REBUILDING LOST IDENTITY: Rethinking Korean Reunification as an Imagined Community of Shared National Identity

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Abstract

In 2018, North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un expressed his desire to write a new history of Korean reunification. South Korean President Moon Jae-in reciprocated Kim’s desire in August 2019 when Moon set the ambitious deadline of the year 2045 for a peaceful reunification of the Koreas. The rhetoric of the two Koreas placed a renewed spotlight on the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. While contemporary literature on Korean reunification primarily focuses on the differences between the two Koreas, little attention has been paid to how a unified Korean identity can play a crucial role in sustaining the reunification effort. This article seeks to bridge that gap by arguing that a unified Korea should be understood as a reimagined community of two distinct nations joined by a shared identity. To support this argument, this article looks first to the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* and applies the framework to the history of Korea’s shared identity. Second, the article analyzes the evolution of the national identities of both South Korea and North Korea since 1945, when the Koreas were divided along the thirty-eighth parallel. Third, the obstacles to reunification are examined. Finally, suggestions on how reunification of the two Koreas could be sustained through shared national identities are explored.

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I. Introduction

In a nationally televised address commemorating Korean Liberation Day on August 2019, President Moon Jae-in pledged to achieve reunification of the Korean peninsula by 2045.¹ For more than half a century, a military demarcation line (“DMZ”) spanning 155 miles along the 38th parallel has separated South Korea and North Korea.² A product of decades of colonization and war, the DMZ is a symbol of Korea’s tragic and bifurcated past.

Existing literature on Korean reunification focuses on the impact to regional and international security, economic and political costs, and reunification scenarios. Missing from the discussion is the significant role a unified Korean identity can play in sustaining reunification when it occurs. This article presents a different way of looking at Korean reunification: As “reimagined communities.” I argue that debates about a unified Korea have paid insufficient attention to the importance of creating a shared national identity. Using Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* as the framework for analyzing national identity, I suggest that a unified Korea should be understood as a reimagined community of two distinct nations joined by a shared identity.

Part II of this article explores the origins of Korea’s shared national identity. This section defines Korea’s shared identity around their experiences during the Chosun dynasty, Japanese colonial rule, and division along the thirty-eighth parallel. Part III shows how South Korea and North Korea are, themselves, distinct imagined communities, with South Korea defined around their democracy, modernity, and increasingly multicultural identity. In contrast, North Korea’s identity developed around communism, tradition, and racial purity. In Part IV, I examine the obstacles to forming a shared identity in a reunified Korea, particularly the barriers of assimilation, discrimination and distrust, and shared memories. Lastly, Part V illustrates how these obstacles might be overcome in forming an imagined unified Korea, unified by its shared commitment to accepting decades of their shared suffering of colonization and war, education and print capitalism, and embracing commonalities rather than differences.

¹. See Edward White & Leo Lewis, South Korea’s President Seeks Korean Unification by 2045, FINANCIAL TIMES (Aug. 15, 2019) (describing President Moon’s televised address promising reunification of the Korean peninsula by 2045), https://www.ft.com/content/0fd71f12-bf10–11e9–89e2–41e555e96722 (this is behind a paywall. I have it as a pdf but I don’t know what the larger policy is); see also Gwangbokjeol, ASIA Soc’y (2020) (stating that Gwangbokjeol is a South Korean national holiday that commemorates the liberation of the Korean Peninsula from thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule), https://asiasociety.org/korea/gwangbokjeol [https://perma.cc/EL44-JHMW].
II. THE HISTORY AND ORIGINS OF KOREA’S SHARED IDENTITY

When the Korean Peninsula (“Korea”) was divided along the thirty-eighth parallel, both South Korea and North Korea adopted two distinct national identities. Prior to the division, Korea was a single kingdom that understood itself as a nation. This section lays a foundation for the article’s argument about reunification by briefly examining Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and exploring the history of Korea’s shared identity.

A. Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities

Anderson defines a nation as an “imagined political community” due to the key role language and culture play in understanding how populations perceive themselves as a community.\(^3\) Imagined communities deemphasize socio-economic disparities in favor of a “deep, horizontal comradeship,” where the identity of a nation takes priority over an individual identity.\(^4\) This is symbolized by the tombs of Unknown Soldiers. Tombs of Unknown Soldiers are revered despite “no one know[ing] who lies inside them.”\(^5\) In other words, national identities are imagined constructs, but that does not make them any less real.\(^6\)

Another central element of Anderson’s imagined community is the role of “print-capitalism.”\(^7\) Newspapers, novels, and television programs in a common language enable populations to “imagine” their community and understand its particularities even though these members may never meet each other.\(^8\) Newspapers enable their readers to imagine a shared experience irrespective of geographic distance and social hierarchies.\(^9\) Similarly, a novel’s ability to depict familiar social environments with identifiable characters also allow readers to imagine a community.\(^10\) Finally, television programs “conjures imagined communities to illiterates and populations with different mother-tongues.”\(^11\)

Anderson also describes nations as modular and “capable of being transplanted . . . to be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.”\(^12\) In other words, postcolonial nations are often modelled after European nations.\(^13\) For example, the postcolonial nations of Africa and Asia were imagined after the

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4. *Id.* at 7–9.
5. *Id.* at 9.
6. *Id.* at 9–10.
7. *Id.* at 43.
8. *Id.* at 32–35, 45.
9. *Id.* at 32–36.
10. *Id.* at 24–32.
11. *Id.* at 135.
12. *Id.* at 4.
13. See *id.* at 163 (stating Anderson backtracked on the view that postcolonial nations were modelled after Europe).
“creole communities.” Anderson argued that creole communities were the earliest forms of nations, indicating that European nations were a derivative of the creole nation. The creole, instead of rallying around linguistic distinctiveness or ancient cultural identities, fought and died for the nation that they imagined—nations which were previously “administrative units” of colonial states. Thus, a nation as a modern form is modular and can be transplanted across nations, although the content of national identity varies from nation to nation. To Anderson, independence movements against colonial rule were both a rejection of colonialism and a creation of new national identities. While colonized nations resisted colonial rule, European “bilingual intelligentsia” brought the English language to the colonies. Bilingual literacy, in turn, enabled colonies to form their own imagined communities through the vernacular English language.

B. A tragic shared past and the origins of divided Korean national identities

The primary logic for Korean reunification draws upon the presumption of a pre-existing shared identity. The Korean Peninsula endured two profound tragedies: The Japanese colonization and the nation’s division along the thirty-eighth parallel. Korea’s history of colonization shattered a millennium of a shared Korean identity. Following the division, the two Koreas were forced to develop new identities modelled after their colonizers. This section examines Korea’s shared identity during the Chosun dynasty, its unified fight for independence against Japanese colonial rule, and the ideological divide between the two Koreas following the U.S. and Soviet military interventions that resulted in the Korean War.

1. The Chosun dynasty (1392–1910): The blueprint of Korea’s shared identity

The Chosun dynasty was a unified Korean kingdom that consisted of eight provinces and three islands. For over 500 years, the kingdom of Chosun was an absolute monarchy ruled directly by a king, where

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14. Id. at 50.
15. Id.
16. Id. at 52.
17. Id. at 4.
18. See id. at 142 (“In the case of colonized peoples, who have every reason to feel hatred for their imperialist rulers, it is astonishing how insignificant the element of hatred is in these expressions of national feeling.”).
19. Id. at 116.
20. Id. at 116–17.
21. See David Shaffer, The Eight Regional Traits of Korea, GWANGJU NEWS (Nov. 5, 2019) (outlining the Chosun dynasty’s territory), https://gwangjunewsgic.com/features/jeolla-history/the-eight-regional-traits-of-korea/ [https://perma.cc/XRR2-GC2T]; see also Kingdom, NAT'L GEOGRAPHIC (2021) (defining a kingdom as a state “that is ruled by a king or a queen.”), https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/kingdom/ [https://perma.cc/N84D-HRAJ].
succession was hereditary.\textsuperscript{22} The kingdom used an elaborate and hierarchical political system in which government officials were ranked according to seniority.\textsuperscript{23} Although a political kingdom, the kingdom of Chosun understood itself as nation. The kingdom was a “nation” in that they developed their own national identity.\textsuperscript{24} The creation of the Korean alphabet and the kingdom’s isolationist policy illustrated the kingdom’s unified national identity.

