

An Interview with Pak Mun-il

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A Diaspora Intellectual's Thoughts about Korea's Division

The Tragedy of Division as Seen by a Chinese-Korean Historian

- Xu** You studied Korean history at Yanbian University and have long conducted research in the field. You have taken advantage of Yanbian University's unique location to widely travel between North and South Korea, and spearheaded a large number of projects aimed at increasing exchanges between the two Koreas. In particular, while conducting research related to unification studies at Yanbian University recently, you emphasized the importance of research regarding Korea's national history. I would first like to ask you what kind of views you have toward the issue of unification as an overseas Korean scholar. You have stated that Korea's division is "a national tragedy and a national torment." I am curious about how exactly you understand this torment.
- Pak** I thought a lot about this question, and I believe that the current issues between North and South Korea are clearly associated with change in Northeast Asia and, simultaneously, are ones that face the entire international community. I think that the issue of the unification of the Korean Peninsula is gradually transforming into one that not only affects the Korean Peninsula but also greatly impacts Northeast Asia and, going forward, the broader world. However, when considering the unification issue from a historical perspective and linking it up with the realities of the confrontation between China and the US centered on the Korean Peninsula today, Korea's division is a major tragedy for Koreans and a headache for overseas Koreans who keep interested in their mother country with hopes for peace.
- Xu** Could you tell us what division meant to you in your own life as a Chinese-Korean (Chosŏnjok or ethnic Koreans in China)?

Pak

In my own experience, Korea's division—specifically, the division along the 38th Parallel—was a painful issue. When Liberation came in 1945, people in the motherland, along with overseas Koreans living in the Yanbian region, welcomed it with open arms, hugging each other, and calling out “Hurrah!” Soon, a lot of people wanted to go back to Korea. Chinese-Koreans had “residential identification cards” at the time, and when the general mood began encouraging people to return home, there was an increase in people who wanted to participate in the construction of the new homeland. There were also people who refused to leave, believing that they were pioneers (in the Yanbian region) and that they needed to protect that land. Many people were longing to participate in the process of building a new homeland as they awaited good news.

When it became known that the Korean Peninsula was gradually becoming divided, however, Chinese-Koreans were greatly shocked. They were very taken aback because they knew that the independence movement, led by people who had moved to Manchuria, had never been aimed at creating an independent country that was divided into North and South. The great distress coming from that tragedy was followed by the second horror of the Korean War a little less than five years later. That fratricidal conflict gave people a shock that, given the atmosphere at the time, would have been difficult to recover from.

I was studying in university at the time. I had decided to quit school before I was informed by the Chinese government that Chinese-Korean students had no choice but to continue their academic studies. I felt the emotional shock caused by the tragedy of fratricidal conflict to my very bones. Amid all that, I continued studying while trying to believe that our nation still had hope despite the circumstances. That's how I and other overseas Koreans developed this hope for the future into a stance. I have also made the history of Korea's fratricidal conflict a serious lesson and theme in my research.

Xu

As a Chinese-Korean historian myself, I also found that watching and researching the process of division is, as it is to many Chinese-Koreans, a very painful thing. In contrast, you

seem to have closely watched efforts to overcome division.

Pak

In the early 1990s, I continuously exchanged opinions with people on both sides amid preparations for a summit between Kim Il-sung and Kim Young-sam. I was at Seoul National University at the time, and Lee Hong-koo, the prime minister, called me one day, saying, “I returned from Kaesŏng yesterday, and it looks like the meeting [between the two Korean leaders] will happen soon.” Hearing that, my eyes suddenly teared up. I believed that we were passing an enormously crucial moment in history.

In South Korea, just like in the North, newspapers were asking daily about how Kim Il-sung and Kim Young-sam would meet and what they would talk about. Filled with happiness about the news, I clipped the articles about it and still have them to this day. I remember the news media comparing the two leaders, including their height. They were telling readers how tall Kim Il-sung was and how tall Kim Young-sam was, and that because Kim Il-sung was taller he would look down at Kim Young-sam while the South Korean leader would have to look up at his northern counterpart. Even in 1994, the two sides refused to let go of their pride and discussed matters as trivial as these.

