

Separated Families in the Two Koreas: The Organizational and Political Transformations

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ABSTRACT

South and North Korea are the only divided countries in the world. The division of the two Koreas has raised various geopolitical problems. The geopolitical issue involves relations between the two peninsula countries as well as the United States and China. During the division of the two Koreas, humanitarian concerns are drawn by the breakup of real families. The separated families, formed in earnest due to the Korean War, have not been reunited due to political separations. To solve this problem, South and North Korea are holding family reunion actions. The Korean Red Cross and the Ministry of Unification are making various efforts to reunite separated families as of 2021. In South Korea, efforts such as setting up a video reunion centre can be confirmed. On the other side, North Korea remains passive about the issue of reunions of separated families between the two Koreas. The Biden administration also tries to resolve the issue of separated families between the two Koreas. Based on the historical political conflicts, family reunions convey both humanitarian and the friendship of two countries. It is more than necessary to show a more aggressive attitude, especially in the geopolitical map today.

Keywords: North and South Korea, separated families, the Red Cross, the Ministry of Unification.

1. INTRODUCTION

South and North Korea are the only divided countries in the world [1, 2]. This division is not just simple as geopolitical separation. It is necessary to consider the circumstances of the peninsula people from the perspective of modern society and nation-state narrative. When the Korean Peninsula was divided, a large number of families broke up. They have had to go through political divisions that go beyond blood relationships, culture, and language. Segregation and separation last more than a generation since the division.

The problem of separated families needs to be approached comprehensively from the perspective of cultural segregation and its severe consequences [3]. At the same time, it is necessary to figure out how South Korea and North Korea have a stance on separated families and their goals through reunions of separated families.

South and North Korea are hoping for reunification despite not recognizing each other as legal or rightful countries. Meanwhile, North Korea's current stance on family reunions is not so positive, which makes the reunion message even more vague than decades ago. This

article conducts a review of family reunions between the two Koreas. To this end, this research first understands the current status of separated families with background policies, then looks at North Korea's attitude toward family reunions and its relationship with South Korea. Finally, this article would like to present some conclusions on what this subtle situation suggests.

2. CURRENT STATUS OF SEPARATED FAMILIES

2.1 Concept and status of separated families

A separated family means that families are currently separated from each other in South Korea and North Korea [4]. The Korean Peninsula has a history of more than 500 years since the Goryeo Dynasty, a region formed by a single ruling system since the Joseon Dynasty. History about Separated Families began to be chaotic after Japan invaded the Korean Peninsula in the 1910s. At the time of the Japanese colonial era, Japanese colonial rule was prohibited from using the Korean language and education on Korean history on the Korean Peninsula. After these painful times, the Korean Peninsula was liberated in 1945 after Japan's surrender.

However, the Korean Peninsula was unable to establish an independent state for Japan's absence, and it was ruled by the United States and the Soviet Union on their be halves. The United States temporarily separated and ruled the Korean Peninsula to prevent the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from governing the entire Korean Peninsula. Accordingly, the region ruled by the USSR is now North Korea, and the country ruled by the US is now South Korea. Since then, relations between the two Koreas have deteriorated rapidly due to the outbreak of the Korean War. The war that broke out suddenly led to the evacuation of civilians living in each area. During the evacuation process, families remained intact in one of the two countries. Families separated and existed in both countries. Such separation of families took place quite a few times, till those family members could never meet again until the two Koreas began to reunite [5].

2.2 Procedures or processes after the death of separated families

Most of the first-generation separated families have died, while the subsequent generation has remained steadily. Reunion of separated families has now become the only chance for separated families to meet again with their families who broke up as children. The reunions also brought about humanitarian results that separated families suffering from the division of the two Koreas could enjoy the joy of meeting their families again. The Korean Red Cross is an event held to check the status of separated families caused by the Korean War and the division of the Korean Peninsula and to tell the news.

Nevertheless, there is a question as to whether such family reunions are held annually. Relations between the two Koreas are changing from time to time. This transformation of relations can have a significant impact on family reunions between the two Koreas. Currently, separated families have been separated for more than 70 years. According to the Ministry of Unification's Information System, the number of separated families currently living was 61,322. According to South Korean figures, a total of 131,172 people applied for reunions of separated families from 1988 to March 2017, with 69,850 deaths, more than half of them. And as of 2021, a larger number of separated families are expected to die. However, it is known that even if separated families die from one country, there is no separate process of being extradited to another. Nevertheless, according to a Unification Ministry official, the number of second and third generations of separated families born in South Korea after the Korean War increases the number of applications to meet their families in the North who do not know their faces [6].