The Chosun dynasty saw the birth of the Korean alphabet (“Hangul”).\textsuperscript{25} Consisting of twenty-eight letters, fourteen consonants, and ten vowels, King Sejong the Great created Hangul in 1446.\textsuperscript{26} Before 1446, Korea did not have a writing system of their own.\textsuperscript{27} Chinese characters (“Hanja”) were the nation’s dominant script.\textsuperscript{28} At the time, Korea lived in a “Sino-centric world” where Korean culture was “inextricably tied to China.”\textsuperscript{29} But because Hanja was difficult to learn, the language was primarily accessible to aristocrats and government officials.\textsuperscript{30} Hanja was also inadequate for “conveying the exact meaning” of a Korean word or phrase.\textsuperscript{31} Hangul was created to address the limitations of Hanja.\textsuperscript{32} In particular, King Sejong encouraged “mass literacy” among the Korean people using Hangul.\textsuperscript{33} King Sejong proclaimed that his wish was for the Korean people “learn [Hangul] easily and that they be convenient for daily use.”\textsuperscript{34} Although Hanja did not disappear, Hangul became a strong vehicle of a shared Korean identity.\textsuperscript{35}

The Chosun dynasty was also unique due to its isolationist policy. Unlike neighboring nations, Korea refused to engage in diplomatic
relations with foreign powers.\textsuperscript{36} Korea’s isolation and seclusion earned it the nickname “the hermit kingdom.”\textsuperscript{37} Korea’s refusal to engage with foreign powers was the result of great pride in their identity as Koreans and a desire to retain cultural homogeneity at a time when Europe and Japan were pursuing colonial conquests around the world.\textsuperscript{38} Korea’s isolationist policy and the development of Hangul reinforces that pre-division Korea understood itself as a nation. But Korea’s efforts to remain homogeneous were in vain; Japan annexed Korea in 1910 and Korea’s fight to reclaim their national identity began.

2. The March First Movement and Korea’s unified fight for independence.

In the early dawn hours of March 1, 1919, a manifesto was read to a crowd along the streets of Seoul denouncing Japanese rule.\textsuperscript{39} The opening of the manifesto read, “We hereby declare that Korea is an independent state and that Koreans are a self-governing people.”\textsuperscript{40} The manifesto was read to a crowd of cheering Koreans who took to the streets of downtown Seoul shouting “long live Korean independence!”\textsuperscript{41} In the following months, over one million Koreans carrying Korean flags participated in peaceful protests for independence.\textsuperscript{42} The Japanese government responded with brutality, resulting in over 7,500 fatalities, 15,000 injuries, and 45,000 arrests.\textsuperscript{43}

From 1910 to 1945, Japan’s annexation of Korea cast a dark shadow over the soul of the Korean nation.\textsuperscript{44} For thirty-five years, the Japanese government attempted to destroy the Korean peoples’ national identity by stripping them of their land, language, history, and culture. In 1912, Japan implemented a large-scale resettlement program that settled more than 98,000 in Korea between 1912 and 1918, displacing thousands of Korean farmers in the process.\textsuperscript{45} It is also estimated that over 670,000 Koreans were conscripted to forced labor between 1939 to 1945 result-
ing in over 60,000 deaths.\textsuperscript{46} In addition, Japan implemented language policies requiring Japanese as “the national language” in print, media, and speech.\textsuperscript{47} The laws targeted children, mandating them to learn Japanese.\textsuperscript{48} In secondary schools and higher education almost all classes were taught in Japanese and students took courses in Japanese history and geography.\textsuperscript{49} Controlling the educational curriculum was part of Japan’s strategy to prevent the resurgence of Korean national identity and assimilate the Korean people into Japanese citizens.\textsuperscript{50} It is estimated that over 200,000 books documenting Korean history, culture, and language were either burned or confiscated for this purpose.\textsuperscript{51}

Adding insult to injury, the Japanese government demolished parts of Korea’s royal Gyeongbokgung Palace to create space for the Japanese General Government Building, Japan’s chief administrative building.\textsuperscript{52} As Japan destroyed artifacts of Korean pride, the Korean people responded with greater pride. While Japan succeeded in suppressing many aspects of the Korean language and culture, they failed to suppress Korean national identity. In the March First Movement, Koreans marched with one voice to reclaim their lost identity. Japan’s surrender at the conclusion of World War II provided hope for the rebirth of Korean national identity, but that hope was short lived with the arrival of the United States and the former Soviet Union.

3. Division along the thirty-eighth parallel and the Korean War

When U.S. troops arrived in Korea in 1945, Koreans were “deeply engaged” in erasing remnants of Japanese colonialism.\textsuperscript{53} However, the United States refused to treat Koreans as a “liberated people” and proposed dividing Korea at the thirty-eighth parallel between the former


\textsuperscript{47} See, e.g., \textit{The Government General of Chosen Bureau of Education, Manual of Education in Chosen} app. at 1 (1920) (stating, “... special attention being paid to the engendering of national characteristics and the spread of national language.”).

\textsuperscript{48} Id. app. at 2.

\textsuperscript{49} See, e.g., \textit{The Government General of Chosen Bureau of Education, Manual of Education in Chosen} app. at 27–29 (1920) (stating, “The teaching of the national language should be commenced ... [in] matters concerning morals, history, geography... [,]”).


\textsuperscript{51} Hong Beom Rhee, \textit{Asian Millenarianism: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Taiping and Tonghak Rebellions in a Global Context} 13 (2007).


\textsuperscript{53} William Stueck & Boram Yi, \textit{An Alliance Forged in Blood: The American Occupation of Korea, the Korean War, and the US-South Korean Alliance}, 33 \textit{J. of Strategic Stud.} 177, 180 (2010).
Soviet Union. Through the division, the United States sought to “contain Soviet expansion” in the ensuing Cold War between the two superpowers. The United States also believed that the Korean people were “incapable of governing themselves” because they were colonized by Japan for over three decades. The United States, thus, viewed Korea as a mere colony of Japan rather than as an independent nation. But the United States disregarded the fact that the Korean people had effectively governed themselves for over one millennium prior to Japanese colonial rule. The occupying powers proceeded to shape Korea in accordance to their own visions. In South Korea, the United States chose Rhee Syngman to build a democratic republic. In North Korea, a Communist state emerged with Soviet powers installing Kim Il-sung.

This imposed ideological divide led to the Korean War, when North Korea invaded South Korea with weapons assistance from the former Soviet Union in 1950. Kim Il-sung waged war to “unify the Korean Peninsula under his communist regime.” North Korea sought to define a single Korean identity under the umbrella of communism. The Korean War underscored the deep distrust that existed between the divided nation. But the distrust was not completely ideological. Prior to the war, there were cultural differences between the two Koreas. For example, the U.S.-occupied South Korea adopted the English language and replaced the traditional Korean attire (“hanbok”) with Western clothing. Conversely, North Korea preserved the Korean language and continued wearing hanbok on a daily basis. North Koreans viewed South Koreans as “puppets” to the United States and have criticized increasing military

54. Id. at 182,184.
55. Id. at 184.
56. Id.
57. Id.
58. Id. at 183.
59. See id. at 202–03 (indicating that the United States chose Rhee due to his fervent opposition to communism).
60. See S. Mahmud Ali, US-Chinese Strategic Triangles: Examining Indo-Pacific Insecurity 69 (2017) (stating that Soviet forces installed Kim Il-sung as leader of North Korea, because they deemed Kim as a “pliant and obedient elite” that would help the former Soviet Union achieve their agenda in the North.).
63. Id.
64. See generally Young Ick Lew The Making of the First Korean President: Syngman Rhee’s Quest for Independence 23 (2014) (stating that Rhee Syngman “developed a liking of dress suits” during his U.S. education).
presence in the region.66 The Korean Armistice Agreement of 1953 temporarily halted the violence.67 But this stalemate has persisted for over six decades with no resolution in sight.68 Korea’s ongoing war is symbolic, because the conflict has played a key role in shaping the national identities of present-day South Korea and North Korea. This will be explored closely in the next section.

III. THE IMAGINED COMMUNITIES OF SOUTH KOREA AND NORTH KOREA

Since the Korean War, the two Koreas have continued on their different paths and have proceeded to develop distinct national identities. Anderson stated that national identities are “imagined” to the extent that they entail a communion between peoples.69 But what makes a nation unique is how they are imagined. This section explores the evolution of South Korean and North Korean national identity, showing how the two Koreas are imagined in different ways.

A. The evolution of South Korea’s national identity and westernization

South Korean national identity is the result of the nation’s colonial experiences and war. This section shows how Western democracy, the English language, and multiculturalism serve as the binding agents that enabled the South Korean people to imagine their community.

1. The Western influence on South Korean national identity

Partha Chatterjee critiqued Anderson’s argument that postcolonial nations were imagined from certain modular forms already in existence from Europe.70 Chatterjee argued that nations “[were not rooted on] an identity but rather on a difference with the ‘modular’ forms of the national society propagated by the modern West.”71 Nations are, thus, imagined differently by different nations.72 This is consistent with how

67. Korean War, A&E TELEVISION NETWORKS (Nov. 9, 2009), https://www.history.com/topics/korea/korean-war#:~:text=Korean%20War%20Casualties,-The%20Korean%20War%20text=Nearly%2020%20million%20people%20died,more%20than%20100%20%2C000%20were%20woundedhttps://www.history.com/topics/korea/korean-war#:~:text=Korean%20War%20Casualties,-The%20Korean%20War%20text=Nearly%2020%20million%20people%20died,more%20than%20100%20%2C000%20were%20wounded [https://perma.cc/KF8B-XP7N].
68. Id.
70. See id. at 157 (illustrating how the Cambodian resistance resembled that of the Bolshevik Revolution, showing the modularity of European nationalism).
72. Id. at 5–6.
South Korea transplanted Western democracy from their occupiers. As a postcolonial nation created by U.S. and Soviet intervention, the content of South Korea’s new national identity was partly in reaction to the U.S. occupation.