The news media also compared the two leaders’ weight. They told readers how much each leader weighed and commented that Kim Il-sung had a habit of pulling the other person toward him when shaking hands. The south’s media outlets worried that Kim Young-sam could be pulled over in Kim Il-sung’s direction when they shook hands. Lastly, the media said that Kim Il-sung was a great orator. He was, in fact, a greater speaker and left a huge amount of written works behind. Of course, we cannot say he wrote all of it, but he had a great knack for writing and speaking. The media worried that Kim Young-sam might not have what it takes to speak with his northern counterpart. In short, the media was trying to say that Kim Young-sam needed to do a lot of preparation (before the summit).

Xu

What was the situation in North Korea at the time?

Pak

Both Koreas were focused on the historic meeting, and many people at Yanbian University were looking at ways they could play a role in the summit. By chance, I got the chance to visit North Korea as a member of the Jilin Province Education Study Delegation. Yanbian University had requested that I take part in the delegation. I was really happy about that because I had wanted to visit the North to see how things were.

The plan was to head to Hoeryŏng after going through Sanhe 三合 (Samhap in Korean)—a township of Tongjiang County in northeastern Sichuan province, China, where the North Korean, Russian, and Chinese borders meet. We were waiting at Samhap, but nobody came from North Korea to meet us even though it was already lunchtime. Then, right at 12 PM, we heard the news that Kim Il-sung had died. We were flustered by the news, and sometime after that, a North Korean arrived and told us that the meeting would not be possible due to the circumstances and asked for our understanding. That happened on July 8, 1994.

Xu

Yes. Kim Il-sung's sudden death led to the cancellation of the inter-Korean summit and tensions on the peninsula rose again.

Pak

I believed that we would be capable of going our way over the ridge of hope after such a long journey, but I became very despondent (after hearing the news). Reports from North Korea said that the entire country was in the midst of severe anguish. The pain that North Korean people felt was almost incomparable to anything else in history, and North Korean scholars interpreted what happened as due to the attachment the entire people felt toward the Suryŏng (Great Leader), along with the shock and sadness of losing a leader they had revered as the “Sun.” They also suggested that people were even more in anguish because the expectations of overcoming the history of division to build a “unified strong country” had suddenly come to naught. It had seemed as if the leaders of two systems that had long been in confrontation with each other were now going to meet, leading down the path to unification; however, Kim Il-sung's sudden death tore all these

hopes to tatters.

I believed that a new era had come following Kim's death. I also wanted to believe that the successors to Kim Il-sung and Kim Young-sam would soon gradually pave the way to accomplish what those two leaders failed to do. I believed that because I, along with many other people, were pointing the way forward, the two Koreas would head down the path of dialogue and peace, even if this was going to take a long time.

Prospects for the Korean Peninsula and a Request for South Korea's Leaders

Xu How did you view the changes in inter-Korean relations from the mid-1990s and on, and what kind of activities were you involved in?

Pak After that, my strong feelings of hope gradually turned to disappointment. First of all, the failure to further invigorate the Kaesoŋg Industrial Complex and its sudden closure was really disappointing. The chairman of the Hyundai Group, Chung Ju-yung, visited Yanbian University in the 1990s. He had come out of the failure of his run for the presidency and was really disappointed about that. We met in Yanbian and also in Seoul. He had really great hopes for the country and the nation through the improvement of inter-Korean relations.

I think that after the recent shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the two Koreas have suffered from many tangible and intangible losses. Kim Woo-choong, the chairman of Daewoo Group, who I met in the 1990s, told me that the skill level of North Korean workers was high, even better than those in South Korea. When I asked why he thought that, he told me that North Korean workers do more training on the work they are given. He also told me that, as was known, the workers had such strong discipline that the quality of goods produced in North Korea in labor-critical industries was better than South Korea and that North Korean labor was cheaper. Consequently, he predicted that there would be a

good market for goods produced at the Kaesong Industrial Complex internationally. Kim added that he had visited the North 13 times, and after going a few times, he wanted to see the country more up close, so he took a train instead of an airplane from China into North Korea. He told me that because the South Korean journalists who visited North Korea with him only wrote insulting things about North Korea upon their return, he wrote a travelogue of his trips to North Korea to inform people about the realities of the country. I photocopied the travelogue he sent to me and sent it to North Korea. So, in that way, I hoped for the broadening of inter-Korean exchanges and the return of hope for the future.