2.3 A Gallup Study on South and North Korea: Key Issues

Gallup's investigation into the division of the two Koreas shows that South Koreans are still passive about North Korea. Gallup reviewed the Reunion of separated families and the Perception of North Korea's Changes to examine South Korean citizens' awareness of separated families. Although the survey was released on February 13, 2014, it is still significant because there have been quite a number of incidents related to North Korea near that time.

As of 2014, the relationship between the two Koreas deteriorated rapidly, with North Korea conducting a third nuclear test in February 2013, threatening provocations after the UN sanctions resolution, the withdrawal of companies from the Kaesong Industrial Complex in May, North Korea's criticism of the release of the NIS's inter-Korean summit. At this time, it is worth noting that the reunion of separated families in 2018 based on the relationship between the two Koreas has not resumed.

With this timeliness, Gallup investigated the following questions: First, do you think North Korea's recent agreement on family reunions has changed? Second, do you think North Korea will eventually give up its nuclear weapons program? Third, if the reunion event ends well, should the tour to Mount Kumgang be resumed? Fourth, it is a matter of whether the Chinese government believes it has turned its back on North Korea.

The results of the survey are as follows. First, about 64 percent of the public thought that North Korea's attitude remained unchanged. It can be analyzed that the public does not have a good view of North Korea's conciliatory attitude toward nuclear tests, threats of provocations, and withdrawal from the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Second, 85 percent of the respondents said they would "never give up" on whether North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons program. This can be said to be a significant number of people who believe that North Korea's purpose in seeking reunions of separated families or high-level inter-Korean contact is not a precursor to giving up North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Third, 56% of the respondents said they should "watch a little more" on whether to resume tours to Mount Kumgang after the reunion event was completed. This is a split opinion that the younger generation should take care of it a little bit, but the 40s and 50s should push for a resumption [7].

3. STRATEGY CHANGES FROM KOREAN RED CROSS AND THE MINISTRY OF UNIFICATION

3.1 2021 Inter-Korean Family Survey

The most important event related to reunions of separated families currently held by the Korean Red Cross is the "2021 Inter-Korean Family Survey." This is conducted by the Korean Red Cross and the Ministry of Unification together. The Korean Red Cross has made considerable efforts to help separated families of the two Koreas reunite in South Korea. Although family reunions have not resumed since the last one in 2018, the Korean Red Cross is still setting various policies for separated families. This fact-finding survey is conducted on applicants for separated families every five years. This survey is conducted to promote existing application information and to understand the status and demand of separated families in preparation for the full confirmation and exchange of separated families.

The Korean Red Cross is still collecting the various information and conducting events so that reunions of separated families can take place. Specifically, it has been found that efforts are being made in various dimensions to provide important information on establishing policies for separated families, or to enable the reunion event itself, correspondence, hometown visits, and various exchanges [8]. The survey, jointly conducted by the Red Cross and the Ministry of Unification, aims to update existing information in preparation for the full confirmation and exchange of separated families. In the case of South Korea, the two Koreas are preparing a lot for the reunion and taking an active stance. Considering the death of most first-generation separated families, it is inferred that other families are also visiting together to confirm their lives. And this also means that if unification is not achieved, the problem of separated families will continue through the family, not end with the death of the first generation.

3.2 The Ministry of Unification

The Ministry of Unification plays a key role in establishing policies related to family reunions in South Korea. The Ministry of Unification was established on March 1, 1969, to collect active discussions on unification from all walks of life after the April 19 Revolution and to deal with the unification issue systematically and systematically at the government level. In the Ministry of Unification case, it also has a historical meaning that a central administrative agency dedicated to unification affairs was established, reflecting the characteristics of a divided country. The Ministry of Unification is in charge of establishing policies on unification, inter-Korean dialogue and exchange, support for delivery, analysis of the situation in North Korea,

education and promotion of unification, and other affairs concerning unification.

As a representative example for separated families, the Ministry of Unification informs the status of inter-Korean separated families through the operation of the "Unification System for Divided Families". It allows the identification of the application methods for separated families. The system is designed to help the two Koreas reunite on a computer basis and carries out various considerations to empathize with the public's sentiment related to separated families. The system also tells the story of the missing family and hometown in North Korea. The 'Digital Museum' operation allows the former family reunion materials to be obtained [8].