Today, South Korea is a successful trade economy with the ninth highest GDP in the world.73 Although it now has free elections, the country did not become a democracy until 1987.74 The promulgation of the South Korean constitution in 1948 established a parliamentary system modeled after Europe, in which the political party with the greatest representation in South Korean parliament (“National Assembly”) chose the President.75 The adoption of the European model was South Korea’s attempt to distance themselves from U.S. influence and create an independent government of their own.76 But remnants of the U.S. occupation remained, underscored by the Rhee government’s hardline stance against communism.77

During his rule, President Rhee repeatedly stressed that South Korea was a “unitary nation” (“tanil minjok”) despite the division.78 Tanil minjok referred solely to the unity of South Korea under democratic values.79 In December 1948, three months after the South Korean nation was established, President Rhee passed the National Security Law (“NSL”).80 Drafted with U.S. assistance, the NSL outlawed “communist activities.”81 The NSL’s goal was to promote democracy and distinguish South Korea from North Korea.82 Anti-communism was, thus, a vehicle that helped shape South Korean identity under democratic principles.

Although President Rhee’s one-nation principle set the blueprint for democracy, that effort was cut short when he was ousted from power through a military coup led by South Korean military general Park Chung-hee in 1961.83 President Park believed the key to a great nation was economic growth.84 As a result, a new Constitution was adopted.

76. See id. at 28 (stating that U.S. input was not “intensively sought.”).
78. Id.
79. Id.
81. Id. at 79–82.
82. Id. at 79–80.
83. Yong-sup Han, The May Sixteenth Military Coup in The Park Chung-hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea 35 (Byung-kook Kim & Ezra F. Vogel eds., 2011).
84. Fuji Kamiya, The Korean Peninsula After Park Chung Hee, 20 JAPANESE
Known as the Yushin Constitution, the document dissolved the National Assembly and eliminated term limits, allowing Park’s authoritarian rule for nearly two decades until his assassination in 1979.\(^{85}\) Park’s rule saw South Korea open its borders to international trade and investment, including with Japan.\(^{86}\) Park’s policy of open borders was unpopular with the South Korean people, who were still reeling from decades of subjugation by foreign powers.\(^{87}\) But Park mobilized public support by appealing to the ethos of Korean national identity, particularly the eternal nature of the “great han race.”\(^{88}\) By pushing for “cultural [and economic] superiority,” Park inspired South Koreans to push towards international prominence.\(^{89}\) Although controversial at the time, the Park era is largely credited for South Korea’s current economic prosperity and the robust democracy that followed his downfall.

When South Korea democratized in 1987, their Constitution was revised for a third time.\(^{90}\) The new Constitution was modeled after the U.S. system based on a separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.\(^{91}\) The President was also to be elected by popular vote for a single five-year term with no opportunities for reelection, which was South Korea’s direct response to authoritarian rule.\(^{92}\) South Korea’s democratic republic enabled the South Korean people to imagine a nation where they were equal before the law. Thus, South Korean democracy is consistent with Anderson’s concept of “horizontal comradeship,” where people come together based on shared values.\(^{93}\) But another aspect of South Korea’s national identity as a reaction to U.S. influence is language.

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87. *Id.*

88. See Shin & Chang, supra note 77, at 122–25 (stating that the “great han race” goes back to the age of Tan’gun, the “mythic founder of the Korean nation.”).


91. Daehanminkuk Hunbeob [Hunbeob] [Constitution] arts. 40–113 (S.Kor.) (governing the laws of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of South Korean government).

92. *Id.* at art. 70.

2. Globalization and the prevalence of English in the Korean language

Another way South Korea imagined their nation was through bilingualism. Anderson recognized the role of “bilingual literacy” in forming the national identities of postcolonial nations.\(^94\) In 1993, the National Assembly implemented an ambitious globalization initiative, known as \textit{segyehwa}.\(^95\) Thus, one objective of \textit{segyehwa} was to encourage students to study abroad to learn about different cultures and systems of governance to aid in the nation’s growth.\(^96\) Accordingly, the National Assembly mandated English be taught at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.\(^97\) This requirement changed the way South Koreans communicate with one another. Called “Konglish,” this dialect combines the Korean language with English.\(^98\) Although not the nation’s official language, Seoul dialect has become prevalent enough to be labeled the standard language of South Korea.\(^99\) In other words, South Koreans used bilingualism to imagine a nation that was global and diverse.

However, the Korean people criticized the English language curriculum for its “negative impact on constructing a Korean national identity.”\(^100\) The 2005 Framework Act on Korean Language (“Framework Act”) addressed this criticism.\(^101\) The Framework Act recognized Hangul as the “official language” of Korea and required programs to preserve the Korean language.\(^102\) South Koreans praised the Framework Act, because the law acknowledged their ethnic language as a tool of resistance against...
forced assimilation by Japan and the United States. Article 2 of the Framework Act’s legislative history stated, “the lawmakers recognize the contributions of Hangul throughout Korea’s history of colonization.” The Framework Act was, thus, an effort by South Korea to construct a national identity apart from the English language. Interestingly, the Framework Act treated Chinese characters as exceptions. Article 14 allowed government institutions to use Hanja to convey the “exact meaning” of a word. Article 14 reinforced the value South Koreans placed on their history, given that the Korean people used Hanja to communicate with one another before Hangul was invented in 1446.

3. South Korea’s growing multiculturalism

South Korea’s multiculturalism is a recent phenomenon that the nation embraced to fulfill their shared vision of “cultural diversity.” South Korea’s vision began with the segyehwa initiative. South Korea believed that cultural diversity would “strengthen democracy” and “promote a culture of tolerance” in an increasingly globalized world. The percentage of foreign residents in the nation increased from 0.24 percent in 1995 to 3.6 percent in 2016. This percentage expected to rise to 6.1 percent by 2030. This trend is remarkable given South Korea’s belief that they are a “single-race nation.” Anderson used the tombs of Unknown Soldiers to show that imagining a nation requires the sacrifice of individual interests. But South Korea’s multiculturalism is not a sacrifice of individual interests. South Korean’s pride in the “purity of [the ethnic Korean] bloodline” goes back to the Chosun dynasty.

104. Gugeogibonbeob [Framework Act on the Korean Language] art. 2 (S. Kor.).
105. Id. at art. 14.
106. Kim, supra note 25, at 6.
111. Id.
113. ANDERSON, supra note 3, at 9.
114. Gi-Wook Shin, Korea’s Ethnic Nationalism is a Source of Both Pride and
Indeed, ancient Korean leadership “always lay in a hereditary monarch, whose supreme authority came from being the child or relative of the preceding monarch.”\textsuperscript{115} Thus, South Korea’s willingness to accept foreigners despite its belief in its ethnic homogeneity shows a sacrifice of a particular national identity.\textsuperscript{116} South Koreans are willing to sacrifice a certain national identity to imagine a nation according to their shared vision of a robust democracy. This sacrifice, however, is not an act feasible by North Korea, as they developed into a secretive nation to ward off foreign influence.\textsuperscript{117}

B. North Korea, the Kim dynasty, and the imagined community

North Korea’s system of government, language, and attitude towards the international community developed very differently. This section explores how North Korean national identity came to be imagined in distinct ways and subject to different influences from South Korea. This section shows how North Korean communism, the language purification movement, and North Koreans’ belief that they are the “pure-blooded Korean people” helped imagine their nation.\textsuperscript{118}

1. The Soviet influence on North Korea’s national identity

Like South Korea, North Korea adopted a national identity that was influenced by its post-partition alliance. It adopted a system of hereditary succession that revolved around Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un.\textsuperscript{119} Influenced by Marxism-Leninism, North Korea evolved into an isolationist and communist nation that was ruled as a dictatorship.\textsuperscript{120}

Modeled after the 1936 Stalinist Constitution of the former Soviet Union, North Korea’s 1948 Constitution defined the nation as a “dictatorship of people’s democracy” run by a single, centralized party apparatus.


