A Dialogue between South and North Korean Youth: *Liberating the Imagination beyond the "Red Complex"*

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Opening the Dialogue

Joh Hello. My name is Joh Kyeongil, and I will be moderating this dialogue on the Korean peninsula, organized to mark the 80th anniversary of liberation. Let me begin with a brief self-introduction. I was born in Aoji—a place some of you may recognize—in Gyeongheung county, Hamgyeongnam-do province, and lived there until I was sixteen. I came to South Korea at the end of 2004. Born in 1988, I defected at the age of sixteen, which makes this my twenty-first year living in Seoul. In total, I spent fourteen years in North Korea, two years in China, and now twenty-one years in the South. I sometimes joke that half of my blood is socialist and the other half capitalist, since my experiences in the North make up a significant part of who I am. I'm not sure whether either of you two has met North Korean defectors before, but I imagine there may be complex emotions as we move back and forth between South and North in this conversation.

I studied political science, with a focus on institutional and parliamentary politics, and in graduate school my research centers on division ideology, anticommunism, and social integration involving North Korean defectors. With that, could you both briefly introduce yourselves ?

Kim My name is Kim Yeonu. When I first received the preliminary questions, I was struck by how comprehensively your introduction encompassed different layers of your identity, which made me think carefully about how to introduce myself. Throughout most of my twenties, beginning in college, I worked on issues related to Japanese military sexual slavery. I now work at an advertising agency.

To be honest, I had never given much thought to how I would describe my own identity, so your question prompted some reflection. The experiences I had in my twenties while working on the Japanese military sexual slavery issue probably constitute the largest part of who I am. Beyond that, being a woman and coming from a rural area rather than Seoul are the aspects that best represent my identity.

Kang My name is Kang Taeseong. I have lived my entire life in the same place, without ever leaving my neighborhood. I was born in Ogeum-dong, Songpa-gu district, Seoul, attended elementary, middle, and high school there. Even when I entered Hongik University, I commuted from home. All of my closest relationships are with friends I have known since elementary school in that same neighborhood.

I always assumed I would find both work and housing within Seoul. Since my family lives here, I never really needed to think about housing—I felt it made more sense to save money for the future rather than move out for the sake of independence. Leaving a familiar neighborhood also means leaving many things behind.

While this background did not directly shape my views on North Korea, I have always considered myself quite patriotic. I was in high school during President Moon Jae-in's administration, and when inter-Korean relations improved following his visit to North Korea, I developed a more positive view of unification. At the time, I also received education that emphasized the importance of good relations with the North. During university, I happened to participate as a chorus member in an album project by the late Kim Won-ok, a survivor of Japanese military sexual slavery. That experience introduced me to the issue. After completing my military service, I eventually joined a student group related to Japanese military "comfort women" issue.

The Unfinished Liberation of 1945

Joh Both of you have been closely involved in activism around the issue of Japanese military "comfort women." I found the essays on the understandings of liberation in Korea, China, and Japan prior to this dialogue fascinating, and I learned a great deal from them. Did anything in these essays challenge your previous impressions or memories of August 15, or strike you in a new way?

Kang What stood out to me was how differently various countries

remember the date of liberation—"August 15." I was struck by the fact that China, Taiwan, and other nations associate liberation with different dates. I had always taken August 15 for granted as the Liberation Day, without considering that other countries might commemorate it differently. That realization prompted some reflection.

I was also intrigued by the section on Koreans in Japan, particularly the account of Japanese military "comfort women" survivors raising funds to support Korean students there. In South Korea, Koreans in Japan are often perceived as being affiliated with the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon 總聯) and therefore labeled as "North Korean people." Reading the essay made me think, for the first time, about those Koreans who remained in Japan after liberation. They organized themselves and established educational institutions in order to continue their lives there. This made me curious about why two million Koreans were unable to return to Korea and instead remained in Japan.

Kim I would like to share my own reflections on August 15. August 14 is the Day of Remembrance for Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, commemorating Kim Hak-sun's first public testimony. Because these two dates fall consecutively, we have studied and discussed the August 14 commemoration and August 15 liberation together. Our discussions have ranged widely—from questioning whether the survivors truly experienced liberation, to reconsidering how liberation itself should be defined, and exploring how the principle of restitution, broadly applied in human rights discourse, might apply to the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery.