3.3 Differences in views on Family Union between two Koreas

The Korean Red Cross and the Ministry of Unification policies show that South Korea is taking a more active stance on family reunions than North Korea. In fact, reunions between the two Koreas that were made to date in inter-Korean relations if the pursuit of reconciliation and cooperation to the reunions of separated families from the concentration in the Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun administration, which can be identified. In fact, there are statistics that 11,600 people, or about 90 percent of the 11,8 separated families in South Korea, were able to meet their North Korean families between August 2000 and October 2007. This is Lee Myung-bak's administration of reunions of only two, all 1127 showing the glaring difference between what he had the opportunity.

In the case of reunions of separated families, South Korea was more active. When the South demanded reunions, North Korea accepted the request. These differences may stem from various causes but arise from economic and political differences between the two Koreas. The reunion of separated families puts an economic burden on North Korea. In the case of South Korea, separated families can apply by themselves if they make an announcement. Still, North Korea must visit them, convene them, and provide accommodation and education for a certain period of time. This means that reunions of separated families are not much of a burden to South Korea but could be a significant burden to North Korea.

Meanwhile, the fact that reunions of separated families are politically disadvantageous to North Korea can represent the North's passive attitude. It is not good to see more North Koreans with families in the South from the perspective of North Korea, which has lagged behind in system competition. However, in South Korea, reunions of separated families are considered a government policy, regardless of ideology. For this reason, North Korea has often used reunions of separated

families as leverage to solve the problem with the South. This is done to demand other issues that North Korea wants in return for accepting South Korean demands. This corresponds to the significant connection between family reunions and food and fertilizer support [9].

4. AMERICA'S ASIA-PACIFIC STRATEGY CHANGE

The U.S. wants to actively resolve the issue of family reunions with North Korea along with South Korea. This means that there is a growing need for close cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea on the issue of North Korea, which is showing a cold response to the resumption of dialogue with the U.S. and South Korea. U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinkon said at a U.S. Congressional hearing on June 7, 2021, that he would do his best to resolve the issue of separated Korean families in the U.S. and that the interests of separated Korean-Americans would be reflected in the U.S. government's efforts. Immediately after that, he/she said on the 8th that he/she would raise the issue of reunions of separated families in the U.S. and reunions of separated families as soon as possible.

The U.S. stance is quite positive for South Korea, which emphasizes the issue of family reunions as a top priority between the two Koreas. This means that the Biden administration is positively evaluating the move toward cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea. It is in line with the values of separated families and humanitarian issues relatively unrelated to political issues with North Korea. Therefore, South Korea should positively evaluate the cooperative movement between the U.S. and South Korea and increase the need for more organized and systematic cooperation [10].

In 2021, the U.S. Federal House of Representatives proposed a family reunion bill under the leadership of Democrat Grace Meng. Korean separated families in the U.S. were thanking the House of Representatives for passing bills and resolutions to help reunite separated families in the U.S. and North Korea. According to the "Korean-American Family Reunion Promotion Committee," a Korean-American separated family group in the U.S., the bill could pressure the government if passed by the Senate. Nevertheless, separated families in the U.S. see no expectation of whether they will be able to reunite with families in North Korea even if a bill similar to the House of Representatives is proposed in the Senate. This can be said to be the main problem of North Korea's lukewarm attitude, which is reluctant to meet separated families and talk with the U.S.

What matters in this situation is U.S. government policy. The U.S. government should show its willingness to decide on the issue of separated families and take action. In the past, the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations have also seen congressional moves to call for reunions of separated families in the U.S.

and North Korea. But there has never been a real reunion. This means that parliamentary efforts do not affect the government's decisions. However, since its inception, the Biden administration has emphasized its willingness to resolve the family reunion issue. In fact, the State Department held a meeting with the Fun Family Reunion Promotion Committee in March and contacted Grace Meng's office, who led the House of Representatives' proposal to reunite separated families. US and South Korea's active stance will play an important role in future reunions of separated families [11].