\footnotesize\textsuperscript{115. Toppling Tyrants in Kyung Moon Hwang, Past Forward: Essays in Korean History (2019).}


known as the Workers’ Party of Korea.\textsuperscript{121} To unite the North Korean people, Supreme Leader Kim Il-sung implemented the \textit{juche} ideology.\textsuperscript{122} Kim defined \textit{juche} as “being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one’s own country.”\textsuperscript{123} In other words, Kim united North Koreans on the premise that North Korea would be a nation defined not by a single class, but the nation as a whole.\textsuperscript{124} Therefore, the \textit{juche} ideology is consistent with Anderson’s argument that a nation shares a “horizontal comradeship” where the nation comes before any individual interests.\textsuperscript{125} This is different from South Korea, where horizontal comradeship was defined by equal protection of citizens under the law. Although the \textit{juche} ideology embraced Marxist-Leninist principles, Kim implemented it in order to distance North Korea from Soviet influence, to give the North Korean people a sense of national identity of their own.\textsuperscript{126}

Two years prior to his death, Kim Il-sung sought to have his son, Kim Jong-il, succeed him.\textsuperscript{127} The 1992 amendment to the constitution authorized Kim Jong-il to succeed his father upon his death.\textsuperscript{128} The 1992 amendment was not only consistent with the Chosun dynasty’s succession laws where the eldest son inherited the throne,\textsuperscript{129} but it was also illustrative of North Korea’s attempt to retain their prior Korean heritage despite the current state of their nation.\textsuperscript{130} Kim Jong-il also used the \textit{juche} ideology to strengthen his grip on the nation. Foreign scholars have described \textit{juche} as meaning “self-reliant.”\textsuperscript{131} North Korea’s “self-reliant[ce]” meant that they did not need to rely on outside influences and allowed North Korea to become a hereditary dynasty.\textsuperscript{132} Just as Anderson believed that European national identity was a derivative of creole national identity, North Korea’s \textit{juche} ideology was a derivative of the Chosun dynasty’s policy of isolationism and hereditary succession.\textsuperscript{133}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[123.] Id.
\item[125.] Anderson \textit{supra} note 3, at 7.
\item[126.] Lee, \textit{supra} note 122, at 105.
\item[127.] Yoon, \textit{supra} note 120, at 1291.
\item[128.] Id. at 1299–1300.
\item[129.] Kuentae Kim & Hyunjoon Park, \textit{Family Succession Through Adoption in the Chosun Dynasty}, 15 HIST. FAM. 443, 447 n.7 (2010).
\item[130.] Seo-hyun Park, Comment, \textit{Dueling Nationalisms in North and South Korea}, 5 PALGRAVE COMM. 1, 2 (2019).
\item[131.] Lee, \textit{supra} note 122, at 105.
\item[133.] See Im, Campbell & Cha, \textit{supra} note 22, at 289 (stating that the succession
In other words, North Korea’s *juche* ideology reinforces how pre-existing materials were used to help imagine the North Korean nation in a particular way.

In addition, whereas Kim Il-sung’s *juche* ideology aligned closely with Marxist-Leninist principles, Kim Jong-il adapted the *juche* ideology to foster narratives of ethnic cohesion. In his 1998 speech to the North Korean people, Kim stated, “The Korean nation is a homogenous nation that has inherited the same blood and lived in the same territory speaking the same language for thousands of years.” Kim’s rhetoric expressed North Korea’s new form of imagining itself—away from Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and toward a national identity consistent with traditional Korean values. *Juche* was, thus, critical to how North Korea imagined itself.

North Korean national identity continued to shift with Kim Jong-un’s rise in 2011. Three primary amendments were made to North Korea’s 2019 constitution. One amendment involved referencing Kim Jong-un as North Korea’s “commander-in-chief,” rather than the “Supreme Leader.” Given the term “commander-in-chief” was uncommon in communist nations, the change was aimed at “preparing for a peace treaty with the United States.” This interpretation is consistent with Kim’s desire to expand trade relations and boost the economy. Article 36 of North Korea’s 2016 constitution stated, “the State shall develop foreign trade on the principles of complete equality and mutual benefit.” But in 2019, North Korea revised article 36 to “protecting credit, improving the trade structure and expanding . . . external economic relations based on the principles of complete equality and mutual benefit.”

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The addition of “credit” underscores Kim’s ambitions to grow North Korea’s economy through trade.\footnote{141}

Finally, the word \textit{juche} is not found anywhere in the 2019 Constitution.\footnote{142} Before, the word \textit{juche} appeared consistently in North Korea’s constitutions. The nation’s 1948 constitution stated, “[The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea] is guided in its activities by the Juche idea[.]”\footnote{143} Additionally, the nation’s 2009 and 2016 constitutions each stated that “[t]he Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is the socialist motherland of Juche[.]”\footnote{144} North Korea’s evolving constitution indicates the fading importance of the \textit{juche} ideology. This suggests that North Korean leadership is evolving to be more personal rather than ideological.\footnote{145}

2. North Korea’s language purification movement

Whereas South Korea incorporated English into the Korean language, North Korea refused to adopt foreign languages both to distinguish themselves from South Korea and as a symbol of resistance against the colonial period.\footnote{146} Unlike South Koreans, North Koreans were determined to preserve the ethnic Korean language developed during the Chosun dynasty and implemented a “language purification movement” in 1949 that continues to this day.\footnote{147}

The language purification movement began with the Hangul-only policy in 1949, which banned the use of Chinese characters in all State publications, such as school textbooks, literature, and media.\footnote{148} Mandating Hangul was part of North Korea’s larger effort to facilitate the use of the Korean language and rebuild lost identity.\footnote{149} But the Hangul-only policy has been relaxed since Kim Jong-un came to power. Since 2016, North Koreans study English starting in elementary school.\footnote{150} Because

\footnote{142. Cho, \textit{supra} note 140.}
\footnote{143. Constitution of 1948, \textit{supra} note 121, at art. 3.}
\footnote{144. Constitution of 2009, \textit{supra} note 137, at Preamble; Constitution of 2016, \textit{supra} note 136, at Preamble.}
\footnote{146. See Yong Soon Yim, \textit{Language Reform as a Political Symbol in North Korea}, \textit{World Aff.} 216, 219 (1980) (stating that Kim Il-sung ordered the banning of “undesirable and arbitrarily used words.”).}
\footnote{147. Yeon, \textit{supra} note 65, at 150.}
\footnote{148. See Yim, \textit{supra} note 146, at 225–26 (stating that Kim Il-sung demanded that only native Korean be used).}
\footnote{149. \textit{Id.} at 217.}
\footnote{150. Elizabeth Shim, \textit{Kim Jong Un Reformed North Korea’s K-12 Education,}}
this policy is still so new, it is difficult to assess the future of the nation’s language purification movement. But this recent development underscores North Korea’s evolving language movement and Kim’s recognition of the English language.

Anderson showed how bilingualism can aid in developing a national identity.151 Whereas South Korea embraced the English language, North Korea preserved the language of the Chosun dynasty.152 North Koreans, thus, viewed themselves as the “purer” Koreans who were “untainted” by Western influences.153 On the other hand, North Korea appears to be embracing bilingual literacy with their new English-language policy. North Korea’s English-language policy shows how the nation continues to imagine themselves apart from their southern neighbor.

3. Racial purity and North Korea’s intolerance for foreigners.

Unlike South Korea, where multiculturalism is thriving, North Korea has embraced a secretive and isolationist identity similar to the Chosun dynasty.154 According to B.R. Myers, author of “The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters,” North Koreans believe that they are “too pure blooded, and therefore too virtuous, to survive in this evil world without a great parental leader.”155 North Koreans, thus, see themselves as “superior” to South Koreans.156 This superiority is key to how North Koreans imagine themselves as a nation.

North Koreans believe that they are “purer” than South Koreans in two ways: They wear the traditional hanbok and listen to traditional Korean music.157 Hanbok originated in 37 B.C.E. during the kingdom of Goguryeo.158 Consisting of a jacket (“jeogori”), pants (“baji”), and a skirt (“chima”), hanbok was the daily attire of monarchs and the Korean people.159 To this day, North Koreans view the hanbok as a “ceremonial and everyday dress.”160 North Koreans wear the hanbok to events, such


152. Yeon, supra note 65, at 150.
153. Myers, supra note 118, at 12.
154. Berry, supra note 117.
156. Id. at 56.
157. Id. at 56–75.
158. See Lee, supra note 62, at 73–77 (describing how hanbok was created in the kingdom of Goguryeo and how the Korean Peninsula was divided into three kingdoms prior to the Chosun dynasty: Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla).
160. Myers, supra note 118, at 60.
as weddings, funerals, and concerts. While South Koreans also wear the *hanbok* to similar occasions, the attire does not carry the same ceremonial meaning as it does in North Korea. For example, South Koreans wear suits, jeans, and dress on a daily basis. In contrast, North Koreans, particularly ordinary citizens, wear *hanbok* in their daily lives.

Similarly, North Korea does not embrace South Korean music. Unlike South Korea who embraces Korean pop ("K-pop"), North Korea listens to music of the Chosun dynasty. For example, North Koreans still use traditional Chosun dynasty instruments, such as the hourglass-shaped drum ("*changgo*”) and the six-stringed guitar ("*gayageum*”). To North Koreans, K-pop is the music of “capitalist vandals” that “corrupts” North Korean culture.