Xu How have you viewed South Korea's responses to recent issues in inter-Korean relations?

Pak After the Kaesong Industrial Complex shut down, I began to seriously doubt whether the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation was truly working for and making decisions aimed at achieving unification. By chance, a high-ranking member of the committee contacted me, and we had a meal together. He was accompanied at the meal by an American of Korean descent who had come from Nasŏn and was the head of an American trading company with offices in Nasŏn and Yŏn'gil. I was surprised to learn that an American had set up a trade office in North Korea. He complained that he was called a "commie" in South Korea. He expressed the desire for North Korea to slowly open its doors to trade.

I was shocked that South Korea closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex when the U.S. was preparing for the future in that way despite confrontation with North Korea. I have recently felt serious concerns about the collapse of inter-Korean relations. The increasing independent decisions made by the South Korean government amid the tinderbox situation that includes the North's nuclear and missile development, the US and South Korea's joint military exercises, and the stirring up of conflict with China over the THAAD issue, have made me even more disappointed. The North's nuclear test site is close to Yŏn'gil, which means that large explosions will directly impact China's northeastern region. The

small earthquakes caused by the North's nuclear tests has tremendous effects here.

When considering those who died for the independence and establishment of a strong, independent Korea, the current tragedy in the making between the two Koreas is a completely unexpected and most terrible situation. That is why I think that if we do not genuinely resolve the issues between the two Koreas caused by division, our nation will have no future. I believe that the pain coming from this tragedy of national history will continue to hurt no matter how much time passes, so we must move forward now to bring about change.

Xu What hopes do you have for the future of the Korean Peninsula?

Pak I believe that we currently are facing a crossroads. One path has us continuing this tragic history, while the other has us making a great shift from a history of division to one of unification. While it may seem obvious, the ultimate results of these two paths are clear. The first path will just lead to the nation's destruction, while the second path will create the steppingstone for the nation's prosperity. As I mentioned before, it is important that we must not forget the patriots who sacrificed themselves for the independence of our homeland and that we continue unremitting efforts to realize the as-of-yet unachieved dream of independence. The history of the past is that of confrontation between the two Koreas which attempted to forcibly absorb each other following Liberation, and where a fratricidal war completely determined the modern history of the nation. The subsequent recent history of the Korean Peninsula is akin to a tinderbox waiting to catch fire.

In brief, Korea's modern history was that of internal war and its more recent history shows that the situation on the two Koreas is akin to a tinderbox. In this crisis, I would like to ask the leaders of South Korea to do the following. The South must promote the independent defense of its territory. Currently, South Korea is in the de facto role of being a military base for the US in Northeast Asia. This is the realization of America's stratagem in Asia that the U.S. has planned throughout the

20th century. After the end of World War 2, the U.S. placed its most important considerations on ways to surround China in the future. The surrounding and hemming in of China is a central part of America's stratagem that continues to this day. By moving its strategic military bases to the Pacific, America's goal in the 21st century is to surround China.

The series of incidents that have occurred in South Korea in recent times are all connected with this trend. The Korean Peninsula is an "eastern entrance" to China, and from America's perspective, controlling this eastern entry point means turning it into a gate for America not for China. The South Korean government needs to examine this closely and continue making consistent judgements regarding the situation.

There are many things that North Korea is sacrificing and consuming for its nuclear development. There are also many things that South Korea is sacrificing and putting into place to maintain its role as a military base for the U.S.. South Korean data shows that from 2006 to 2016 the amount of American military materiel South Korea bought was equal to 211.5 billion yuan. When I visited South Korea, someone suggested that I visit an American army base. I ate a dinner there of seafood and found that the ingredients were not from South Korea, but all imported from the Pacific. The products sold at the base's store were of good quality and very cheap, so much so that some Koreans would buy things there and then sell them outside the base. All of the conditions aimed at maintaining the bases, however, are burdens carried by the South Korean government and South Koreans. While South Koreans may be used to American bases taking up space and consuming things, there is now a need to view things in a different light.

