Korea's Divided Families
Fifty years of separation

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4 Family histories

INTRODUCTION

Having described the historic, demographic and political background to the divided families problem, and outlined the role played by the issue in inter-Korean relations, this section of the book will now concentrate on an examination of the histories of the individual divided family members interviewed and their relatives. This chapter and the next one are based on interviews conducted by the author of seven first-generation divided family members, all of whom benefited from the 2000–2001 reunions resulting from the success of the 15 June 2000 Summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong II and ROK President Kim Dae Jung. Full transcripts of English translations of the interviews are in Appendix.

This chapter will look at the personal histories of the interviewees and their relatives and the next chapter will examine the interviewees’ impressions of the meetings with their relatives held in Seoul or P’yŏngyang during the course of the 2000–2001 reunion programme.

Initial contact with the interviewees was facilitated by the ROKNRC who provided contact information to the author for thirty first generation divided family members who had met their relatives in the 2000-2001 series of reunions. Fifteen of the people on the list had relatives who had gone to North Korea from the South (wŏl’buk), and the remaining 15 had come to South Korea from the North (wŏl’nam). The author sent letters containing a stamped and addressed reply envelope and letter to 22 of the 30 on the Red Cross list who lived in the Seoul-Inch’ŏn area. Seven replies agreeing to interview were subsequently received. Of the seven who consented to interview, two were first-generation divided family members who originated from North Korea and who had come to the South (wŏl’nam) during the Korean War; and, the remaining five were all people whose relatives had originated from South Korea but had gone to North Korea (wŏl’buk) during the Korean War. All interviewees had the choice of whether to give anonymous or open interviews. Four chose to give anonymous interviews, while three gave permission for their names to be published. The three who chose to give open interviews were all Koreans of southern origin who had relatives who had gone North (wŏl’buk) during the war.
In order to provide a more complete and balanced picture of the situations of Korea's divided families, the author will also draw on the interviews he conducted of North Korean refugees during research carried out for his PhD thesis in 1997. Another source of invaluable information was Kim Kwi-Ok's comprehensive study of North Korean refugees published in 1999.  

SURVEY LIMITATIONS

While the author's 1997 survey has provided some support in attempting to build as objective a picture as possible of the situations of first-generation divided family members in South Korea, the first limitation of this work which should always be born in mind is the absence of primary research on this problem in the DPRK. Although the author has made efforts to gain access to data from North Korea, the DPRK authorities have refused to co-operate on this issue. As has been already mentioned above, this is by no means unusual. Whilst the North Korean authorities have allowed access to the DPRK for foreign scholars in such academic areas as music or archaeology, as far as the author is aware, no such co-operation has ever been extended to scholars researching into issues related to current political problems such as Korea's division or eventual reunification. The divided families problem, with its ongoing politisisation and connection to the continuing inter-Korean rivalry and struggle for legitimacy, is clearly one such issue. The obvious implication for this book is that the reader should always remember that descriptions of conditions in North Korea, or indeed the comments of the interviewees' relatives are reported.

This, of course, raises the greater issue of the reliability of the information provided by the interviewees themselves. Kim Choong-Soon, in his book *Faithful Endurance*, notes the three areas on which Koreans seem most likely to give misleading or deceptive information:

> When information is sought from which a person's failure in role performance can be inferred; when information is sought which might reveal deviations from valued cultural norms; and, when the information sought is a marker of social rank.

Evidently, as can be seen in the interviews and as will be examined in greater detail in this and the next chapters, the first two areas apply frequently to the subject matter of this work. On the subject of 'failure in role performance', as will be seen below, feelings of guilt or recrimination for perceived failures in family roles or duties were all common themes in the interviews.

As regards the second area, 'deviations from cultural norms', assessment of the reliability of testimony is, I believe, much more problematic for the simple reason that such 'cultural norms' must surely include in Korea's case ideological values and consideration of the political and social system under which the informants live. As has been pointed out in the Introduction to this work, perhaps the most striking aspect of the author's research has been the marked contrast between the guarded and extremely suspicious attitudes of the informants in Kim Choong-Soon's book, interviewed in 1983 during the Chun Doo Hwan dictatorship in South Korea, and the generally open and welcoming attitudes of the informants in the author's 1997 survey, interviewed near the end of Kim Young Sam's tenure as a democratically elected president of the ROK. This readiness to discuss politically sensitive issues on the part of the informants testifies to the success of South Korea's rapid democratisation, and the consequent liberalisation of South Korea's society was further emphasised by the willingness of those informants whose relatives had 'gone North' (woolbuk) to provide open interviews to the author on subjects which hitherto had been considered taboos in South Korea.