North Korea’s steadfast commitment to traditional Korean attire and music emphasizes their “purity” as Koreans. Propaganda further enabled this illusion of superiority. In 2018, North Korean academics released a novel titled, “The US Imperialists Started the Korean War.” The novel falsely blamed the United States for starting the war, when it was really North Korea that invaded South Korea. The novel also referred to South Koreans as “puppets” to the United States. To North Koreans, the absence of foreign influence equated to superiority. This illusion of superiority led to the Korean War. North Korea sought to reunite the Korean Peninsula under their imagined notion of the “pure Korean.” North Korea’s actions were consistent with Anderson’s argument that it was the horizontal comradeship “that [made] possible . . . for

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161. *Id.*
162. *Id.* at 24.
164. *Id.* at 6.
168. MYERS, supra note 118, at 9.
170. *Id.*
171. *Id.*
172. *Id.*
173. MYERS, supra note 118, at 25.
174. *Id.* at 9.
so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.” This is symbolized by the tombs of Unknown Soldiers—that national identities are not false just because they are imagined constructs. Millions of North Koreans gave their lives to recognize their shared vision of superiority. North Korea harbors a deeper resentment towards foreign powers, and its association with South Korea with foreign influence creates barriers towards reconciliation with its southern neighbor.

IV. OBSTACLES TO CREATING A SHARED IDENTITY IN A REUNIFIED KOREA

Should President Moon Jae-in’s pledge to reunify the Korean Peninsula by 2045 become reality, a newly unified Korea faces the monumental task of overcoming the differences that have defined them for over seven decades. This section examines some of the obstacles that a unified Korea may face, covering specifically assimilation, distrust, and the generational gap.

A. Assimilation and obstacles to creating a shared identity

Assimilation is the first obstacle a reunified Korea will face. There are two primary challenges to assimilation: The different ways in which the two Koreas evolved and finding common values that they share with one another. This section analyzes what assimilation might entail for both South Korea and North Korea. The Pew Research Center describes assimilation as “members of one group adopting the cultural patterns of the majority or host culture.” In particular, this section considers how the identities of South Korea and North Korea would evolve if both Koreas were to assimilate one another into a reunified Korea.

1. South Korean identity and the assimilation of North Koreans

If South Koreans assimilated North Koreans, South Koreans must adopt certain aspects of North Korean culture and society. South Korea formed a nation around democratic values, globalization, and the English language. But to assimilate into a reunified Korea, South Korea may want to adopt the North Korean approach of preserving ethnic Korean culture. Anderson stated that an “imagined political community” is only possible if the nation forms “an image of a communion.” Thus, South Korea must find common values that they share with North Korea.

176. Id. at 9–11.
177. Myers, supra note 118, at 25.
179. Song, supra note 96, at 26.
Although they embraced Western values, South Korea also worked to preserve their ethnic Korean culture. For example, South Korean historians are defensive about the Chosun dynasty. Prominent South Korean historian Shin Byung-joo praised the kingdom’s isolationist policy, stating, “At a time when the West and parts of the East were actively colonizing other nations, [the kingdom of Chosun] instilled a sense of national pride to the Korean people.”\(^{181}\) Hence, if South Korea assimilated North Korea, South Koreans could redefine their national identity around North Korea’s political isolationism where they limit outside contact to preserve traditional Korean culture. South Koreans could also redefine their identity around North Korea’s hereditary succession system given their history of over two decades of authoritarian rule under President Park Chung-hee.\(^ {182}\) North Korea’s hereditary succession system would provide a reunified Korea with a figurehead reminiscent of the kings of the Chosun dynasty.\(^ {183}\)

In addition, South Korean assimilation of North Koreans could spur a cultural and linguistic purification movement in which South Koreans purge the English language and Western culture. Although South Korea adopted the English language, the nation took measures to preserve the Korean language. The purpose of the 2005 Framework Act was to mandate Hangul as South Korea’s official language.\(^ {184}\) The Framework Act was a response to the nationwide criticism of South Korea’s segyehwa initiative.\(^ {185}\) South Koreans believed that the English language and continued foreign presence “corrupt[ed] South Korean national identity.”\(^ {186}\) Accordingly, South Korea could purge their “Konglish” and reimagine their national identity around the Korean language, similar to North Korea’s Hangul-only policy.\(^ {187}\)

South Korea could also abandon Western music and beauty standards in favor of traditional Korean culture. South Korea is known as “the plastic surgery capital of the world.”\(^ {188}\) South Korea’s obsession with Western-style double-eyelids and an upright nose is a product of continued foreign influence.\(^ {189}\) Contrary to North Korea, whose citizens wear

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181. *Living as the King of Joseon, Dr. Shin Byeong-ju, Ph.D. in History* [조선의 왕으로 산다는 것, 역사학박사 신병주 [최강 1 교시][미비미]] , YouTube (Apr. 17, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UySPQ2vSi14 [https://perma.cc/L55C-R84Q].
182. Im, *supra* note 85, at 233–35.
186. Id.
187. See Rhodes, *supra* note 98 (describing “Seoul dialect” as a combination of English and Korean in the same sentence); see also Yim, *supra* note 146, at 225–26 (describing North Korea’s Hangul-only policy).
189. Jasmine Kwak, *The Influence of Western Culture on Plastic Surgery*
hanbok on a daily basis, South Koreans only wear hanbok on special occasions, such as weddings, funerals, and Chinese New Year. K-pop contributes to the nation’s beauty standards due to its dominance in South Korean media. For K-pop artists, plastic surgery is a contractual obligation. Entertainment agencies pressure their artists to meet the nation’s Westernized beauty standards to make their artists are more “marketable” overseas. Prevalent since 1992, K-pop derives influence from Western hip hop, rhythm-and-blues, and dance. But K-pop is not warmly received by South Korea’s elderly population.” The older generation believes traditional Korean music, like trot, is an vital element of ethnic Korean identity. South Korea has not abandoned traditional Korean music. Recently, South Korean media aired a trot singing competition featuring veteran trot singers that enjoyed immense popularity. The veteran singers wore hanbok on the show and displayed more traditional Korean beauty standards. The show’s popularity is reminiscent of Anderson’s argument that television programs “conjure[] images of imagined communities.” It is, thus, possible that South Koreans abandon K-pop and Western beauty standards in favor of a resurgence of traditional Korean music and culture currently embraced by North Koreans. Accordingly, the assimilation of North Korean culture in a reunified Korea would result in a South Korean identity that is radically different from South Korea’s current identity. Nevertheless, these drastic changes may be necessary to fuel the reunification effort.

2. North Korean identity and the assimilation of South Koreans

Like South Korean identity, North Korean identity could also undergo major changes if North Korea were to assimilate South Korea. The North Korean nation revolved around isolationism, hereditary

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192. Id.
193. Id.
196. Id.
198. Id.
199. Anderson, supra note 3, at 135.
succession, and language purification. But to achieve reunification, North Koreans will also need to adopt certain aspects of South Korean culture and society.

As North Korea’s identity revolved around the belief that they were the “pure Koreans,” the nation adopted many Chosun dynasty policies. One was isolationism, where the nation closed off contact with the outside world. But this appears to be changing. North Korea’s 2019 constitution underscores Kim Jong-un’s ambition to grow the nation’s economy through trade. In January 2021, Kim publicly outlined plans to “expand foreign relations.” To do so, North Korea needs to relax their isolationist policy. Hence, North Korea would want to adopt South Korea’s segyehwa globalization initiative to pursue their economic ambitions.

North Korea would also want to adopt South Korea’s “Seoul dialect,” which combines the Korean language with the English language. Anderson stated that bilingualism “made possible the imagined community floating in [the] homogenous, empty time” of colonized nations. In 2016, Kim lifted the Hangul-only policy and mandated the study of the English language starting in elementary school. Although the exact motivations of Kim are unknown, the revised North Korean constitution and Kim’s recent public remarks indicate Kim’s ambition to relax the nation’s isolationist policy. If Kim’s plan is to expand North Korea’s reach in the international community, North Korea would also benefit from South Korea’s study abroad programs. North Korea might also consider reinstating Chinese characters if their goal is to expand relations with foreign powers. As North Korea continues to evolve, certain elements of South Korean national identity become useful for North Koreans in the reunification effort.

North Korea may be open to adopting South Korean democracy. Although a communist nation, North Korea’s constitution embraces a number of democratic rights. For example, article 66 guarantees the right to be elected to public office and article 67 guarantees “freedom of speech, the press, assembly, demonstration and association.” However, the juche ideology contradicts these democratic principles. Article 3 stipulates juche as the guiding principle of North Korea and article 12 obligates the nation to “strengthen the dictatorship of the people’s

200. Im, Campbell & Cha, supra note 22, at 288–89.
201. Berry, supra note 117.
202. Shim, supra note 150.
204. ANDERSON, supra note 3, at 116.
205. Shim, supra note 150.
democracy[.]”  However, the juche ideology has faded in the past decade. In fact, the nation’s most recent constitution does not mention juche at all. This indicates that North Korean leadership has evolved to be more personal rather than ideological.