Xu I think you're talking about a broad transformation of how South Korea needs to view itself within the power-based relationship it has with the US. Then, what kind of perspective must we have toward the two Koreas making contact and meeting directly with each other?

Pak I think that the two Koreas need to continue meeting and

talking with each other even if they again feel pain and sometimes engage in conflict. Of course, based on the information I receive, the North is continuously changing. Moreover, they are working hard to increase the speed of that change so they can change faster. When people say that North Korea's only strategy is nuclear development, they cannot perceive the real changes going on there.

My relatives are still in North Korea, and my nephews and nieces tell me that North Korean society is changing a lot compared to the past and that the speed of this change is accelerating. Of course, the people cannot talk about or criticize the regime or nation freely; however, they have told me that the North Korean government is regularly making its own evaluations about what it does well and what it does not. This is an evidence that the North has been different from the past. There is a broad use of cellphones in the society and Yanbian University teachers who return from North Korea say that there is a lot of change happening from year to year. They say that the way people dress, what they talk about, and the facilities and buildings are all changing. I understand in particular that the country has demonstrated a relatively high level of architectural engineering competency.

Xu What specific steps must South Korea take to improve inter-Korean relations?

Pak I think that the South Korean government should trust that North Korea is changing, and should increase multifaceted contact and continued dialogue with the North to accelerate this trend. Of course, South Korea is superior to the North in most spheres in which the two countries would conduct exchanges or meetings; however, I think that it is important for South Korea to help the North and show consideration toward it in areas that it is superior in, rather than being excessively proud of its strengths while looking down at the weaknesses of its counterpart. In short, the South needs to show it can lose during exchanges with the North. In fact, losing in the short-term means winning in the long term. That is akin to planting seeds as an investment for a better future. I hope that South Korea can treat the North with this mindset.

Second, I believe that exchanges must first take place in the economic and cultural fields. Cultural exchanges are easier for both sides to understand and approach compared to rigid and complicated political or social issues. For the past 10 years, however, the South has completely prevented these exchanges from occurring. Recently, South Korean authorities have even been reluctant to having their scholars have contact with North Korean scholars in the Tumen River Forum. I think that if the two Koreas first move forward with cultural and academic exchanges, political exchanges will follow in tow.

That is why I think that the divided family reunions should start again immediately. The unfortunate incidents that occurred before are in the past, and at this point there is an imperative to acknowledge the promises made by both sides, even if there is no immediate agreement. The two sides must believe that each other will honor promises going forward and find ways to yield to each other. In fact, yielding is what the superior side does to show it has time on its side.

Xu What kind of changes do you think need to happen in terms of South Korea's relationships with overseas Koreans?

Pak I think South Korea needs a proper research institute for unification studies. The institute would facilitate contact and exchanges with overseas Koreans throughout the world and accept their advice. The Japanese-Koreans are divided into those who support the Korean Residents Union in Japan (abbreviated as Mindan 民團) and the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (abbreviated as Ch'ongnyŏn or Chōsen Sōren 朝鮮総連). The South Koreans have only used the Mindan to make contact with the Ch'ongnyŏn, and there is a need for the South Korean government to communicate directly with the Ch'ongnyŏn and take the transformative step of supporting their visits (to South Korea). In short, they need to listen to what both the Mindan and Ch'ongnyŏn are saying. While what the Ch'ongnyŏn people say might not be nice to hear, South Koreans can better understand the North through interactions with this group, and this will lead to peace in the Japanese-Korean society, too. On the part of the Ch'ongnyŏn,

there will be a lot of differences in their perceptions of South Korea depending on whether they have direct interactions with South Korea or not. The perceptions held by South Koreans will undergo change through this process, but perceptions held by the Ch'ongnyŏn community will undergo even more changes.