Another limitation which should be noted is the small sample size itself. For the usual reasons of limited time and financial resources, a bigger survey was not possible, and, while, as we have seen in Chapter 1, the numbers of first-generation divided family members are perhaps not as great as claimed by some institutions in South Korea, the divided families problem is still clearly a large, complex and important socio-political problem which evidently merits more comprehensive research based on a much larger sample of informants. Here again, there is an obvious need for a comprehensive, nation-wide survey of divided family members.

One issue which may or may not have been a limitation to the validity of this work was the author's nationality. As a foreign scholar in South Korea I have never met with anything other than kindness, respect and a willingness to help which would shame most other countries. Koreans' respect for education and learning is such that whether as a student or as an established scholar, Koreans from every social class and walk of life almost invariably do their utmost to provide whatever help or assistance is requested. The author's two periods of Korea Foundation fellowship in South Korea in 1997 and in 2001 while researching this book were no exception to this rule.

Those familiar with Korean culture will know that it is somewhat unusual for a Korean to invite anyone, and in particular a stranger, to the family home. Although four of the interviewees made exceptions to the cultural norm by inviting the author to their homes, one informant was interviewed in his office, but two insisted on meeting in a public place such as a restaurant or coffee shop for their interviews. As the author is not a native speaker of Korean, this did pose some problems as the background noise did inhibit his understanding of the interviewees' responses. To compensate for this, the author asked all the informants for their permission to record the interviews. This permission was readily given in all cases.

Paradoxically, the author's 'foreignness' while posing some linguistic problems as six of the seven interviews were carried out completely in Korean, may have

1 Kim Kwi-Ok, op. cit.
compensated for this limitation. The respondents were particularly keen to show special kindness to someone who, despite not being Korean, was studying a problem which had received remarkably little attention from Korean academic circles. All the interviews were later transcribed, however, by the author’s wife and brother-in-law who are native Koreans, in an effort to ensure an accurate transcript was made of the interview.

Another problem encountered by the author was that the majority of respondents were male. While two of those who agreed to interview were female, only one was interviewed directly by the author, the other sent her husband in her place (Interview number 5). This same problem was also a drawback in the author’s 1997 survey, in which out of 60 respondents to the initial postal questionnaire survey, 58 were male and only one female consented to be interviewed. Regrettably, at that time it was impossible to contact this respondent to arrange an interview.

One final limitation in some cases was the respondents’ advanced ages. This, coupled with the passage of half a century since their separation from their relatives, did mean that some events were not remembered clearly and some contradictions did appear regarding the exact dates of some of the historic events in question. This limitation was also evident in the author’s 1997 survey, and in the research carried out in 2001 for this book it was apparent in the case of two of the interviews.

PERSONAL HISTORIES

Japanese occupation

As Japan’s imperial ambitions grew, Japanese exploitation of both the physical and human resources of her Korean colony intensified. The invasion of Manchuria in 1931 saw a definitive end to the period of liberal rule of Korea – the munhwa chōngch’i (cultural policy 1919–1931) – which had begun after the March First Movement had shaken Japanese rule in 1919, and the advent of a systematic policy of forced assimilation of her Korean subjects. The so-called naesŏn ich’е (Japan and Korea as one body) policy heralded Japan’s attempts to eradicate the Korean language, force Koreans to adopt Japanese names and mobilise more and more Koreans for the Japanese imperial war effort. Invasion of China proper in 1937, and the Pacific War in 1941 greatly increased the exploitative momentum as the needs of the Japanese war machine grew exponentially. In 1938, as the war in China intensified, the Japanese ‘State Mobilisation Law’ was passed. Faced with an ever-growing need for manpower, in 1942 and then in 1944, the Japanese government passed further amendments to this law to allow for the forced mobilisation of labour for the Japanese war industries and mines, soldiers for the Japanese Imperial Army, and, perhaps most infamously, young women to serve as ‘comfort women’, or, to put it more directly, sex slaves, for Japan’s armed forces.

