, apparently due to insufficient demand.

In contrast to the first generation of immigrants/migrants to Japan from the Korean peninsula, who were forced to carve out a social space and identity despite being stripped of their nationality, citizenship, and civil and residential rights, most first-generation South Korean immigrants/migrants to the US benefitted from the more favorable milieu in post-1965 America. Of our research subjects, the vast majority arrived as international students, as businessmen dispatched to Texas by prominent Korean companies, or as the wives of middle-class American men. Equally significantly, as members of a comparatively praised “model minority” racial group (in contrast with less-vaunted racial minorities, such as the African Americans and Latino communities), Asians—among them many middle-class Korean Americans—were able to bypass the most flagrant aspects of anti-immigrant US racism. Houston’s designation as “the most diverse city in the nation” further mitigated the most egregious cases of racism (Mistretta 2019).

Yet legacies of anti-Asian discrimination, both overt and covert, remain. Also, “model minority” or not, Asians are by no means tight allies of whites. During our of our

conversations, Ahn recalled seeing signs advertising the Ku Klux Klan on the periphery of Houston when he was growing up during the 1970s and 1980s. Asked if Korean immigrants at the time understood their meaning, Ahn recalled, “Oh yeah, every Korean knew what they meant,” meaning that they knew that such signs aimed to dehumanize African Americans, and, by extension, all non-whites.

Navigating the complexity of race relations in the US was and continues to be a challenge for Korean Americans, and Houston is no exception. During the 1990s, racial tension (namely disinterest on the part of white Americans and antagonism on the part of African Americans) was especially pronounced. The 1992 Los Angeles Uprising (a.k.a. “the LA Riots”) was a watershed for Korean Americans, including those in Houston. Ahn and Youn both separately recounted the impact of the event locally, especially for Korean Americans working among African Americans as owners of gas stations, beauty shops, and motels in similarly poor and marginalized neighborhoods. Ahn told the authors:

We were worried that what happened in LA could happen here. Almost on a monthly basis you would hear about Koreans getting shot. This being Texas, everyone had to have a handgun in their back pocket. The perception was that Asians were suspicious of African Americans. African Americans didn’t like Asians because they already faced discrimination from everyone else. But to be discriminated against by Asians was especially hurtful. (interview with the authors)

Ahn added that although many Koreans in Houston downplay the size of the population of working-class immigrant Korean small business owners who exist at the frontlines of US racial conflict in favor of describing more vaunted professionals, the latter remain a fixture in Houston's multiracial and gentrifying landscape.

More subtle feelings of alienation are also likely to play a role in the seeming retreat of older and less acculturated Korean immigrants from community and civic engagement in the US and their gravitation towards politics on the Korean peninsula.

Ahn argued:

The more Korean Americans try to get involved in the mainstream [i.e., with white Americans, whom he jokingly referred to as “the nobles”] they get met with humiliation or pain. Especially for the first generation, this is because their English isn't good enough. So, they don't want to keep going forward. They want to retreat back to what they had, which is the Korean immigrant community.

(interview with the authors)

### *The Views of Houston-based Korean Americans on Reunification*

Mostly led by favorable economic conditions in the US during the 1960s and 1970s, the early Korean immigrants to Houston tended to share a politically conservative and South Korea-supporting position, as well as correspondingly right-leaning views that were in line with the American mythology concerning upward mobility among ethnic minority populations. In this light, it was interesting to see that, apart from the working-class and undocumented Koreans in the city—two groups absent from this article's sample—

Koreans in Houston exhibited a generationally-specific desire for reunification somewhat similar to that found among Koreans in Japan. Differences in opinion, however, existed in relation to the subtleties involved in the process, one in which most Houston-based Korean Americans envisioned the US or South (not North) Korea playing prominent roles. This was the view that was almost always espoused in official spaces in the city. For example, a lecture in January 2018 sponsored by the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea promoted a variant on the *namhanjudoui heupsutongil*, or the ideology of eventual unification through the absorption of the North by the South. Citing privatization and market-oriented capitalist reforms as a means of unifying other divided regions, such as Albania and Kosovo, the invited lecturer, a professor of marketing, endorsed a vision of unification reminiscent of *bukhandaebak* (or the North Korean jackpot, discussed above in this article) to a packed venue of Korean American listeners. Through this type of activity, the Korean Consulate General in Houston has performed a similar role in informally promoting the agenda of the South Korean government to Koreans in Houston (Kim 2014).