The survivors consistently say that liberation has not yet come. Although liberation and independence were achieved, the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery remains unresolved, and survivors such as Kim Won-ok were unable to return to their northern hometowns because of national division. As a result, when we talk about August 15, we inevitably connect it to division and the question of unification. For me, August 15 signifies an incomplete liberation.

Through my work on this issue, I had some contact with

Koreans in Japan. However, I found it particularly striking to learn that Koreans in Manchuria were recognized as ethnic Koreans. More broadly, what resonated with me throughout the essays was the reminder that although August 15 is often remembered as a day of joy and celebration, it was in fact also a time of immense confusion, fear, and upheaval.

Joh Yes, the essays helped us see how Korea, China, and Japan remember and interpret August 15 differently. I was especially struck by how each country approaches it from a distinct perspective—Koreans remember it as liberation and independence; China commemorates it as Victory Day; and Japan marks it as the day of defeat. This suggests that when these three nations engage in discussions about historical interpretation in the future, multiple dimensions must be taken into account. Japan's emphasis on atomic bomb victimhood, in particular, highlights how divergent these historical memories remain.

Kang As Japan has shifted significantly to the right, there has been an effort to soften or obscure the reality of defeat in the Pacific War. The war is sometimes framed as unavoidable, or the focus is placed primarily on Japan's identity as a victim of atomic bombing. I see this as an attempt to deflect attention from Japan's colonial crimes in Asia. That is why August 15 holds a different meaning in Japan—it is remembered as defeat rather than liberation.

Kim While Japan has indeed undergone a significant rightward shift, there have also been sustained efforts by younger generations and civil society groups to confront Japan's past honestly. These voices have not become mainstream, but they continue to exist and persist.

Encountering Divided Border-Crossers before Liberation

Joh This is the first time either of you has met a North Korean defector. Although defectors frequently appear in the news,

opportunities to meet or speak with them in person are rare. As a result, many people either know very little about defectors or have no chance to learn more about them. Nearly 35,000 North Korean defectors have settled in South Korean society, yet the statistical probability of an ordinary South Korean encountering a defector in daily life is less than one percent—unless once actively seeks out such an encounter.

North Korean defectors live as equal citizens of the Republic of Korea. The South Korean government established its defector policy based on the principle of "accept and embrace all, but do not induce." Some welcome defectors as "a preview of unification," while others feel uncomfortable and at times direct hate speech toward them. Despite this mixture of hospitality and hostility, there is broad agreement that social integration between South Korean citizens and North Korean defectors is important. For this reason, integration has become a significant social issue.

Media portrayals of defectors have also been controversial. Many South Koreans form their impressions of defectors through media representations—such as reports of certain defector organizations sending anti-North leaflets across the border, or allegations of involvement in online opinion manipulation in cooperation with the National Intelligence Service (NIS). I believe many misunderstandings stem from mutual ignorance. Recently, entertainment programs featuring defectors—such as Channel A's *Now on My Way to Meet You*—as well as defector YouTubers have increased public familiarity with defectors.

For defectors, South Korea represents a space of liberation: a new life attained only after risking their lives to escape a dictatorial system. Yet there is also strong opposition to state support for defectors. Some criticize settlement subsidies, tuition assistance, and other benefits as "reverse discrimination." Given the difficulties many South Koreans face, I understand these sentiments. I'm curious what kind of image each of you has about North Korean defectors and how much you feel you know about them. Please feel free to speak openly. If social integration with defectors is necessary, what significance do you think it holds for unification and liberation?

Kim I've always felt that "North Korean defectors" is a difficult topic to discuss. Because they are a minority in South Korean society, careless remarks can easily be interpreted as hate speech. That makes it hard to speak freely—especially when there are so few opportunities for open conversation to begin with. To be honest, I didn't always find defectors' media statements entirely credible. North Korea is such an unknown space to South Koreans that I worried distorted or selectively framed information might be conveyed to the public. As you mentioned, Mr. Joh, I think defectors who appear in the media often seem to speak with particular intentions and political motivations.

I've never actually met a defector, so I realize my perceptions may themselves be a form of prejudice. I knew that defectors are managed by the NIS and Hanawon upon arrival, and I felt uneasy about this system. The NIS does not have a wholly positive image, given its role during South Korea's authoritarian period and the democratization process. That made me question how freely defectors could speak under such supervision. For these reasons, I often felt reluctant to speak openly about defectors.