Although previous amendments to the State Mobilisation Law had allowed for ‘draft by recommendation’ (1942) and ‘voluntary’ mobilisation, in reality, these euphemistically titled measures concealed the true coercive nature of Japan’s ever more desperate attempts to exploit its subject Korean population. By the end of the war in 1945, 265,896 Koreans had been forcibly mobilised to work for the war effort in mines, factories and other industries, while approximately 320,000 had been forcibly conscripted into the Japanese Imperial Army.\(^4\)

While many of the interviewees were too young to clearly remember their lives under Japanese occupation, all were clearly aware of the inequities of the occupation and the harsh discriminatory reality of life in that period:

They talked about ‘Japan and Korea as one body’, but everything was distributed according to whether you were Japanese or Korean. The Japanese were first class, we were second. But that’s part of the sorrow of being a subject people – they talked about equality, but in practice we were discriminated against in every walk of life.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) Jap. – kokkutsu shōdoin hō.


\(^5\) Interview 1, Kim Dong-Man, 2 July 2001.
Even interviewees who were in primary school at the time of the occupation recall the Japanese efforts to inculcate a sense of ‘patriotism’ for Japan rather than Korea, and eradicate the use of the Korean language:

I was too young to remember much... the things which really leap out in my memory are... ‘Speak Japanese! Don’t speak Korean!’ If you spoke Korean, you had to stay after class and you were scolded... then, in the morning at assembly, we had to face east and salute Tokyo... and repeat the oath of allegiance as imperial subjects.6

Some of the interviewees, or those among their relatives who were adults at the time of the occupation, also faced the threat of conscription into the Japanese Imperial Army. One interviewee was conscripted into the Japanese Army (interview 3) and served in an artillery unit stationed in P’yŏngyang, while of others who were old enough to perform military service, one was exempted on medical grounds (interview 4), another (interview 5) left university in Japan without formally graduating in order to return to Korea and avoid the military draft, and the third was exempted because of his job in a ‘reserved occupation’ (interview 2). As Korean scholars have pointed out, Koreans employed a variety of methods – passive and active – in order to avoid labour or military mobilisation.7

While the inequities of their colonial existences did much to shape Koreans’ political consciousness, particularly those who lived in Seoul like Kim Dong-Man, for poor Koreans from rural areas the experience of forced mobilisation for labour or military service shocked many into a sharp and brutal awareness of the realities of their situation as colonial subjects of Japan:

When I went to Japan, I realised why we lived so badly. First, I came to know what it was to be a colony. In our hometown we were so poor and there were no jobs, so I didn’t know what it meant to be a colony. But, when I went to Japan, I realised that the gap between rich and poor was a direct result of colonial policy... From the Yalu and Tumen Rivers our lumber and raw materials, iron and steel all flowed to Japan at cheap prices, then, in those Japanese factories these were turned into manufactured goods. Then, these were sent back to Korea where they were sold at high prices. How could we live well? All this did for us was to give us the opportunity to work on building railways and other such heavy labour.

Second, the police in our country were paid 70 wŏn if they were Japanese, but 30 wŏn if they were Korean. The Japanese ate white rice, we ate millet. Even low-ranking Japanese received an overseas allowance. In the fishing industry too, it was the same. Permission was given to Japanese operators to fish, not to Koreans. In such a situation, how could we possibly live well?8

Liberation

Pak Yong-Ch’ŏn, as Kim Kwi-Ok succinctly points out in her book, had he remained in his poor fishing village in northeast Korea, he would perhaps never have become aware of the true inequities of the Japanese occupation of his country. However, his experience of labouring in Japan had opened his eyes to the realities, both of Japanese oppression and of its Korean face and those of his countrymen who were benefiting from the colonial policy. After landing at Pusan after the collapse of Japan, Pak had to walk back over 500 km to his native village. During this journey, Pak directly witnessed American Army brutality in the form of rapes of Korean women and robberies of defenceless refugees, who, like Pak, were attempting to return to their native towns and villages after the trauma of Japanese occupation. His experience during his return through US-occupied southern Korea led him to remark: ‘The American Army were worse than the Japanese Army’.9

