

Our Cherished Hopes Are For Unity

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*Our cherished hopes are for unity,
Even our dreams are for unity,
We'd give our lives for unity,
Come along unity,
Unity saving the people.
Unity saving all nations.
Come here quickly unity
Come along unity.*

The "Song of Unity" is a well-known and loved folk song that expresses the ardent desire of the Korean people to see their peninsula re-united into one nation. Or is that wishful thinking?

As an American living in South Korea continuously for over 20 years, it has been more than a passing interest to me what the Koreans really feel about unification. Over the years I have talked to neighbors, friends, and students about this issue. More often than not, when talking to foreigners, Koreans try to figure out what you want to hear and give you some version of that. To get around this, I have developed a strategy of asking

simple, direct questions.

Of course, the standard reply is that we are all brothers and at all cost we have to be united as one nation. When I probe deeper, many times quite different ideas come out. Recently I did an informal and unscientific survey using three direct questions. I asked 100 ESL students ranging from middle school students to middle-aged housewives, the following questions.

1. Is the reunification of Korea important to you?

Almost everybody immediately said "yes." A couple of middle school wise guys said "no, who cares." 98% yes, 2% no. As a follow up, I asked, "Which is more important to you, unification or getting into a top university (or, your son or daughter getting into a top university)?" This time, 30% said unification and 62% said a top university; the rest couldn't answer.

2. Do you think you will see North and South Korea united in your lifetime?

44% said "no," 31% said "yes" and the rest said they didn't know. For a follow up, I asked, "How do you think unification will happen?" Most replied by talking about a gradual process of easing of tensions, increasing culture and commercial exchanges, and fielding joint sports teams at international events being the preferred way. Only a handful of people talked about regime change in the North.

3. What are you willing to do to make unification happen?

This was the most difficult question for people to answer. Most folks had no idea what they could do. Usually they think it is the government's job. In order to get some answer, I offered a few suggestions. Most people were willing to pay a unification tax if it was not too much, maybe 10%. Also, people said it would be important that everyone fairly paid the tax. When I suggested some kind of service project with young people going to the North to live, serve, and help to educate the people, everyone balked. No one could imagine doing such a thing. In retrospect, I would change this question to make it less open-ended.

The reunification of Korea is an enormously complicated issue. There are more than a few obstacles. The first is ideology. Under which form of government would unification take place, the democratic South or the totalitarian North? Or will a new ideology emerge that can absorb both?

Also there are the geopolitical issues in Northeast Asia. China is loath to have a reunited Korea under the South Koreans on their doorstep because they are allies of the United States. They continue to prop up the basket case economy of the North. Without China's support, collapse and regime change would most likely come fairly quickly with a lot of resultant chaos. Japan may be very uneasy about a reunited Korea that would be their economic and military rival in the region.

In addition, internally, there are so called progressive groups in South Korea whose roots can be traced back to the Donghak Movement of the late 19th Century. The Donghak Movement was anti-noble class, anti-feudal, and anti-foreign influence. Although the movement was crushed by the Yi dynasty, their ideological descendants under the progressive umbrella continue to influence politics in the South with a pro-Korean nationalist and anti-foreign agenda. This often puts them in violent opposition to the government. It also makes them ignore the human rights situation and economic catastrophe in the North, and so they are admirers and apologists for the North. Their views amount to favoring unification under some form of Juche, the self-reliance ideology of Kim Il Sung.

The biggest impediment to realizing the dream for many in the South is the enormous cost associated with unification. Estimates range as high as \$2 trillion. That's around \$40,000 per man, woman and child in the South. Lots of younger people want to know if it is worth it. While the monetary costs could be huge, the social costs may be even higher. The continuing belligerence of the North in rhetoric and aggressive actions leave many in the South wondering if they really want to live in one nation with these bad boys.

The South Korean government continues to push to keep the dream alive. Several years ago May was designated "Unification Education Month" and all students were required to attend classes on unification. There has also been a proposal to levy a unification tax. But official policy notwithstanding, more and more young people just shrug their shoulders when it comes to unification.

It has been nearly 70 years since there was an undivided Korea. As the years pass, the elders who remember and long for unity are passing away. Even the languages of the North and South continue to diverge. In the face of all these obstacles, is it time to finally forego the dream? If not, what would it take to achieve it?

The Korean people I've come to know are unique, with a deep emotional vein that when touched is capable of rising up and responding passionately with one heart. Nowadays, it is on display mostly when Korean athletes and sports teams contend for the gold. The 2002 Seoul/Tokyo FIFA World Cup soccer tournament brought the Korean people onto the streets with one heart to cheer the Red Devils (not to be confused with the reds up north). Kim Yuna, the figure skater who brought home Olympic gold in 2010, the WBC national baseball team, and swimmer Park Tae Hwan, who also brought home Olympic gold in 2008, were all wildly embraced by Koreans. When Koreans win big on the world stage it makes all Koreans proud.

This may be the key to North-South unification. If there was a charismatic figure, group, or ideology that could awaken the deep pride in being Korean for both the North and South Korean people it could be the impetus to solve the practical problems and push the people towards unification. Just imagine the people filling the streets and plazas of Seoul not to sing in support of their soccer team but to sing the "Song of Unity."

What is it that Koreans are most proud of? They are proud of their language, culture, and history. What's more, they long to be recognized as a people of destiny in the world. They value what is true, a person of true character, a true teacher and a true leader. If such a person were to appear, the people both in the North and South could see in him or her fulfillment of their own deepest longings and would be filled with pride of being Korean.

Is it possible for such a person to appear? The Rev. Sun Myung Moon "woulda, coulda, shoulda" been that person. He lived his entire life with this very purpose in mind. The record of his 93 years of life and achievements are evidence of that. I can't help thinking of Jesus, whose dream of the Kingdom of God seemed to die with him at the age of 33, yet his dream was resurrected and its light eventually transformed the world.

This month we commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of Rev. Moon's birth by remembering and celebrating his life and work. It is a life that the Korean people can truly be proud of both in the North and in the South. Once the Korean people forget their misconceptions and prejudices and really know his life, the light of his life might shine forth and lead the people towards unity. Of course, standing around holding hands singing the "Song of Unity" isn't going to make it happen. Here on Earth, God's work must truly be our own.