

Sun Myung Moon's Groundbreaking Campaign to Open North Korea

Armin Rosen
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Sun Myung Moon (left) with North Korean leader Kim il-Sung in December, 1991

The death of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the controversial Unification Church founder whose 92 years of life included some very colorful moments, made the front pages of both the *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*. The Unification Church invested over \$300 million in the capital area, after all, and his business dealings reached far beyond--for instance, the *Post's* obituary noted that Church-owned companies were responsible for more than half of the raw fish served at U.S. sushi restaurants. The *Washington Times*, which Moon founded in 1982, lauded him as a "business visionary" whose "church's practices sparked criticism, suspicion and persecution" that included six stints in jail and time in one of the most feared prison systems on earth: North Korea's. Moon's relationship with the country of his birth was a complicated one. But for all the focus on the eccentric mogul's quirks and U.S. investments, his role in North Korea may turn out to be his most enduring legacy, a fascinating story of how one man opened one of the very few cracks in this modern hermit kingdom.

Moon, who was born in 1920 in the present-day North Korean province of North Pyongan when the Korean peninsula was still a Japanese colony, was a unique figure in the highly fraught history of inter-Korean relations. A Christian (or Christian-influenced) cleric who enjoyed close personal ties with the officially atheistic Kim regime, Moon's staunch anti-communist beliefs were partly informed by his experiences in a North Korean labor camp in 1950. But his death nevertheless prompted a "message of condolence" from North Korean premier Kim Jong Un himself.

In his extensive dealings with Pyongyang, Moon revealed both the potential and the limitations of the hard-edged yet increasingly open policy towards North Korea that Japan, South Korea, and the United States embraced immediately after the Cold War. The Unification Church's approach to the country was an early and important part of a larger international effort to pry open the hermit kingdom. But these efforts -- like those of the numerous governments and international organizations that have sought to moderate the Kim regime's stance towards its southern neighbor, and towards its own citizens' human rights -- ultimately highlighted the resilience of one of the world's most oppressive states.

Moon's organization was headquartered in South Korea, where aiding the North is still punishable under the country's National Security Law. The economically powerful and politically connected Unification Church was not as constrained as other South Korean organizations -- or, at times, as restrained as the region's governments -- in dealing with the regime in Pyongyang.

Moon was an early practitioner of the kind of conciliatory politics that the South Korean government would eventually embrace in its now-abandoned "Sunshine Policy," which it introduced in the late '90s in an effort to build friendlier ties with the North. In 1991, the self-made mogul visited North Korea's founding leader, Kim Il Sung, in Pyongyang, nine years before South Korean president Kim dea-Jung's groundbreaking visit to the North Korean capital. "Moon began his efforts to engage with the North Koreans at a time when the South Korean government still formally opposed that kind of interaction," says Scott Snyder, a Korea expert with the Council on Foreign Relations.

But Moon had hardly been coopted by his hosts. The *Washington Times* published a conspicuously defiant opening paragraph about the meeting: "President Kim Il-sung of North Korea, one of the last of

the Stalinist states, yesterday discussed reconciliation of the two Koreas with a man he once imprisoned, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the founder of the fiercely anticommunist Unification Church." Moon's flagship American media property published original reporting about the "horror" of the country's "communist gulag," even at a time when the Unification Church was engaged in precedent-setting investment in that same country. This approach was not without its drawbacks for Moon and his business empire. Washington Post columnist David Ignatius discussed the tension between Moon's North Korea outreach and the Times' editorial line in a 2004 column:

Coverage of the Korean Peninsula has been an especially delicate issue. The paper's stance has been aggressively anti-Pyongyang. But the church has embraced a conciliatory line, including investment in North Korea. Moon has bankrolled Pyonghwa Motors, which plans to produce cars in the North, along with a hotel, a park and a church there. A senior church official, Ahn Ho Yeol, told a South Korean newspaper last year: "It is our principle to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula by promoting mutual prosperity." Again, that's a dovish sentiment you won't often read in the Times.

Still, this combination of moderation and hawkishness toward North Korea might have been more coherent than it seemed. After all, in 2004, U.S.-North Korean trade was worth over \$25 million (including, amazingly, \$1.5 million in North Korean exports to the U.S.), despite the escalating nuclear crisis in the peninsula. And, in 1999, the year that Unification Church-related business interests opened Pyonghwa Motors, the U.S sent over a quarter billion dollars in aid to North Korea, even though it had launched a Taepodong missile toward Japan the year before. In the late '90s and early 2000s, the U.S. used aid and economic support as a confidence-building measure with a country that many external observers believed was on the brink of collapse. Moon's approach to the country was of a similar vein, even if it meant certain contradictions within his organization.

Pyonghwa Motors, the joint business partnership between a Church-owned South Korean company and a state-run North Korean consortium, was the centerpiece of the Church's investment in North Korea, which also includes a hotel in Pyongyang. Private auto ownership is extremely rare in North Korea, and only about 1000 vehicles roll off the assembly lines every year. But Snyder says that Pyonghwa was still an important moment in North Korea's relationship with the outside world, since its factory provided "early socialization" for northerners who were unschooled in modern manufacturing and the global economy. "It is an interesting exercise as one of the first efforts to do production of that type in North Korea, and so in that sense it was a path-breaking effort," says Snyder.

The Unification Church's investments in North Korea foreshadowed later and more significant efforts at cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. Today, over 100 South Korean companies employ North Korean laborers at the Keasong Industrial Park, a special economic zone just a few miles north of the DMZ. Snyder says that Pyonghwa Motors was a crucial test-run for the initiative, which started in 2005 and is responsible for much of the \$1.7 billion in trade between the Koreas. And there were political dimensions to the Church's relationship with North Korea as well. "The bottom line wasn't necessarily the primary consideration behind the investment," says Snyder. The Kim regime recognized that the Church had a global reach and a certain amount of political influence. Meanwhile, Moon believed that political and economic engagement were a prerequisite for one of his most cherished political goals: the eventual reunification of the Korean peninsula.

But the Korean peninsula is not unified, and whatever small amount of outside investment the Kim regime allows is hardly enough to precipitate fundamental changes to the country's failed command economy. The Unification Church's efforts were, in a sense, a subset of the outside world's larger failure to reform, moderate, or restrain the Kim regime in the years after Kim Il Sung's 1994 death, a period when the country developed nuclear weapons, maintained its vast network of political prison camps, and even attacked its southern neighbor, all despite South Korean, American, and multilateral overtures. Signs of progress, like the UN's success in maintaining the World Food Program's presence in the country, still serve as perverse evidence of the durability of the Kims' system. The Unification Church may have helped to foster engagement between Pyongyang and the outside, but Moon never lived to see his efforts pay off as he'd dreamed.