The interviewees’ experiences of liberation from Japanese rule depended largely on their ages at the time of liberation, their or their parents’ occupations under Japanese rule and where in the country they were when Japan surrendered and Japanese colonial rule came to an end. All of the interviewees or their relatives had gone North or South, and had become separated from their families, during the Korean War. Of the five interviewees whose relatives had gone to the North during the Korean War (wŏlbuk), two were schoolboys at the time of liberation, the oldest being only 12 years of age in 1945. Both lived in the provinces rather than Seoul, and, according to their relatives, had little conception of politics at the time of liberation, or indeed, five years later when the Korean War broke out. Only Kim Dong-Jin, elder brother of interviewee number 1 Kim Dong-Man, appears to have been politically aware at this time and openly engaged in political activity:

At that time in our family, my elder brother read books about Marxism and Leninism and became enamoured with that philosophy. Because we were a subject race and he was a nationalist, he said he would always fight against the Japanese. After liberation in August 1945, he became fully involved in the student movement, much like the student movement of these days. Then in 1947 he was sent to prison for two years. He was released and re-arrested and that time he was given a ten year sentence.10

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7 Kim Kwi-Ok, op. cit., p. 183.
8 Pak Yong-Ch’ŏn, interviewed in Kim Kwi-Ok, op. cit., pp. 188–189.
9 Kim Kwi-Ok, op. cit., p. 189.
10 Interview 1. Kim Dong-Man.
As a result of his political activities in the student movement, Kim Dong-Jin spent the remainder of the liberation period in Sōdaemun Prison in Seoul. When the South Korean capital was occupied and the gates of the prison opened by the KPA, he was released.

Interviewee number four’s elder brother, who worked in a Japanese engineering plant in Inch’ŏn during the occupation and had avoided the Japanese military draft because of a medical condition, showed no interest in politics, either during the occupation or the liberation period. After the collapse of the Japanese war economy, he worked in a small private engineering workshop in Inch’ŏn, and then fled the fighting with the rest of his family when the KPA occupied Inch’ŏn in late June 1950. Interviewee number 7, Hwang Pyŏng-Wŏn’s younger brother Pyŏng-Nyŏl, spent most of the liberation period in Seoul where he studied medicine. However, as his elder brother spent most of this time in Andong, North Kyŏngsang Province, and had little contact with his younger brother, it is unclear as to whether Pyŏng-Nyŏl became politically involved in the chaotic political scene in South Korea’s capital city during this turbulent period. Nonetheless, it seems a reasonable assumption that whether politically involved or not, Pyŏng-Nyŏl’s life as a student must surely have led to some degree of political awareness.

Of the two interviewees who had left their hometowns in North Korea to come to the South, interviewee number 2 had worked in the Japanese colonial postal service during the occupation, and had avoided being conscripted because of this reserved profession. Despite the fact that he had been a civil servant in the Japanese occupation, this interviewee had continued to work at the post office in his village during the liberation period under the Soviet-backed liberation government. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, the communist-led government in the northern Soviet-occupied zone adopted a rather forgiving attitude to many who had served in the Japanese occupation, even going so far as to create a special category of 

Lit. clerk. See , Cumings, Bruce (1997) op. cit., p. 397.

Both of these interviewees declared strongly and repeatedly that they had had no involvement, interest in, or knowledge of politics in this period.

The Korean War

Two of the interviewees’ relatives, who were schoolboys at the time, accompanied the KPA back to northern Korea after the successful landings of the UN forces at Inch’ŏn in September 1950. Both were aged 16 or 17 when recruited into the KPA during the North Korean forces’ three month occupation of southern Korea. While interviewee number 5 stated clearly that his brother-in-law had been conscripted or taken by force into the KPA:

The KPA ordered all the first year highschool students to assemble at the school, and then took them all off to the army.12

When asked whether his brother-in-law had volunteered or been conscripted into the KPA, the interviewee frankly admitted that neither he nor his family knew for sure:

We’ve no idea as to whether he joined voluntarily or not. He was just in the KPA, and that’s how we have to look at it.13

Interviewee number 6, Professor Oh Hyŏng-Jae, however, gave a rather more complete and detailed account of the complex circumstances surrounding his elder brother’s induction into the KPA, and the possible reasons for his actions. Oh Yŏng-Jae, who is now one of North Korea’s leading poets, was 16 years old when he joined the KPA.

... among the third year middle school students14 my brother was a strong boy. He had a good physique. I was in the first year, so I wasn’t a target of the draft. At that time,15 they said that some students from the third year had to join the KPA. The teacher talked about the draft, but the boys hung their heads reluctantly.