North Korean censorship ranks among the highest in the world, with the government refusing to grant their citizens access to foreign products. K-Pop is no exception. But North Korea’s attitude towards K-pop has changed. In April 2018, K-Pop artists performed a two-day concert in North Korea. The last concert in North Korea was in 2005 by South Korean trot singer Cho Yong-pil. Whereas the North Korean people’s reception of Cho’s solo concert was “lukewarm,” the reception of K-Pop stars was more positive. Kim Jong-un expressed that he was “deeply moved” by the K-Pop stars’ performances and the artists were given a standing ovation by the North Korean audience. K-Pop also has a positive reception among the North Korean people. North Koreans have expressed that while North Korean music “[has] no emotions . . . American or South Korean music[] literally gives you chills.” Just as television helped South Koreans imagine an identity beyond K-Pop, K-Pop concerts in North Korea have a similar effect. This is consistent with Anderson’s statement on the power of television in forming imagined communities. K-Pop’s positive reception in North Korea indicates that North Koreans could purge traditional Korean music and adopt Western music.

Lastly, North Korean beauty standards have also evolved. Unlike South Koreans, North Korean citizens wear hanbok on daily basis. But since Kim Jong-un came to power, Western-style clothing has grown in popularity. These changes are attributed to Ri Sol-ju, the wife of Kim Jong-un. Whereas the nation’s previous First Ladies were rarely seen

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208. Id. at arts. 3, 12.
209. Cho, supra note 140.
210. Isozaki, supra note 145.
214. Id.
215. Talmazan, supra note 212.
218. Lee, supra note 62.
219. Gayeong Seo, North Korean First Lady’s Fashion Evolution: Is Kate
in the media, Ri made herself more visible to the North Korean public.\textsuperscript{220} Forgoing the \textit{hanbok} and monochromatic outfits, Ri donned stylish dresses and eye-catching accessories.\textsuperscript{221} Ri’s preference for Western fashion introduced North Korean women to new styles.\textsuperscript{222} The most noticeable change has been makeup trends, with more North Korean women applying makeup in public than before.\textsuperscript{223} Ri’s visibility is consistent with Anderson’s “image of a communion,” as Ri allowed North Korean women to imagine a community beyond their nation.\textsuperscript{224}

North Korea’s evolving fashion trend suggests that they could readily adopt South Korea’s plastic surgery culture and Western fashion. Like South Korea, North Koreans assimilating the South Koreans would imply a drastic shift in the identity they currently possess.

B. Distrust and discrimination between the two Koreas

In addition to assimilation, the two Korea’s history of distrust is another obstacle that would hinder a reunified Korea from developing a shared identity. Distrust runs deep between the two Koreas and is a shared inheritance of U.S. and Soviet interventions.\textsuperscript{225} Against their will, the Korean Peninsula was divided by occupiers who refused to acknowledge them as an independent nation capable of governing themselves.\textsuperscript{226} The pressure of foreign powers forced South Korea to evolve into a democratic republic and North Korea into a communist nation.\textsuperscript{227} Just as Anderson implied that European national identity was modelled after the “creole pioneers,” the two Koreas modelled their nations after their occupiers.\textsuperscript{228}

Ernest Renan in his “What is a Nation?” essay argued that a “shared suffering unites more than does joy.”\textsuperscript{229} The shared suffering of division and foreign occupation led to the Korean War. Anderson described how the creole pioneers sacrificed themselves to maintain the “deep, horizontal comradeship” they forged from their “imagined” nation.\textsuperscript{230} The Korean War was more than a clash of ideologies; it was a battleground


\textsuperscript{220} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{221} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{222} \textit{Id.}


\textsuperscript{224} \textit{Anderson, supra note 3, at 6.}

\textsuperscript{225} Stueck & Yi, \textit{supra note 53, at 178.}

\textsuperscript{226} \textit{Id. at 184.}

\textsuperscript{227} \textit{Id. at 202–03.}

\textsuperscript{228} \textit{Anderson, supra note 3, at 47.}

\textsuperscript{229} Ernest Renan, \textit{What is a Nation?}, in \textit{QU’EST-CE QU’UNE NATION?}, (Ethan Rundell trans., Presses-Pocket 1992) (full text).

\textsuperscript{230} \textit{Anderson, supra note 3, at 7, 47.}
where the two Koreas attempted to justify their newly formed identities and vision of reunification. South Koreans and North Koreans fought and died for their respective nations. The Korean War never ended; it is an ongoing conflict that has persisted for over seven decades with no end in sight.

The ongoing clash of identities only strengthened the distrust between the two Koreas with no end in sight. This deep distrust resulted in discrimination. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines discrimination as “acts, practices, or policies that impose a relative disadvantage on persons based on their membership in a salient social group.”

Discrimination runs on both sides. In February 2020, the Korea Times reported that 17.2 percent of 3,000 North Korean defectors polled said that they experienced discrimination in South Korea for “cultural differences.” The defectors were discriminated for “their way of speaking, manners, and lifestyle.”

South Koreans who responded to the same survey cited “lack of skills and poor job performance” as reasons for discriminating against the defectors. In a different survey, 37 percent of female defectors stated that they experienced “lower wages and sexual harassment” in the workplace. The female defectors faced prejudice “due to their gender and country of origin.” The extent of discrimination was revealed in 2019 with the deaths of two defectors. In September 2019, a mother and her six-year-old son were found dead in their apartment complex; they allegedly starved to death.

The mother could not find employment, because “she was...”

231. Korean War, supra note 67.
232. Id.
233. Id.
236. Id.
237. Id.
239. Id.
241. 탈북자 한성옥 모자의 ‘아사 비극’ 전말, 선데이저널. [North Korean Defector Han Sung-ok and Her Son’s “Tragic End.”], SUNDAY J. (Sept. 5, 2019), https://sundayjournalusa.com/2019/09/05/%ED%83%88%EB%B6%81%EC%9E%90-%ED%95%9C%EC%84%B1%EC%98%A5-%EB%A8%EC%9E%90%EC%9D%98-%EC%95%84%EC%82%AC-%EB%B9%
a defector... and a single mother.” It was also revealed that Seoul’s Health and Welfare Center “did not prioritize her application [because she was a defector].”

Discrimination against South Koreans is prevalent in North Korea as well. Propaganda is the vehicle through which North Koreans express discrimination against their southern neighbor. North Korea’s propaganda novel, “The US Imperialists Started the Korean War,” refers to South Koreans as “puppets” to the United States. North Koreans view South Koreans as a “colony” of the United States and not as an independent nation. The North Korean government also consistently refer to South Korea as “capitalist vandals” for allegedly abandoning their Korean heritage for Western values. Thus, North Koreans discriminate against South Koreans due to South Korea’s close ties with Western nations. The source of North Korea’s distrust is their belief that they are the “pure Koreans.” The notion of purity and superiority is how the North Korean nation imagined their nation for over seven decades. Because distrust and discrimination run deep between the two Koreas, they pose monumental obstacles towards reunification. The extent of the distrust may be difficult to overcome, because both nations were divided for seventy-five years.

C. Overcoming the generational gap and creating shared memories

Another obstacle a reunified Korea may face is the generational gap between older and younger Koreans. As the generation who lived through the Korean War, the division, and the latter half of the Japanese occupation fades, so do the memories of those times. In a 2017 survey conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, only 27 percent of South Koreans aged nineteen to thirty-nine viewed reunification favorably compared to 48 percent of those aged sixty and over. In other words, younger South Koreans do not share the same sentiments as their elders. Unlike the older generation, younger South Koreans were born into cosmopolitan cities and a thriving democracy. The younger generation is also more receptive towards the United States and the international community due to the mandatory English language requirement and their experiences studying abroad. As a result, the younger gen-

84%EA%B7%B9-%EC%A0%84%EB%A7%90/ [https://perma.cc/C6AC-4NPK].
242. Id.
243. Id.
244. Illing, supra note 169.
245. Id.
246. Denyer & Kim, supra note 216.
249. Song, supra note 96, at 26.
eration’s concerns about reunification are more practical than nostalgic. The most pressing fear among younger South Koreans is the nearly $5 trillion economic burden the state would bear should reunification occur, which inevitably impacts the job market and overall quality of life.250

In contrast, the North Korean view on reunification appear more inconsistent. Due to limited data from North Korea, the positions of the three previous leaders offer a window into the nation’s views on reunification. According to David Hawk, author of the book “Thank You Father Kim Il-sung,” Kim developed the North Korean nation with reunification in mind.251 To Kim, a reunified Korea would be communist, hereditary, isolationist, and linguistically pure.252 But when he realized South Korea did not share his views, he waged war to prove that his vision of a reunified Korea was correct.253

Forty-six years later, Kim Jong-il succeeded his father.254 Whereas Kim Il-sung viewed reunification as a “collective effort,” Kim Jong-il viewed reunification as an “independent” feat.255 In a public speech to the nation in 2000, Kim Jong-il stated, “All nations have a right to shape their destiny by their own hands and independently according to their will . . . Since the reunification of our country is an affair of our nation[,] our nation must achieve it by its own efforts[.]”256 This speech is consistent with how Kim handled reunification matters. In 1998, Kim and then-South Korean President Kim Dae-jung negotiated the Sunshine Policy.257 Rather than discuss reunification, Kim made repeated demands for economic assistance to overcome poverty.258 President Kim Dae-jung accommodated Kim Jong-il’s demands, only to discover later that Kim Jong-il never used the money for humanitarian purposes—he used it to restart North Korea’s nuclear program.259 Unlike his father who took