The reputation of Texas, and the US South more generally, as Republican strongholds, as it were, has influenced the local and global political orientations of many Korean residents. Helen Chang, national president of the Korean American Women's Association USA and a self-described "die-hard Republican and Texan" in her sixties personified this demographic—albeit in an accentuated form. "Moon Jae-in is a commie!" she flamboyantly declared during an interview. The successful businesswoman and active community organization member displayed her first-hand knowledge of North Korea. She first visited the country as a member of a Houston-based National Unification

Advisory Council delegation in the 2000s. In describing her brief visit, Chang mostly highlighted the unworldliness of the people she met, as well as the shoddy state of North Korean air travel and accommodation. Unfortunately, her passionate yet simplistic comments about the country revealed less a genuine interest in understanding North Korea and its people than an enduring “intensification in the type of emotional and often unfounded labeling” of the country as inferior (Ryang 2009: 11). The targets of Chang’s harsh criticism were not limited to the North Korean regime. Consistent with right-wing Korean factions’ condemnation of President Moon Jae-in and support for former President Park Geun-hye, Chang maintained that the politics of inter-Korean *détente* espoused by Moon were a disaster, both for South Korea and for the larger Korean American economy. In contrast, she expressed undying support for President Donald Trump (including his anti-immigrant Border Wall), although she was critical of the recent softening of what used to be his hardline stance towards North Korea.

While Texas remains politically conservative in the context of US politics, recent reports indicate that the city has been becoming increasingly Democratic-leaning with each new generation and passing election cycle. For example, in 2016, 53.9 percent of Harris County voters supported Democratic presidential candidate Hilary Clinton (Raychaudhuri 2018: 2). In general, greater Houston represents partisan diversity—approximately 28 percent Democrat, 25 percent Republican, and 26 percent Independent—while the surrounding suburbs are more politically mixed, setting Houston somehow apart from other large US cities with large concentrations of Asian American residents, where voters tend to lean Democrat (Raychaudhuri 2018: 2).

Furthermore, despite the seeming class homogeneity of Korean Americans in Houston, this “new” middle class in the US is complex and contradictory in its political affiliations—a quality true of most Korean diasporic communities throughout the country (Park 1997: 12). On the one hand, this group consists of elements aligned with right-leaning politics in both the US (the Republican Party) and South Korea (the Liberty Korea Party or Jayuhangukdang) that seek upward mobility via the social, economic, and political status quo. On the other hand, the Korean population in Houston also includes members with more liberal or radical political views (chiefly intellectuals and those belonging to better educated segments) who side with the working class and remain critical of US global hegemony. This does not, however, mean that actual or potential party affiliations in the US align neatly with support for the current US government’s approach to North Korea. As illustrated in the example of Chang noted above, despite her support for President Trump on most issues, she is skeptical toward his relationship with Kim Jong Un as she distrusts the latter.

Most research subjects were initially loath to express direct views about Korean reunification beyond the almost universal mantra that it must happen—someday—echoing the widely-held belief that as Korea was originally one, it should therefore return to that state. But there was no concrete sense of uniformity among the opinions expressed. Contrary to the popular assumption that older generations tend to hold more socially conservative views regarding both the US and South Korea, the variety of perspectives expressed by our older interlocutors defied simple categorization: The picture is far more complex.

Unlike Koreans in Japan, Koreans in Houston are geographically and culturally distant from their natal homeland. Likewise, favorable post-1965 immigration policies and relatively relaxed travel restrictions between the US and South Korea (unlike the case for the early Koreans in Japan) have arguably afforded Koreans in the US greater freedom regarding their views on Korean reunification. Conversely, the imperatives of immigrant life in a country that paradoxically grants legal but not cultural citizenship to its racial minorities continues to produce varying degrees of longing and belonging for a unified Korea—albeit under the direction of South Korea and, contingently, the US, but not North Korea, as most of the Houston respondents were not sympathetic, and at times even hostile toward the latter.