"I (teacher) have taught you incorrectly. A new era has come, but you are just standing there. A new era has come so you must devote yourselves to the revolution!"

The boys were still reluctant, so later on, seeing that no-one would volunteer, the teacher just picked out three or four boys. The brightest, the most capable, the strongest.

12 Interview 5 (anonymous).
13 Ibid.
14 Sixteen years of age.
15 During the KPA occupation of southern Korea, from late June to September 1950.
But the question is: why did our parents not resist this? I’ve often asked myself that question. But there may have been something about their situation I didn’t see. My father was a schoolmaster. He was a member of the bourgeois class. A kind of village leader, Farmers, fishermen, they had no problems, but a schoolmaster is some sort of high-ranking position. They were supposed to show some contribution to the new regime. So… my father may have been under some sort of pressure from them.

“Show me your loyalty!”

I don’t know for sure, but they might have said that… It’s just my conjecture. So, my father and mother… I have many brothers and sisters… my family members could have been faced with some difficulties.

First, conscription; second, my father; third… at that time, even if you went to the KPA, everyone thought you would be back soon… “A new era has come! The KPA is winning!”

Because of the “new era”, it wasn’t thought to be such a problem to be drafted.

“We can meet with him soon”, we thought, a new era has come.

So, he (father) just allowed it – unwillingly. That’s how he came to go.

“I’ll be back soon”, he said. “Don’t cry!” Then, looking at his mother, “don’t forget!”

Asked about his memories of his brother’s attitude on leaving for basic military training with the KPA, Professor Oh replied:

My brother, in the third year at middle school… it was a bit like the French novel, you know, ‘La Classe Dernière’ by Alphonse Daudet. Young people you know, they are curious about everything. They have no fear. They are afraid of nothing. It can be fun, you know. To join some interesting group – an adventure – he was perhaps a little happy, excited, sad, curious… he had mixed emotions, maybe. He went. He went and now we have met again after fifty years… Ah, it’s such a tragedy.16

The circumstances surrounding the flight North of interviewee number four’s elder brother are even more unclear. Although he was 31 years of age in 1950, from the evidence of his relatives this person was clearly uninterested in politics, and indeed, anxious to avoid any involvement. Asked whether her elder brother was involved in any political activity or interested in ideology, interviewee 4 replied concisely:

It’s because he wasn’t interested in ideology or politics that he dug a cave into the mountain during the KPA occupation in order to hide.

Interviewee number four’s elder brother was taken by the KPA when he left his hiding place and went to a stream to wash.

During the KPA occupation, they patrolled at night. If they stopped anyone, they would check their hands to see if that person had done manual labour or was an office worker. Our brother had lovely hands, so soft…

When asked at their reunion in August 2000 why he had accompanied the KPA North during the retreat of the North Korean forces after the Inch’ŏn landings, interviewee 4 gave the following account of her brother’s explanation of his actions to his family members:

When we met this time, we asked him: “Brother, how did you come to go north? You said you were just going to wash”… He wasn’t like our brother of old… He said this and then that… After repeatedly asking him how he came to go with them (the KPA), he just said: “They said, let’s go!” He was in the Dongbu Police Station for some time, then they said: “Let’s go!”, and he just went over with them. That’s how he described it.17

The circumstances surrounding Hwang Pyŏng-Wŏn’s younger brother Pyŏng-Nyŏl’s flight to the North are also unclear. Pyŏng-Nyŏl had qualified as a doctor at the young age of 22 in February 1950, three months before the outbreak of the war:

Because he graduated so young, and because he was so bright he joined Seoul National University Hospital as an intern. He joined Yi Chae-Bok’s surgery team as an intern. Then, two or three months later, the war broke out.

Here again, it is unclear as to whether Pyŏng-Nyŏl volunteered to accompany the retreating KPA to the North, or whether he was forced:

After the war broke out, Yi Chae-Bok’s surgery team were busy treating, first South Korean casualties, but then soldiers from the North as well. When the KPA retreated, the whole team went with them. Some people dropped out, but he couldn’t. The whole team went north… You could say that he was kidnapped, but you could also say that he volunteered. The reason I say this is that when we met and I asked him “why did you go to the North?” , he said that he had heard that our house near the Naktong River had been shelled and that everyone was dead. Hearing that, and because he was an officer in the (KPA) Medical Corps and was well-treated, he just went to the North with the KPA. Half-forced, half-voluntary, there was no ideology involved, he just followed them up there.18

16 Interview 6. Oh Hyŏng-Jae.
17 Interview 4.
However, in this case, as Hwang Pyŏng-Wŏn’s younger brother was an officer in the KPA, it would appear more likely that Pyŏng-Nyŏl volunteered rather than going against his will with the retreating North Korean forces.