Kang My perception of defectors has probably been rather extreme. Until recently, I tended to see them either as staunch anti-communists who deeply hate North Korea, or as spies sent under orders. In media programs, defectors often voice intense criticism of North Korea, while online comments and public discourse sometimes accuse them of being as communists or spies. South Korean politics is extremely polarized.

Through today's conversation, I realized something quite simple: defectors did not come to South Korea for some special political purpose—they came in search of freedom. I had thought of them as similar to international immigrants, but I only learned today that they hold the same Republic of Korea citizenship as I do. Because defectors have firsthand knowledge of North Korea, I hope they can participate more actively in discussions and decision-making related to North Korea and unification policy. For social integration to succeed, I think people like me need to rethink our assumptions. South

Korean society tends to be exclusionary toward foreigners, and that attitude seems to be extended to defectors as well.

Joh That's true. When we look at defectors who appear in the media, provocative or extremely biased voices are often highlighted. But I believe these voices represent only a minority. The established political sphere tends to select defectors who express hardline views on North Korea, and some defectors strategically position themselves in that way. Conversely, when defectors express more progressive views, they are often accused of being spies or communists. This atmosphere discourages them from expressing their political opinions freely.

Kim If social integration with defectors is necessary and proceeds successfully, I think it could broaden the imaginative horizons of young people in South Korea. Because of division, South Korea can feel like an island, with public imagination constrained by the lingering "Red Complex." To me, integration means accepting others as they are. Yet defectors' identities and opinions are easily instrumentalized according to shifting political circumstances. We therefore need to think collectively about how defectors can be accepted without being politically exploited.

Joh Defectors come from different backgrounds. Their speech patterns differ, and so do their life experiences. But once they resettle in South Korea and live as members of this society, I think it is crucial to form ordinary relationships with them as equal citizens, rather than defining them primarily by their origins. Demands for social integration arise precisely because, although citizenship is legally equal, social perceptions are not. In reality, discrimination, prejudice, and misunderstanding persist simply because defectors come from North Korea.

Kim If social integration means living well together with defectors, I wonder whether that is fundamentally possible without improvement in inter-Korean relations. As you noted, Mr. Joh, defectors inevitably carry the label "North Korea." Just as

our perceptions of Japanese or Chinese people, are shaped by images of their countries, national origin always functions as a label. Even though defectors left North Korea because they rejected it, that label remains attached to them. In that sense, doesn't successful social integration presuppose, at least to some extent, improved relations between the two Koreas?

Joh That's an important point. Inter-Korean relations clearly affect social integration with defectors. When relations improve, support for unification increases and North Korea is viewed more as a community of "compatriots" than as South Korea's "main enemy." When relations deteriorate, those perceptions reverse. This shift also affects how defectors are viewed. When North Korea conducts missile tests or other provocations, negative sentiment often spills over onto defectors. The shadow of North Korea constantly follows them. In this sense, improving inter-Korean relations is indeed a crucial component of social integration. As long as the two Koreas remain in a hostile relationship, integration will inevitably be shaped by that hostility.

Kang I agree that South Koreans' attitudes need to change. Although defectors came from North Korea, they are now citizens of the Republic of Korea. They are people striving to adapt to South Korean society, yet the same exclusionary attitudes directed toward foreigners are often directed at them. An inclusive perspective is essential for social integration. It is striking that even in interactions with Americans or Europeans, racial hierarchies—such as differential treatment of Black and white people—continue to operate within South Korean society.

The Divided Korean Peninsula: Is the South an Agent of Liberation?

Joh Let's change topics. According to Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea—"The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent islands"—North Korea is defined as part of the Republic

of Korea's territory. From this perspective, North Korea is considered an unrecovered territory, and the logic follows that North Korean defectors are citizens of the Republic of Korea. At the same time, many people—perhaps subconsciously—tend to view South Korea as the agent that must liberate North Korea. Yet in reality, public interest in North Korea or in unification is steadily declining. Even so, North Korea remains inseparably connected to us. If North Korea is to undergo democratic change, I would like to ask whether you think South Korea should be the agent responsible for liberating North Korea as an unrecovered territory. What kind of perspective, vision, or attitude do you think we should adopt toward the idea of liberation under the current conditions on the Korean peninsula?