All in all, this article’s research sample reveals parallels with generation-specific trends supporting unification in South Korea, but the divide between the generations is porous and far from rigid. Younger respondents in their twenties and thirties were not indifferent to the issue; all expressed a desire for “peace on the peninsula.” Regardless of their level of acculturation (i.e., whether they were fluent in English or Korean), their opinions were mostly surface-level ones, and they included few specific references to unfolding events, such as the North’s continued missile tests or even the 2018 inter-Korean summit. Paul Kang (pseudonym), a medical intern in his mid-twenties in Houston confessed that the average Korean American like himself cared more about immediate issues such as finding a secure job and building a sense of belonging in the US than “distant” and “abstract” issues such as reunification. Nevertheless, Kang still expressed interest in “one Korea,” although perhaps more out of a self-described “obligation as a Korean” than any particular personal desire. Tiffany Koh, a medical professional and



active community member in her forties exhibited even less interest in events on the Korean peninsula. Instead, she suggested that apathetic Koreans in Houston needed to care more about social justice issues affecting all Houstonians (not only Koreans), such as urban poverty, immigrant rights, and structural racism.

Older Korean Americans like Youn were aware of these generational divides, but still found commonalities with younger generations. “To a general extent, all Koreans— young or old—are interested in reunification,” he said. “Everyone wants there to be peace where we can have something desirable but not be ruled by Kim Jong Un. We don’t want that kind of reunification.” Youn’s comments reproduced a common disparagement of North Korea and its stereotypical despotism by most Koreans in Houston. Ahn provided cross-cultural context to this tendency, however, particularly for older-generation Korean Americans who were educated in South Korea as children. “We grew up being taught that North Korea was evil. The indoctrination in school was severe. So, I can understand why Korean Americans in Houston might remain highly critical of North Korea,” Ahn recalled. Nonetheless, Ahn was adamant that Koreans in Houston as a community were “about as politically diverse as you would have in South Korea.” He continued by noting that, regardless of their initial class backgrounds, Houston-based Korean immigrants hailed from regions across South Korea, including left-leaning Jeolla Province and right-leaning Gyeongsang Province, their differing political views continuing to reflect this diversity even after their migration to the US.

In many ways, Ahn was an exception: Ahn’s more humanistic view in relation to North Korea, its people, and its politics became evident after he told the authors he had traveled directly to the country twice on humanitarian missions. After helping to arrange

a North Korean choral performance in Houston in 2001, Ahn was part of a group that arranged a visit to North Korea via United Nations representatives from North Korea in New York. There, he visited designated tourist sites, such as museums and monuments. Tellingly, Ahn implied that it was how people in the North talked about the South during his visit that made an impact: “You know how South Korea sometimes demonizes the North? They don’t do that in North Korea. This surprised me. They just think of South Korea as a victim of the US. So, they’ll demonize the US, but not necessarily South Korea.” In contrast to Chang’s highly critical view of North Korea following her visit to the country, Ahn was diplomatic. “I just thought, this is their system,” he said, conveying a reluctance to judge too quickly.

These measured views extended to more specific attitudes towards reunification itself. In common with most of the research subjects that the authors met, and regardless of their respective ages, Ahn argued that reunification could most likely only occur through recognizing—however unsavory such an admission—the staying power of the Kim regime, saying: “If [the regime] were going to collapse, as the US always hopes it will, it would have been during the 1990s with the famine. But it didn’t.” He followed this comment stating: “I actually support a two-state system. So, South Korea and US would support North Korea in terms of the diplomatic aspects, normalizing relations.” According to Ahn, his status quo option, which echoes the thinking of Choi Jang-jip (see above), was not always popular among Koreans and Korean Americans, including academics. For him, as well as for most of the other research subjects who communicated unexpected dispassion and pragmatism, the idea of a unified state under the administration of the South Korean government was a romantic vision that was gradually

dying out (figuratively and literally) with each passing generation. For them, the two-state option would be more practically achievable. Furthermore, Ahn and some older Korean Americans in his age range proposed that the two ideas needed not be mutually exclusive. In other words, a recognition of two-state status could theoretically lead to an eventual desire for diplomatic, if not territorial, unification and peace. Such view was a variation of Paik Nak Chung's view that denuclearization and lasting peace could occur only through gradual union, *yeonhap*, between the two Koreas (see above). The younger generation in their twenties and thirties largely agreed with this position, further adding that, economically, they did not want to witness the burden of capitalist integration (including, for some, the probable "hyper exploitation" of North Koreans) if the nation unified under the aegis of a US-backed South Korea.