In the cases of the two interviewees who had come South (ówlnam) during the war, the circumstances affecting their actions are, perhaps, easier to understand. Interviewee number 2 had joined the local self-defence militia or ch’iandae in his village during the 40-day occupation of northern Korea by South Korean and UN forces following the retreat of the KPA after the success of the Inch’ŏn landings:

In the North, to tell the truth, politics was not really established then. When the KPA retreated from our village there was nothing. All the people who had been involved in politics had disappeared. We young men thought that we had to save our village. We had to maintain order in our village. We didn’t join because we compared politics in North and South and said that one was better than the other. The village then was in chaos. We got together and decided we had to fill the vacuum. At that time, because the KPA had been driven north, many people were out for revenge. The place was in a mess. It wasn’t because we favoured one ideology over another – south over north – it was because there was anarchy and we had to restore order and justice. We didn’t have the capacity then to decide which was better, south or north.19

Local defence militias – ch’iandae or poandae – were recruited among the local population and established by both sides during their respective occupations of ‘enemy’ territory, and were responsible for many atrocities as the ‘ideological cleansing’ engendered by a change in political control became further complicated and embittered by reactions of revenge to settle local rivalries and grudges.20 Also, in remote towns and small villages, the farther away from large urban centres and the organs of the military occupation government, the less influence that government had, and the more power was in the hands of such local militias.21 Although interviewee number two’s explanation may appear disingenuous, whatever his actions during the occupation, in his village as in others, all who had co-operated in any way with the 40-day South Korean/UN occupation of North Korea had no choice but to flee when the KPA, assisted and reinforced by their Chinese communist allies, retook northern Korea and pushed the occupying South Korean and UN forces back to the South during the so-called ‘big retreat’ or 1.4 Hut’oe.

After walking from his home village to Wŏnsan, where the American 8th Army Command was located, but failing to find a boat to take him and his fellow members of the ch’iandae South, interviewee number 2 and his companions walked to Kwangju in Kyŏnggi Province, South Korea. In total, over 700 km on foot, and a journey which took over two months. Interviewee number 2 stated that he had been forced to leave his wife and baby daughter behind in North Korea:

I left our house on the 2nd of August 1950, and our daughter was born on the 3rd. I couldn’t even get the chance to see our daughter’s birth. Because of my duties in the ch’iandae, I couldn’t even get the chance to go home.22

However, this was not the case for all members of ch’iandae waits, some of whom succeeded in evacuating all their family members with them during the retreat, in spite of apparent orders that only male combatants should be evacuated.23 Just why interviewee number 2 had left his home village over a month before the entry into the war of the Chinese communist forces and the start of the ‘big retreat’ is not made clear. When pressed on the discrepancies between his account and the dates of the historical events in question, the interviewee was unable to elaborate on his account.

Interviewee number 3, after having served in the Japanese Imperial Army during the Japanese occupation, was inducted into the KPA on the eve of the Korean War, captured by South Korean forces in October 1950, and then inducted into the South Korean Army in April 1951:

... because I was in the KPA, I became a prisoner, I surrendered, so then I went into the South Korean Army. So, from the Japanese Army to the KPA, then from the KPA to the South Korean Army. I had a really hard time....

Asked if he had volunteered for the KPA, interviewee number 4 replied:

Because the Korean War broke out, all young men had to go to the KPA, you could not go.

Asked if he had volunteered for the South Korean Army, the interviewee answered the following:

... At that time things were like this, ... ideology is not a material thing. It doesn’t leave any visible marks. People were all classified. They checked everyone to verify their political background. You had to have someone to vouch for you. I had a lot of friends who’d come from the North, and they said that I wasn’t a ‘red’. I thought that after that I would be released, but it wasn’t so simple. All the men from the KPA had to go into the ROKA.24

19 Interview 2, Appendix.
20 For accounts of such atrocities during the South Korean–UN forces’ occupation of northern Korea, see Kim Kwi-Ok, op. cit., pp. 230–232, for accounts of atrocities committed during the KPA occupation of southern Korea, see Interview 4, Appendix.
21 Ibid., p. 235.
22 Interview 2, Appendix.
24 Interview 3, Appendix.
After serving in the South Korean Army, interviewee number 3 was finally released in 1955, two years after the end of the Korean War.