Moreover, there is a need to conduct a lot more activities aimed at creating the conditions for unification through opportunities for interaction with overseas Koreans. There is an imperative to actively prepare for meetings rather than just sitting around waiting for the best time to meet. In the past, I held frequent meetings with diplomats at the South Korean consulate in Shenyang, but now I do not see them at all. I want to highlight that losing in the short term is winning in the long term.

The Contributions of Chinese-Korean Society to Overcoming Division and the Expansion of Unification Studies-related Research

Xu It seems to me that you have used your prospects for the future and your perspective as a Chinese-Korean while conducting your unification studies-related research.

Pak I think that the Chinese government and Yanbian University know the importance of research on the unification issue and is closely observing the situation on the peninsula. Yanbian University researchers do not have many biased views of either Korea. I hope that the South Korean government and academia can have more exchanges with China and contact with Yanbian University on the division and unification issues, including the issue of Chinese-Korean immigration to the peninsula.

China's interest in Korean unification has been influenced much more by historical experience than the U.S. or Europe. China conducted its independence movement together with Koreans. In the past, it was said that China conducted an eight-year campaign against the Japanese; now, however,

that narrative has shifted to 14 years. In short, the Chinese and Korean people conducted at least a 14-year campaign to rid the Korean Peninsula and mainland China of Japanese. Chinese and Koreans fought together against the Japanese, with Kim Ku going to southern China to fight, while Kim Il-sung went to northeastern China to fight the Japanese.

Neither Chinese-Koreans nor the Chinese want the tragedy of division to continue. China is located very close to the peninsula and knows that it is in the most important position during the course of the unification process. China and the Chinese-Korean community have a keen interest in Korea's unification, so South Korea and China must try to continue good relations going forward.

That is why Yanbian University has a critical degree of influence domestically and internationally in the field of unification studies. A number of research centers, including the Chinese Association of Korean History (Zhongguo chaoxian lishi yanjiuhui 中國朝鮮歷史研究會), Chinese Association of Korean Literature (Zhongguo chaoxian wenxue yanjiuhui 中國朝鮮語文研究會), and the Chinese Association of Korean Language and Culture (Zhongguo chaoxian yuwen yanjiuhui 中國朝鮮語文研究會), all started at Yanbian University. Some years ago, the South Korean Ministry of Education even endorsed the establishment of the Research Institute of Korean Peninsula (Chaoxian bandao yanjiuyuan 朝鮮半島研究員) at Yanbian University. We need to relive the experience of having around 100 scholars from 34 countries take part in an international forum on Korean Studies in 1989.

Xu

Yanbian University currently cooperates with Kim Il-sung University, and South Korea's Seoul National University, Korea University, Yonsei University, and Cheju University, and seeks opportunities for joint research in unification studies that meshes Korean Studies and North Korean Studies (Chosŏnhak). The school has also long conducted joint academic forums for the two Koreas, giving the Chinese-Korean community the role of mediator between the two Koreas. Going forward, the school will need to continue research and other efforts to bring about Korean unification. What direction do you think such research needs to take?

Also, what kind of activities does the Chinese-Korean community need to conduct apart from academic research at universities to promote diverse exchanges and cooperation?

Pak

When North and South Koreans meet, there are many old misunderstandings that come up between them. I think that Chinese-Korean researchers have an important duty to help fix these misunderstandings. Koreans from the South need to be told about the changes in the North, while people in the North need to be told about what is happening in the South. In particular, we must help resolve the areas of misunderstanding that North Koreans have about the South. We must refrain from trying to achieve too much during meetings between South and North Koreans and start with resolving misunderstandings first. That will allow them to better understand each other so they can move forward.

Second, Chinese-Korean scholars need to serve as mediators to bring together scholars from the two Koreas so they can conduct joint research projects. Even if the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation still exists and there are many experts involved in solving unification-related issues, there are many areas they cannot do themselves in terms of preparing and sustaining inter-Korean meetings. Chinese-Koreans must play a significant role in helping fill the gaps.

