Communist and Post-Communist Studies 47 (2014) 179–190

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

New approaches to North Korean politics after reunification: The search for a common Korean identity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 10 May 2014

Keywords:
South Korea
North Korea
National identify
Reunification
Nation-building

ABSTRACT

Whilst most of the literature focusing on the Korean peninsula has concentrated on how to achieve unification through confidence-building measures, dialogues, negotiation and diplomacy, little attention has been paid to how a unified Korean identity, a core component of any potential reunification scheme could develop and be sustained. The paper addresses this gap by: (1) defining what national identity is, and how Korean identities have been formed, (2) outlining how both South and North Korea have understood and used the concept of national identity, (3) suggesting possible grounds on which the two Koreas could build a new, common national identity.

1. Introduction

While most of the literature focusing on the Korean peninsula has concentrated on how to achieve unification, and has thus extrapolated on confidence-building measures, dialogues, negotiation rounds, diplomatic openings as well as practical discussions on infrastructure, taxation and property rights, the nature of the Korean tensions has detracted researchers from advancing models of sustained unification. The Korean peninsula is widely known for remaining one of the only few parts of the world where remnants of the Cold War are still preventing peaceful coexistence. As a result of the partition of Korea after World War Two both Koreas have presented themselves as being the only legitimate entity having the "right to define and govern citizens of its counterparts as its own political subjects" (Park and Chang, 2005). Some have argued that the political vacuum that has been left after the Japanese occupation has led both Koreas to develop 'dualistic and antagonistic' identities (Bleiker, 2001).

Igniting a new strand of intellectual enquiry and research that sees reunification as a positive development, the project focuses on three factors that should be considered in order for a potential Korean unification to be successful. Those factors, reconciliation, mutual trust and common identity are interdependent. In order for an eventual unification to be sustainable, it is not enough to state that both Koreas must be unified under one system. Indeed, this would assume a top–down approach, meaning that governmental structures, legal systems, economic policies, as well as other components of a country, would be remoulded in order to accommodate both North and South Koreans.

Unification must address the emotional and personal component of what a country is made of individuals. It is insufficient to assume that people will naturally develop a sense of unity and belonging to a reunified Korea, as such processes are extremely complex. In essence, a Korean reunification will necessarily lead to building of a new nation. In Bloom's words, nation-building means "both the formation and establishment of the new state itself as a political entity, and the process of creating viable degrees of unity, adaptation, achievement and a sense of national identity among the people" (1990). In order to assess how a new Korean national identity could be created, the research will progress in three steps: (1) Defining what national identity is, and how Korean identities have been formed, (2) Outlining how both South and North Korea have

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2014.04.008

understood and used the concept of national identity, (3) Find possible grounds on which the two Koreas could build a new, common national identity.

It is hypothesized that each country understands national identity differently, with North Korea sponsoring a top–down approach in which being a North Korean is generally directed by the regime, and which allows little room for any development at the individual level. For South Korea, it is hypothesized, that national identity was also mostly created under a top–down approach during the post-war period, but that after the 1980s and economic development, newer generations have a more fluid and sometimes confused understanding of their own national identity. Emphasis will also be put on new immigration patterns to South Korea that have started to redefine South Korean understanding of 'multiculturalism' and 'ethnocentrism'.

2. Defining national identity

The concept of a national identity, or a form of national consciousness, predates by far our general understanding of the nation-state system being born out of European wars and resulting in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Indeed, Smith traces the beginnings of national consciousness to the war between the Scots, French and English, with the caveat that such movements were not secular ones. Essentially, it is not "until the American and French Revolutions that nationalism appears as a 'fully-fledged secular ideology'" (Smith, 1992). National identity is therefore the resulting feeling associated with the concept of a nation which Smith comprehensively defines as "a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (1991).

A national identity gives people a sense of belonging and a way to relate to one another through a heightened 'awareness of affiliation' (Keane, 1993) but differs from a state's identity: while being born out of similar factors such as people, geography, religion and customs, a state is clearly different because it incorporates governing structures through regimes (Choi, 2010). Thus there appears to be, according to Jones and Smith (2001), two largely different yet related concepts to form a national identity. On the one hand, ascriptive qualities such as ethnicity and kinship provide a more organic and biological grounding in one's relationship to a group, while on the other hand a voluntaristic set of qualities, such as civic roles and duties, determines one's place within a polity.

The relationship between the ethnic and civic components of a nation is far from being straightforward. There appears to be an inherent tension between the two, especially when considering that the examples of a 'nation-state,' which consists of only one ascriptive group —a homogeneous ethnic group evolving within the realms of the state, a fixed population, fixed border, a government and an ability to enter into relations with other states—is simple non-existent nowadays. Japan, Israel and the Koreas are often referred to a near nation-states in that sense, largely because of their homogenously-perceived population, while many European states and the United States, obviously, are disqualified as nation-states because of their pluri-ethnic backgrounds. In essence, though it is generally accepted that "national identity is part of one category of collective identities, namely those with a territorial reference" (Kohli, 2000).

There are many debates in the literature about whether a national identity is more of a political unit or a rather ascriptive one, and especially how national identity is projected, taught, reinforced, and recognized. Other debates also pertain to how national identity fluctuates: this is important as it leads to questions on whether a national identity can be defined and managed, and especially on whether a particular national identity is considered at risk if it is being changed. Such discussions also lead to important normative questions on whether or not national identities can, and should be protected, or whether they should evolve and mirror evolution seen in societies and states.

The consensus is that national identity lies, first and foremost, within people of a specific nation, regardless of whether the concept comes from the people up to the state structure, as a bottom-up approach, or whether it is defined and managed by a regime, regulating people's behavior, as a top–down process. Because national identity can be understood as being a group identity (Schlesinger, 1991), values, myths, traditions and collective memories, shared and perpetuated by one people, allow for a common sense of unity to be developed and maintained. The concept of place is especially important, as place can be seen as a way for individuals to be bound together, but also as enabling groups to sustain a common identity over long periods of time, hence creating 'historical traditions' (Jacobi and Stokols, 1983).

National identity can also be expressed through tangible means such as banknotes, hymns, stamps and foods, but the concept is often linked to the notion of places and geographical location (Unwin and Hewitt, 2001). Eventually, most national identities are carried through 'regulated' knowledge transmission and acquisition processes such as education (Choi, 2011), with schooling systems providing a top–down approach through which nationhood can be fostered by a specific government (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). With educational systems providing the matrix for national identity to develop, especially by focusing on historical and civic elements that should be acquired while growing up, the concept of pride is largely seen as being one of the most recognizable manifestations of national identity. With national pride being defined as "the positive affect that the public feels toward their country as a result of their national identity" (Smith and Jarkko, 1998), Chung and Choe (2008) suggest that national pride can be found in a variety of mediums such as science, economy, or the arts, with national pride in sports being especially important for relatively small countries.

While factors such as historical events, places, religions, and national heroes might appear perennial, a multitude of factors from war to economic development can have a significant impact on national identity as well. As such, national identity should also be understood as an evolving concept functioning in a similar fashion to how one's individual identity is