251. David Hawk, Systems of Thought, Values, and Belief in Korea Prior to Kim Il-Sung’s Accession to Power in the North in THANK YOU FATHER KIM IL-SUNG: EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS OF SEVERE VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE, AND RELIGION IN NORTH KOREA 49–50 (2013).
252. Id. at 51.
253. Id. at 53.
254. Yoon, supra note 120, at 1291.
255. See Hawk, supra note 251, at 52 (describing Kim Il-sung’s belief that reunification of the Korean Peninsula was a “collective effort” that included South Korea); see also QUOTATIONS OF KIM JONG-IL ON REUNIFICATION, COLUM. L. SCH. (June 13, 2000) (describing Kim Jong-il’s belief that reunification is an “independent” feat), http://www2.law.columbia.edu/course_00S_L9436_001/North%20Korea%20materials/quotations_of_kim_jong_il_on_reu.htm [https://perma.cc/NT4P-J767].
256. QUOTATIONS OF KIM JONG-IL ON REUNIFICATION, supra note 255.
258. Id. at 42.
259. Id. at 58–59.
reunification seriously, Kim Jong-il used reunification as a tool to build North Korea in accordance with his vision.

Unlike his predecessors, Kim Jong-un appears to have a more progressive view on reunification. Since he came to power, Kim focused on North Korea’s economic growth and trade relations with foreign powers. Indeed, Kim’s public announcement that he is actively seeking to expand foreign relations shows his desire “to do business” foreign powers. Kim’s approach to reunification reflects his foreign policy ambitions. Since coming to power, Kim has made a series of symbolic gestures to South Korean President Moon Jae-in that has not been seen before. In 2018, Kim became the first North Korean leader to cross over into South Korea in the village of Panmunjom. The two leaders, then, signed a historic document called the Panmunjom Declaration. In the Panmunjom Declaration, the two Koreas agreed to make sincere efforts to end the Korean War and avoid future conflicts.

In other words, different generations show different perspectives on reunification in both South Korea and North Korea. The obstacles presented above—assimilation, distrust and discrimination, and the generational gap—show the difficulties in achieving a shared identity in a unified Korea. But it may still be possible for the two Koreas to form a shared identity when they reunify by focusing on their commonalities rather than differences.

V. THE REIMAGINED COMMUNITY OF A UNIFIED KOREA

South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in pledged reunification of the Korean Peninsula by 2045. Although Korea faces many obstacles toward reunification, the obstacles are not impossible to overcome. This section explores how a reunified Korea can understand itself as two distinct nations joined by a shared identity. A reunified Korea is reimagined in the following ways: Through the two Korea’s shared suffering of colonization and war, education and literacy, and by embracing their commonalities rather than differences.

260. Cho, supra note 140.
261. Id.
264. Id.
265. White & Lewis, supra note 1.
A. **Build a common national identity through shared suffering: A hybrid regime**

Although South Korea and North Korea evolved in different ways, a reunified Korea can still develop a common identity based on their shared suffering of colonization and war. Renan argued, “The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices and devotions . . . shared suffering unites more than does joy.”266 First, the two Koreas share a history of protest during Japanese colonial rule.267 In the March First Movement, the Korean people marched together with one voice to reclaim a national identity they once shared.268

In addition to Japanese colonization, the two Koreas endured the trauma of division and civil war. The division saw the U.S. occupation of South Korea and the Soviet occupation of North Korea.269 The continued presence of foreign powers pressured both nations to adopt distinct identities modelled after their occupiers. South Korea developed into a democracy that adopted the English language and globalization, while North Korea became a communist state that embraced isolationism and hereditary succession.270 Despite developing differently, both nations had certain pride in the new identities they “imagined.”271 This pride led to the Korean War. Just as the “creole pioneers” in Anderson's *Imagined Communities* sacrificed themselves to preserve their nation, millions of North Koreans and South Koreans gave their lives to protect their newly formed national identities.272 But the Korean War served another purpose. Both Koreas pursued reunification, albeit with different visions.273 Thus, the Korean War was a battleground where the two nations tried to justify their vision of a unified Korea.274

Anderson defined a nation as “an imagined political community[.]”275 The nation is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members . . . yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”276 In South Korea, the principle of *tanil minjok* was used to unite the South Korean people under democratic values.277 Likewise, the *juche* ideology united

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266. Renan, *supra* note 229.
270. See Song, *supra* note 96, at 26 (stating that South Korea embraced the *segyehwa* initiative and English); see also Beauchamp, *supra* note 132 (stating that North Korea’s *juche* fostered hereditary succession and isolationism).
271. See Anderson, *supra* note 3, at 6 (defining a nation as “an imagined political community.”).
272. Id. at 47.
274. Id.
276. Id.
the North Korean people under communism. Because the national identities of South Korea and North Korea are products of their shared suffering of colonization and war, a hybrid regime that combines South Korean democracy and North Korean communism is one way a reunified Korea can reimagine themselves.

Scholars have defined a hybrid regime as “a system that combines important elements of both [a] democracy and [an] autocracy.” A common characteristic of hybrid regimes is elections that are limited to the ruling party or the regime’s favored candidates. Opposition parties or candidates are allowed to participate in elections, but they may be shut out of the ballot box or the media. Recognized examples of hybrid regimes include Russia, Indonesia, and Venezuela. A 2019 survey conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University revealed that 30.9 percent of South Koreans were open to “a hybrid of both governments [of South Korea and North Korea].” Prior to 1987, South Korea boasted a hybrid regime under President Park Chung-hee. Democratic institutions existed, but elections were not free, fair, or competitive. Despite ruling with an iron fist for over two decades, the South Korean people view the Park era favorably. A 2015 survey conducted by Korean newspaper Joongang Ilbo revealed that 74.3 percent of South Koreans positively assessed the Park era. South Koreans believed Park’s politics led to South Korea’s unprecedented economic growth that laid the foundations for a thriving democracy after his death. Similarly, North Korea’s communism led the nation to adopt a system of hereditary succession that revolved

278. Lee, supra note 122, at 105.

279. Henry E. Hale, Eurasian Polities as Hybrid Regimes: The Case of Putin’s Russia, 1 J. of EURASIAN STUD. 33, 33 (2010).

280. Id. at 34–35.

281. Id.


283. Hak-jae Kim, 김학재 외, 2019통일의식조사, 서울대학교 통일평화연구원 [2019 Unification Perception Survey], INST. FOR PEACE AND UNIFICATION STUD. AT SEOUL NAT’L U. 1, 65 (2019) (in Korean), http://ipus.snu.ac.kr/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019-%ED%86%B5%EC%9D%BC%EC%9D%98%EC%8B%9D%EC%A1%B0%EC%82%AC_%EC%B5%9C%EC%A2%85%EC%9B%89%EC%9A%A9.pdf.


285. Id. at 579.


around the Kim family.\textsuperscript{288} As the North Korean people’s “Supreme Leader[s],” the Kim family are the figureheads that North Koreans have rallied around since the division.\textsuperscript{289}

Anderson stated that nations are formed around common values, ideas, and visions.\textsuperscript{290} Although they developed distinct national identities, South Korean democracy and North Korean communism are both products of decades of colonization, division, war, and continued foreign presence. In other words, the two Korea’s shared suffering can help create a new shared national identity that transcends their differences. Given South Korea’s history of authoritarian rule and North Korea’s hereditary dynasty, a reunified Korea can be reborn under the shared idea of a hybrid regime that combines the shared suffering of the two Koreas.

B. Combine language, education, and literacy to create a shared identity

In addition to a shared suffering, the two Koreas also share a common language. The official language in South Korea is “Hangugeo,” whereas the official language of North Korea is “Chosuno.”\textsuperscript{291} Although both Hangugeo and Chosuno use Hangul, the difference is that Hangugeo incorporates English, while Chosuno uses no foreign languages.\textsuperscript{292} For example, South Koreans call shampoo \textit{shampu} (or 상주 when written in Hangul).\textsuperscript{293} On the other hand, North Koreans call shampoo \textit{meorim-ulbinu} (or 머리물비누 when written in Hangul), which literally translates to “head water soap”.\textsuperscript{294} Despite these small differences, having Hangul as the common written script means that both South Koreans and North Koreans can read and understand each other’s literature and texts. This commonality can help build a shared identity through literature and texts taught in educational settings.

