

Fourteen years have passed since I visited Kungang Mountain, North Korea, with the Red Cross Youth. This program was possible through the South Korean liberal government's Sunshine Policy, which aimed for a closer relationship between North and South Korea. However, ten years of South Korea's conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments have rejected these pro-unification policies. During this time, while the conservative administrations were applying sanctions to North Korea with hostility, many of the remaining members of separated families from the Korean War passed away. They were not able to meet their families for over sixty-five years. As a South Korean who was taught that the two Koreas are a nation of "one" people, I have been questioning this physical and ideological division between the two countries, and what the unification means for the younger generation who did not experience the direct aftermath of the separation. Why should we, young Koreans and

WHY UNIFY

The Younger Generation's Role in Korean Unification

non-Koreans, care about Korean unification? It is understandable that the younger Korean generations see unification as an abstract idea because they do not see immediate benefit from it. However, Bruce Cumings, an East Asian History Professor at the University of Chicago, underlines that "Korea had the history of one of the oldest unified countries on the face of the Earth." He insists, "Unified Korea would be a very strong nation. South Korea is already 11th in the rankings of advanced industrial countries. If South Korea unified with the North, Korea would have a population of 80 million people." Cumings emphasizes that another reason to push for unification is to prevent another Korean War. Many South Koreans are against the unification because of the taxes they would have to pay to co-develop the country. But Cumings claims that it costs more tax money to defend South Korea from North Korea than to support the progression of a unified Korea.

After North Korea's recent ballistic missile launch, U.S. President Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made statements that aimed to impose sanctions on North Korea. These sanctions would delay potential unification, as seen by North Korea's responses of violence.

While North Korean elites spend their money developing nuclear weapons, North Korean civilians continue to suffer from violations of almost every aspect of their human rights. Amnesty International's "North Korea 2016/17" reports:

Citizens of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) continued to suffer violations of most aspects of their human rights. North Koreans and foreign nationals were arbitrarily detained and sentenced after unfair trials for criminal "offences" that were not internationally recognized. Severe restrictions on the right to freedom of expression continued. Thousands of North Koreans were sent by the authorities to work abroad, often under harsh conditions.



Even this very moment, North Korean authorities control their public's freedom of expression, right to privacy, migrant workers' rights, freedom of movement, and conduct arbitrary arrests and detentions. These urgent human rights issues should alert South Koreans to question their apathetic attitude towards North Korean citizens. Although many South Koreans think there are huge differences between the lives of South and North Koreans, Cumings believes the cultural history and language between the two Koreas are very similar. Communist indoctrination and the lack of involvement with the rest of the world has limited North Korea's global development, but it has the advantage of self-reliance and maintenance of a traditional Korean culture. North Korea can contribute to reunification with a strong sense of distinct culture and self-reliance, allowing the unified Korea to remain independent from surrounding countries of power.

The media rhetoric of North Korea has contributed to the global population's fear of missiles and nuclear weapons in the country. This has created bias against North Korean people and distanced both South Korean and global populations from seriously considering unification. However, people should be aware that the North Korean civilians live under oppression and that they suffer from the violence of dictatorship. To increase the possibility of peaceful unification, it is now the younger generation's role to study the history and respond to the current state of the Korean division.

At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I founded the student research group, Humans in North Korea (HNK). HNK educates Chicago communities on North Korea's social and political situation, and human rights issues. The members volunteer at Empower House, a North Korean refugee resettlement center in Hyde Park, to create educational public platforms such as symposiums and film screenings. We meet with North Korean defectors and share each other's knowledge and stories of suffering.

It is urgent to build and continue meaningful actions and critical thinking to prepare for an unexpected reunification of South and North Korea. We, the younger generation, can prepare future generations to acknowledge the differences between the two nations and further work towards peaceful Korean unification.