Motives

On the question of people's motives for becoming refugees and leaving their native hometowns and villages and becoming separated from their families, the accounts of the personal experiences of the interviewees given above raise as many questions as they answer. According to the testimonies of the informants, it would appear that only Kim Dong-Man's elder brother Kim Dong-Jin, made a conscious ideological choice to accompany the retreating KPA North in September 1950. However, given the heated ideological confrontation of the Korean War period, and the 'ideological cleansing' that was carried out by both sides as territory changed hands, is it really accurate to describe Kim Dong-Jin's actions as a 'choice'? If 'choice' here implies the dictionary definition of the word 'the opportunity or power of choosing', or the 'possibility of an alternative course', then Kim Dong-Jin's record of resistance and opposition to the South Korean authorities effectively precluded any possibility of any 'alternative course' of action after it had become clear that Seoul was about to be retaken by the UN and South Korean forces after the Inch'on landings. Remaining in Seoul would have meant running the risk of falling into the hands of the South Korean government and probable summary execution, or, at the very least, a long period of imprisonment. Other interviewees' relatives, though they had no record of resistance to the ROK government or support of left-wing political parties, were faced with similar 'choices'. It is the contention of this author that the vast majority of those who went North had no real 'choice', as we understand the word, about what course of action to take. Whether a person 'volunteered' to accompany the retreating KPA – as was claimed by all those who had gone North at their reunions with their South Korean relatives – or whether they were all forcibly conscripted into the KPA – as is claimed by the South Korean authorities – reveals little about the circumstances those in question faced during the intense and bitter fratricidal confrontation of the Korean War.

An examination of the circumstances of the two interviewees who came South during the war reveals a depressingly similar picture. Interviewee number 2, according to his own account of his actions, along with the rest of his companions who had joined the ch'andae, was forced to abandon his wife and newly born child in North Korea and flee to the South when it had become clear that the occupying South Korean and UN forces were in headlong retreat from northern Korea after the intervention of troops from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in late 1950. His 'collaboration' with the South Korean and UN forces during the 40-day occupation meant that remaining in his village would have almost certainly led to his death at the hands of the returning KPA or, those who had suffered at the hands of the ch'andae.

As a Prisoner of War (POW) in South Korea, interviewee number 3 was also faced with limited 'choices'. During the Korean War, POW camps were not immune from the ideological battles being fought throughout Korea. Despite the fact that the Geneva Convention states clearly that all POWs are to be repatriated, the United States proposed a 'voluntary' repatriation scheme with a 'screening' process for communist North Korean and Chinese POWs. This provoked one of the greatest controversies of the Korean War, and proved to be a key point of disagreement between both sides in the armistice negotiations which dragged on for two years between 1951 and 1953, when the armistice was finally signed. The United States' allies in the UN coalition which had been formed to defend South Korea all opposed the United States' actions on this issue. 'Voluntary' repatriation in effect meant that the POW camp authorities used every means at their disposal to 'persuade' POWs not to return to North Korea or the PRC. Such means included the introduction into the camps of Nationalist Chinese guards who employed coercive methods such as physical violence and torture, and tattooing Chinese POWs with anti-communist slogans to make it impossible for them to return to the PRC. Communist POWs responded to these attempts to force them to change their political allegiance with their own coercive methods to 'persuade' those among their fellow POWs who may have wavered to remain 'loyal'. The USA's first chief negotiator at the peace talks, Admiral Joy, recorded in his personal diary the reality of the 'screening' process implemented by the UN/ South Korean authorities. According to Joy, anyone who expressed a wish to return home was 'either beaten black and blue or killed...the majority of the POWs were too terrified to frankly express their choice'.

While interviewee number 3 was still keen to emphasise that he had 'surrendered' from the KPA, and 'volunteered' for the South Korean Army, it is clear that in the bitter and violent context of POW camps in the Korean War, he had had little real free 'choice' about his destiny. In his own words, he admitted that as a POW and ex-KPA soldier, in order to prove his ideological correctness he had had no choice but to join the ROKA.