Ultimately, opinions concerning the possibility of Korean reunification among Koreans in Houston provide an insightful complement and contrast to those held by Koreans in Japan. As a sentiment, the desire for a return to a unified Korean state certainly exists among the greater Houston-based Korean diasporic community. Yet, several factors contribute to distinct differences in how this desire is articulated as well as the intensity of its expression, including age, generation, class background, geographic and political affiliation, exposure to and identification with ethnic identity, and individual personality. The specificity of US immigration and assimilation trends, particularly their ties to racial formation (especially anti-Asian racism) in the US, and their local manifestations in Texas and the US South, also work to produce variables.

### *Conclusion*

From our findings, it emerges clearly that, ultimately, most overseas Koreans that we interviewed regarded Korean unification as something that should happen —if not as destiny per se. Except for a small number of Koreans in Japan (typically, the second generation), who received a hard-core Cold War education worshipping North Korea, and against the backdrop of their continued residence in Japan feel severely disadvantaged in relation to their options, members of both older and younger generations of Koreans in Japan supported Korea's unification. Koreans in Houston, too, overall, supported unification, albeit with a sense of reservation and nuanced reticence, showing more subtle variation when compared to Koreans in Japan. This richer subtlety and variation among Koreans in Houston, as compared to Koreans in Japan, most likely derive from the complexity of social relations in an intensely multiracial and multicultural aspect of the US society which neither South Korean society nor Japanese society has.

Another point that we recognize, based on our limited sample size, is that no generational group in the US and Japan was more excited about Korea's unification than the first-generation Koreans in Japan, again reflecting their first-hand experience of having lived in the colonial metropolis and their connecting the ongoing ethnic discrimination in Japan with the lack of a unified homeland. It is this group of respondents that expressed the unconditional assumption that since Korea had originally been one, it would only be natural for it to return to being one state. The rest of the population groups were more measured in terms of their emotion as well as their conviction. Interestingly, Houston Koreans, similar to the younger-generation (third-generation) Koreans in Japan, showed a broadly global take on Korea's unification; that is to say, Korea being one piece in the puzzle piece among all of the challenges that the

world faces today. Thus, many of our Houston respondents referred to humanitarian aid for North Korea and political stability in the region in conjunction with Korea's unification. The third generation of Koreans in Japan, too, remotely perceived Korea's unification in this manner.

Paradoxically, despite Houston's geographical distance from Korea, its Koreans maintain much closer kinship and social ties with South Korea than those in Japan, for whom the relationship is considerably more remote, and basically severed. Further, Houston Koreans came across as more balanced in their approach to the possible unification of Korea, trying to gauge how such an event would impact their businesses, families, and identities. For this reason, they are more pragmatic and unemotional, not passionate or hostile. By comparison, Korean respondents in Japan showed stronger positive (first-generation) or negative (second-generation) emotions in relation to the possibility of Korean unification and any discussion of this subject.

Considering that Houston Koreans do not have a strongly ethnic organization or a large ethnic presence in the city, it is remarkable that many Korean individuals still followed the recent events on the peninsula. Still, it would be fair to say that overall, the degree of their interest in the matters concerning possible unification of Korea lacks intensity, most likely because the majority of them are the citizens of the US and what happens in Korea does not impact their everyday lives. Compared to the enthusiasm and highly visible interest in the possible unification shown in South Korea, Houston Koreans do not have direct stake in this issue, economically and politically. The same applies to Koreans in Japan as well, even though the majority of Koreans in Japan do hold the nominal South Korean nationality.

Our findings of Houston Koreans' views concerning the issue of Korea's unification are useful, in that it is not difficult to foresee a very different response among Koreans on the US East Coast or those on the West Coast, where a consolidated sense of identity and civic activities among Korean Americans can more readily be found. At the same time, it would not be impossible to imagine change in the Korean community in Houston, given Houston's rapid diversification. Whether such change is brought about by demographic forces or by political developments remains to be seen.

### *Acknowledgment*

The research for this study was funded by the Academy of Korean Studies (Project ID: AKS-2018-R-24). The authors wish to thank the AKS for its generous support for this research. Numerous individuals participated in this study as interviewees and informants. The authors are deeply indebted to all of them for their willingness to share their insights.

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