Kim Honestly, the idea that South Korea must liberate North Korea as an unrecovered territory feels outdated to me. Both South and North Korea are recognized as sovereign states and are members of the United Nations. Even if South Korea claims that North Korea is not a legitimate state, would the international community really accept that view? These days, many young Koreans seem to perceive North and South Korea simply as two separate countries.

I also found it interesting that your question assumes North Korea is a dictatorship and therefore must be democratized. The answer changes depending on how we define the terms. Accepting your premise—that North Korea is a dictatorial state and that "liberation" means democratic transformation—I do not think South Korea should be seen as the agent of liberation.

When I was active on the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery, I once held the somewhat arrogant belief that Japanese young people were ignorant of the issue, and that we should go to Japan to educate them through campaigns and events. At the time, an older activist told me something that stayed with me: the agents of social transformation in Japan must be Japanese people themselves. That insight feels highly relevant here. If North Korea requires liberation from dictatorship, then the agents of that change must be North Korean people. Korea's independence was achieved by

Koreans themselves, and South Korea's democratization was accomplished through the autonomous efforts of its citizens.

Personally, I also feel that South and North Korea are now effectively two different countries. Psychologically, we have lived apart for too long. The unification discourse promoted by older generations often feels obligatory to me—"we must unify simply because we must." For many young people today, the most pressing concern is making a living. They are not persuaded by abstract arguments about the necessity of unification, nor do they see clear, practical benefits. If unification is to be meaningful, we need to convince young people of its relevance.

For now, I believe it is more realistic to acknowledge the two Koreas as separate states and articulate a framework for coexistence. Even as separate countries, coexistence is unavoidable on a shared peninsula. Rather than framing unification as an obligation, we should focus on creating tangible forms of shared growth—especially in a rapidly changing global environment. As I mentioned earlier, division and the Red Complex have severely constrained our imagination. If we could expand that imagination, South and North Korea might collaborate in innovative ways, from economic cooperation to security. I believe that survival on the Korean peninsula now depends on becoming partners in coexistence.

Kang When I hear discussions about North Korea and liberation, the first image that comes to mind is the idea that we must rescue our compatriots from a dictatorial regime. It resembles the narrative of a video game narrative in which a hero saves a princess from a demon king. That is the kind of "liberation" narrative I have internalized.

But when I reflect more critically, South Korea's view of liberating North Korea resembles Japan's past justification for colonizing Korea. Japan claimed it needed to "liberate" Korea from Qing China. Ultimately, just as the true agents of liberation in South Korea were its own people, I believe the most important force for change in North Korea must likewise be its citizens themselves.

What Have We Yet to Be Liberated from?

Joh Liberation carries great significance as national independence, but when we narrow the concept to the level of individuals, it can take on many different meanings. One example is liberation from self-censorship. I believe that our society has yet to be fully liberated from thought control. For instance, when I try to share videos produced in North Korea on my personal social media, I suddenly hesitate—Is this allowed? Even today, possession of North Korean publications violates the National Security Law. If someone expresses views even slightly similar to North Korea's—such as advocating for inter-Korean dialogue—they risk being labeled "pro-North" or a North Korea sympathizer. As a result, many people censor themselves when expressing political opinions. In this sense, freedom of thought remains constrained.

Because I am originally from North Korea, I sometimes face even harsher attacks. If I support policies or candidates from the Democratic Party, people comment, "How can someone who defected support a pro-North party?" Others threaten to report me as a spy. I do not take such remarks too seriously. Rather, I am curious about the psychology behind these identity-based attacks, so I read the comments with interest.

Both of you were born and raised in South Korea. You may or may not have experienced similar forms of self-censorship, or the feeling that you have not yet to be liberated from something. Women, in particular, may feel that South Korean society has not fully freed itself from patriarchal culture. In any case, it has been eighty years since liberation. Can we truly say we are liberated? What does liberation mean in our lives today?

Kim What Mr. Joh said resonated deeply with me. When I first received the questionnaire and thought about what I have not been liberated from, my immediate answer was capitalist competition—my job is exhausting. But as we prepared for this dialogue commemorating the 80th anniversary of liberation and reflected more seriously on its meaning, what struck me most was that I have not been liberated from

the Red Complex. This remains a deeply troubling issue in Korean society, and it made me realize that I still lack political freedom.