To Anderson, education and literacy went hand-and-hand towards the creation of national identities.\textsuperscript{295} According to Anderson, the spread of “modern-style education [occurred] because of the moral importance of modern knowledge even for colonized populations.”\textsuperscript{296} European intelligentsia introduced the vernacular English language and encouraged

\textsuperscript{288} Beauchamp, supra note 132.
\textsuperscript{290} Anderson, supra note 3, at 6.
\textsuperscript{292} Id.
\textsuperscript{294} Id.
\textsuperscript{295} Anderson, supra note 3, at 116.
\textsuperscript{296} Id.
“bilingual literacy” in the colonies. Since the Korean War, both South Korea and North Korea boast well-developed education curriculums unique to their own systems of government. The structured education systems showed the extent to which the two Koreas valued education and high literacy rates. After World War II, less than twenty percent of all Korean youth under Japanese colonial rule completed an elementary school education. The two Koreas adopted different measures to combat the high illiteracy rate. In North Korea, the government banned Chinese characters and mandated the sole use of the Korean alphabet in educational settings. In South Korea, citizens adopted the English language in their educational curriculum and studied abroad to broaden their knowledge of the world. But like North Korea, South Korea also preserved the Korean language through the 2005 Framework Act. Thus, the preservation of the Korean alphabet is a trait that the two Koreas share despite their different approaches to literacy.

As of 2020, the CIA World Factbook reports North Korea’s literacy rate as 100 percent and South Korea’s literacy rate as 98 percent. High literacy rates equate with the ability to read classical Korean literature, some of which could serve as a shared cultural reference point. One classical text both Koreas read is the Memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong ("Memoirs"), a collection of autobiographical memoirs written by Queen Hyeongyeong of the Chosun dynasty. In the chapter entitled “The Memoir of 1802,” the Queen lamented how her second son, Prince Uiso, forgot his “filial duties” to her following his two-month stay in Qing Dynasty China. Prince Uiso volunteered to go to China as an ambassador to negotiate continued diplomatic relations between the two nations. The Queen recounted, “Oh! Grief! My son used to

297. Id.
300. Yim, supra note 146, at 232 n.5.
301. Id. at 218.
303. Framework Act, supra note 101, at art. 3(1).
304. See South Korea, supra note 299; see also North Korea, supra note 299.
305. Theorizing the Development of History Curriculum to Improve History Teaching and Learning, 146 INST. OF KOREAN HIST. 89, 116 (2018) [역사 교육과정 개발 방법, 146 역사교육연구회 89] [in Korean] [http://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE07470909&language=ko_KR#.
307. Id.
look in on me four or five times a day and was always concerned lest he do something contrary to my wishes . . . he has adopted the barbarian ways and dares to disrespect me.”

This is similar to Anderson’s portrayal of the Spanish novel El Periquillo Sarniento. From the novel, Anderson cites “the hero . . . is exposed to bad influences—ignorant maids inculcate superstitions [and] his mother indulges his whims [.]” Anderson described the novel as “a national imagination at work in the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape . . . that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside.” The Memoirs invoke a “nationalist imagination” that alludes to the certain superiority of the Korean nation as opposed to neighboring nations. Thus, classical Korean texts, like the Memoirs can help the unified Korea imagine a community with people they have never met before who nonetheless share the same long history. In other words, shared language and literature can be a potent source for the development of a shared national identity in a reunified Korea.

Anderson argued that print capitalism formed “the embryo of the nationally imagined community.” This was because print capitalism “gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation.” Like their southern neighbor, North Korea recently adopted the English language. Thus, a reunified Korea can also develop a shared identity based on bilingualism, where a hybrid of the English and Korean languages can unite the nation. Because the Memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong is already translated into the English language, a reunified Korea can work to publish the Memoirs in both languages across the nation. Anderson cited how the over 200 million volumes of books that were disseminated throughout Europe in the 1600s “changed the appearance and state of the world.” Thus, book-publishing can also act as the critical binding agent that allows the people of the newly unified Korea to build a shared national identity.

Lastly, newspapers can also bring the Korean people together. To Anderson, the date at the top of a newspaper provides the essential

308. Id.
310. Id. at 29.
311. Id. at 30.
312. Id. at 29–30.
313. Id. at 44.
314. Id.
315. Id.
316. Shim, supra note 150.
318. See Lady Hyegeyon supra note 306) (showing that the memoir is translated into the English language).
319. Anderson, supra note 3, at 37.
320. Id. at 37–38.
connection against the “onward clocking of homogenous, empty time.” Anderson also describes the content of newspapers as “juxtaposed,” reinforcing that the linkage between the news stories are imagined. In other words, the reunified Korean nation can choose which news stories they want to disseminate to the public, irrespective of geographical distance and social hierarchy. The date at the top of the Korean newspapers will link the Korean people to the outside world through their common vernacular language. A reunified Korea can choose to disseminate only those stories that happen within their nation, the international community, or both. Whichever route the nation chooses, the newspaper can unite the Korean people under a shared idea or vision.

C. Embrace commonalities rather than differences

Finally, an imagined unified Korea would be a nation that accepts their commonalities rather than their differences. The two Koreas have more similarities than differences. Even though South Korea and North Korea developed differently, they share a rich history that goes back to the Chosun dynasty. Renan argued that “[f]orgetting . . . is an essential factor in the creation of a nation.” This is applicable to a reunified Korea. Because Korean history dates back 629 years, one way to rebuild a unified Korean nation would be remember certain aspects of the Chosun dynasty and “forget” about the division. The Chosun dynasty saw policies of isolation, language purification, and hereditary succession. Both South Korea and North Korea share a fondness for these policies even though they developed in different ways.

On the other hand, both nations see the division and war in a different light. Although South Korea developed into a thriving democracy and North Korea into a communist state, the two Koreas share an animosity to their newly formed identities. Both Koreas believe that they did not have a choice in how to form their nations. In the present, the United States has fifteen military bases in South Korea. In a survey conducted by South Korea’s Financial News Magazine in July 2020, 43 percent of South Koreans want the U.S. military to leave, while 27 percent disagree. The most frequent reason cited was the “bitterness”

321. Id. at 33.
322. Id.
323. Id. at 32–36.
324. Renan, supra note 229.
325. Im, Campbell & Cha, supra note 22, at 288–89.
326. See Kim, supra note 25, at 6 (describing King Sejong’s desire create a writing system for all Koreans); see also Seth, supra note 36 (describing the Chosun dynasty’s isolationist policy and hereditary succession).
the participants felt from the U.S. occupation.\textsuperscript{329} South Korea may be a thriving democracy, but the majority of South Koreans believe that it was not by choice. North Korea carries a deeper animosity and resentment towards the outside forces that divided them seventy-four years ago. North Korea’s answer to their disapproval of the division was their isolationist policy and language purification movements.\textsuperscript{330} Even though they developed into a communist state, North Korea sought to preserve remnants of the ethnic Korean identity they had prior to the division.\textsuperscript{331}

Renan stated that a nation was an artifice that was continually reconstituted through the mutual consent of the people.\textsuperscript{332} This is reminiscent of Anderson’s argument that a nation is imagined, because it entails a sense of communion or “horizontal comradeship” between people who do not know one another.\textsuperscript{333} Thus, a reunified Korea must develop itself through common values, ideas, and visions. Thus, a reunified Korea can rebuild their nation that resembles the Chosun dynasty more so than the distinct identities they developed following the division.

VI. Conclusion

In the narratives surrounding Korean reunification, the role of national identity has largely been ignored. The significance of creating a shared identity is critical for a nation that has been fractured for over seven decades. Prior to division, South Korea and North Korea were a unified nation that shared a language, history, and culture. Since the arrival of the United States and the former Soviet Union, however, the two Koreas were forced to go their separate ways and eventually developed distinct national identities. Using Benedict Anderson, this paper has shown how South Korea and North Korea were “imagined” following the division. This paper has also argued that obstacles to reunification can be overcome through shared suffering, print capitalism and literacy, and through commonalities rather than differences. All nations are imagined, according to Anderson. The difference lies on how, around what values, ideas and visions a particular nation is “imagined.” This paper has attempted to show that through a reunified Korea. Indeed, the two Koreas have more in common in terms of their language, a history of protest, colonization, and war. Thus, the two Koreas can use their shared experiences to create a new imagined nation. Korean reunification has had different meanings for Koreans since the nation’s division. To the older generation, reunification has been a seventy-five-year-old dream. To the younger generation, reunification has simply been an idea they

\textsuperscript{329} Id.
\textsuperscript{330} See Yim, supra note 146, at 225–26 (stating that Kim II-sung demanded that only native Korean be used); see also Beauchamp, supra note 132 (describing how juche influenced North Korea’s isolationist policy).
\textsuperscript{331} Park Young Ho, South and North Korea’s Views on the Unification of the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Relations, KRIS 1, 7 (2014).
\textsuperscript{332} RENAN, supra note 229, at 10.
\textsuperscript{333} Anderson, supra note 3, at 6.
could do without. But when reunification is looked at through the lens of national identity, different layers of a complex history are observed. Korean reunification is not a simple security, economic, political, or cultural issue. It is a complex problem where the origins of the nation's national identity must be examined to understand the nature of a nation that the two Koreas would eventually create together. A reunified Korea must be “imagined” to be fully understood.