The biggest limitation for separated families in the United States is North Korea's lukewarm attitude. According to Robert King, former US Special Envoy on Human Rights in North Korea, North Korea is not interested in the reunion of separated families between the US and North Korea, which basically means that it is taking a fairly tough line against the US. In particular, it is predicted that it will be very difficult to include Koreans in the US in the reunion of separated families between the two Koreas. In terms of relations with South Korea, South Korea is under great pressure to hold reunions of separated families. Some argue it would be a difficult choice because including Koreans in the US could lose their chances of reunions. As a result, it is important to open the door for dialogue with North Korea to improve relations with the United States, South Korea, and South Korea for separated families.

5. NORTH KOREA'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SEPARATED FAMILIES BETWEEN THE TWO KOREAS

The US is an important player on the issue of separated families between the two Koreas. The North Korean government has refused to include U.S. citizens in inter-Korean reunions and insists that the US and Pyongyang deal with the issue of separated Korean families bilaterally. Koreans can only participate in inter-Korean family reunions through their immediate family members in Korea and often had to rely on privately organized reunions through unreliable third-party intermediaries.

This can be attributed to the absence of official diplomatic relations between the US and North Korea. The absence of this relationship adds to the difficulty of establishing a government-to-government reunion mechanism, given the ongoing communication and political commitment required to implement these programs.

The US also plays a key role in the issue of separated families between the two Koreas. This can be inferred from the recent joint statement by President Joe Biden that "President Biden expresses his support for inter-Korean dialogue, engagement, and cooperation". It should be recognized that North Korea is currently prioritizing restoring relations with the United States to

express its position. Using this point, it can be predicted that the chances of reunions of separated families, a humanitarian issue, could be increased along with restoring relations with the U.S [12].

According to the report, South Korea aims to restore national homogeneity and communication exchanges and family reunions through separated family exchange and cooperation projects. According to the Ministry of Unification's announcement, the separated family exchange and cooperation project is a non-profit activity jointly carried out by South and North Korean residents for separated family exchange and cooperation with approval of cooperative businesses in accordance with the requirements and procedures set forth by the Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Act. To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Unification recently established a video reunion center to reunite separated families in 2021. This means that the South Korean government will set up additional video reunions where separated families of the two Koreas can meet face-to-face. At the time of family reunions in the past, it can be understood that even if non-face-to-face reunions of separated families take place in South Korea, physical accessibility is reduced due to the lack of video reunions.

Though South Korea's active movement, conditions for inter-Korean exchange and cooperation can be established, and it can be interpreted that there is a policy space and room for inter-Korean cooperation. Of course, as it turns out, there are no related discussions with North Korea yet. Still, it is a process of actively preparing what South Korea can do first, such as strengthening its infrastructure, in preparation for future situations. Video reunions are a realistic alternative considering that it is difficult for the first generation of separated families to move, which is becoming increasingly old [13].

The geopolitical problems of the two Koreas can be said to have changed based on the North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s. This crisis resulted in family reunions being pushed out of the priorities of inter-Korean issues. In other words, as the nuclear issue becomes the first issue to be solved, humanitarian issues are regarded as means, or auxiliary, to solve military and security issues. Therefore, it is necessary to approach the North Korean nuclear issue and security issues separately from humanitarian issues.

6. CONCLUSION

According to the 2020 White Paper on Foreign Affairs, there is a "continuation of the peace process on the Korean Peninsula" in the South Korean government's foreign policy stance and major diplomatic activities. This is a declaration that South Korea will pursue various efforts to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula and regional cooperation. It is expected that 2021 will continue a similar strategy in line with this trend. However, various international efforts will be needed to

ensure that peace policies on the Korean Peninsula, including reunions of separated families, can be made, as the diplomatic issue is not just a country's effort. The division, which began in 1947, has been largely influenced by geopolitical classifications to date. Ideology is the main reason why the two Koreas have yet to unify. Later, the Korean War broke out due to North Korea's sudden invasion, and relations between the two Koreas have deteriorated since the Korean War, which resulted in the separation of South and North Korea not only being politically and geographically separated but also turning them into a different world for about 70 years. South Korea has become an advanced country with trillions of dollars in the economy, but North Korea still survives through various assistance. The two countries differ in civil rights, law and order, economy and society, and daily life. Nevertheless, thousands of years of history as a unified nation can be a reminder of Korea's division, and this identity still serves as an opportunity for South and North Korea to unify. It should be noted that the current application for separated families is made not only by the first-generation separated families but also by the second- and third-generation separated families. This increases the possibility that the two Koreas can have cultural unity. Nevertheless, more problems will have to be solved for the two Koreas to achieve unification. This requires continuous inter-Korean exchanges and coordination on political issues.

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