I also became newly aware of how much self-censorship I practice. Even during this conversation, I found myself worrying that something I say might cause problems later. The very fact that I feel this way demonstrates how deeply self-censorship and constraints on freedom of thought persist in our society. In that sense, I do not feel fully liberated either. Through this dialogue, I came to feel strongly that these limitations on thought are closely tied to the reality of division. Ironically, I am experiencing that very reality in a conversation meant to mark the 80th anniversary of liberation.

If I were to define liberation now, I would say it means "opening up possibilities." It means expanding what I am permitted to say and broadening my sense of what kinds of ways of being are possible for me. At present, the range of identities one is allowed to inhabit in this society feels extremely narrow.

Kang I often think of it this way: in rural areas, dogs are sometimes tied with short leashes, unable to move beyond a fixed radius. Living in South Korea can feel similar. There is a narrowly defined standard of normalcy, and if you deviate from it, you are met with suspicion. People look at you harshly, suggest you need medical treatment, or in extreme cases treat you like a criminal. I have experienced these many times.

There seems to be an implicit classification of acceptable "types" of people, and deviation from that framework is not tolerated. I think this stems from a lack of respect for diversity. What I want to be liberated from is precisely that atmosphere. For me, liberation means being respected as an individual. I think of it as a form of self-affirmation—the ability to exist confidently as oneself, to love oneself while holding certain identities or engaging in certain actions. It means placing myself at the center of my life, rather than conforming to society's narrow expectations.

The Significance of Today's Dialogue

Joh My final question is about the significance of today's conversation. This dialogue brings together young people from South and North Korea, and since you both mentioned that this is your first time speaking with a North Korean defector, I imagine it may have been a unique experience. What meaning does this conversation hold for you, particularly in relation to August 15, liberation, and unification?

Kim This was my first conversation with a North Korean defector, and it reinforced something important for me: you can only truly understand people through dialogue. Despite our very different backgrounds, this exchange allowed us to understand each other's perspectives in a meaningful way. I am slightly worried that some of what I said might have hurt Mr. Joh. Defectors risk their lives to come to South Korea, so if I said anything insensitive, please understand it stems from my limited knowledge of the defection process. Through today's dialogue, some of my prejudices about defectors dissolved, while other ideas became clearer. I hope there will be many more opportunities like this. Dialogue deepens understanding, and as understanding deepens, integration becomes possible.

Kang I feel the same way. I would really like to have more conversations like this. We speak the same language, so we can just talk naturally—just chat. There's that saying about clinking glasses together; it comes from the practice of mixing drinks to prove there is no poison. I think we need to do that too—clink glasses and talk.

Joh Thank you both. I genuinely listened to everything you shared. Every time I participate in conversations like this, I am struck anew by questions of similarity and difference, and today was no exception. When our backgrounds differ, invisible boundaries tend to arise between us, and those boundaries rarely dissolve without dialogue. I believe today's conversation dismantled walls and barriers we did not even

realize we had built. If conversations like this multiply at the individual level, then dialogue between nations may also become possible. Ultimately, is it not the absence of dialogue that has caused South and North Korea to accumulate layer upon layer of division? I look forward to the day when South and North can clink glasses together. Until then, let us continue to create those moments ourselves. Thank you both for your time.

Concluding Reflections

Three young people from South and North Korea—Joh Kyeongil (dialogue moderator), Kim Yeonu, and Kang Taeseong—reflect on the meaning of August 15 not as a simple narrative of national victory or defeat, but through diverse perspectives shaped by the distinct historical experiences of Korea, China, and Japan. They argue that August 15 represents an incomplete liberation, pointing to the unresolved issues such as Japanese military sexual slavery and the continued division of the Korean peninsula. Liberation, in their view, is not a concluded historical event but an ongoing struggle for human rights, political freedom, and sovereignty.

The South Korean participants note that opportunities to encounter defectors in everyday life are extremely limited, leaving many people dependent on sensationalized or extreme media portrayals of North Korea. They critically reflect on how Korean society has positioned defectors as "special others," marked primarily by the stigma associated with North Korea rather than embraced as citizens with equal rights.

Regarding North Korea's transformation and liberation, the participants emphasize that North Korean people themselves must be the agents of change, rather than passive recipients of liberation imposed from the South. Unification, they argue, should not be framed as a compulsory merging of states, but as a process that expands possibilities for individuals whose lives and thoughts have been constrained by division. In this sense, liberation means breaking free from self-censorship—whether enforced by legal mechanisms such as the National Security Law or by social prejudice—and creating space for individuals to exist fully and freely.