After the Korean War – 'guilt by association'

The interviewees' post-Korean war experiences in many ways mirror and catalogue the hardships suffered by all Koreans — North and South — after the intensely destructive and disastrous fratricidal conflict.

25 During the television coverage of the divided family reunions in 2000 and 2001, KBS, the South Korean state broadcasting company, invariably stated that any South Korean who had accompanied the KPA had been 'taken by force', i.e., that no South Koreans had volunteered to join the occupying North Korean Army.

27 Ibid., p. 178.
In the post-Korean War period, North Korean refugees were faced with official distrust on the part of the South Korean authorities, and the difficulty of making a living and establishing themselves in a place where they had no family or relatives to assist them. The importance of the family in Korea is not only emotional or sentimental. Family connections and influence are often the vital factors in determining success or failure in any endeavour. This is perhaps why since the Korean War, North Korean refugees have built such a strong reputation in South Korean society for their hard work, diligence and determination to succeed against the odds. Interviewee number two’s account of his post-war struggle to survive and rebuild his life epitomises this spirit:

Casual labouring… building work, that sort of thing. At that time that’s all there was. Some people couldn’t even get that…. At that time people bought makkolli29 (as a bribe) and got work that way. It was all hard to mouth then…. I’m someone who has lived without enjoying his youth… coming here I had no roots or base of support, so to be honest, I think that what I have accomplished here is pretty good. I’ve lived with no hobbies or pleasures. Most people of my age have lived their lives in the same way here in South Korea. During the Japanese occupation they were dragged off to forced labour, dragged into the army, then they had to suffer the Korean War… Our generation has suffered so badly.29

Faced with economic hardships and loneliness – the majority of divided family members separated from their families during the Korean War period either came South or went North alone – interviewees numbers 2 and 3, unable to ascertain the fates of their wives in North Korea, both remarried in South Korea after the armistice.30 Interviewee number 2 has five sons, but his wife in South Korea has passed away, while his first wife in North Korea survives. Interviewee number 3 lives with his wife in South Korea. His North Korean wife has passed away, as has their first son.

Relatives of those who went North during the Korean War, besides the struggle to rebuild their lives amidst the desolation of post-Korean War Korea, have in many cases also had to contend with deep distrust and open discrimination on the part of the South Korean authorities. While such discrimination has not been applied to all relatives of South Koreans who went North, among the interviewees Kim Dong-Man and Oh Hyŏng-Jae both recounted experiences of discrimination applied by the South Korean government against themselves or their families. The experience of the Korean War – its inconclusive ending and the absence of a peace treaty between the two Korean states – has produced a situation in which both governments on the Korean Peninsula are, perhaps understandably, obsessed by the issue of state security, which overrides all other concerns of government. Koreans’ human rights on both sides of the DMZ have suffered enormously as a result of this problem and the discriminatory policies both governments have adopted to maintain state security. In South Korea, this discrimination is referred to as yŏn’jwa’e, or to translate it literally: the ‘guilt by association’ system. According to the logic of yŏn’jwa’e, anyone whose family members were thought to have made an ideological choice to leave their native South Korea, was deemed to be ‘untrustworthy’. The most unjust and shocking example of injustice suffered by the interviewees as a result of this iniquitous ‘system’ was provided by Kim Dong-Man:

...my mother had suffered so much... my father was dragged off to the police station where they tortured him. Then he was thrown into jail and he died there... the family was turned upside down... if one person (elder brother) disappears like that, it’s bad enough, but me, our mother, chased out of our home to sleep in the grounds of Sŏnggye’nyang University, feeding on the streets, is that fair?31

In Kim Dong-Man’s case, it is clear now, and was then, that his elder brother Kim Dong-Jin, faced with the prospect of being, at best, returned to prison to finish a 10-year sentence after the KPA retreated from Seoul and, at worst, summary execution were he to have fallen into the hands of South Korean forces, had had little option but to go North with the retreating North Korean forces. This ‘ideological choice’, together with Kim Dong-Jin’s pre-war history of left-wing political activity, perhaps explains the severity of the repression his remaining family in South Korea had to bear after his departure.

For Oh Hyŏng-Jae, because his elder brother Oh Yŏng-Jae had been effectively conscripted into the KPA, and also perhaps because of his age (16) when he joined the North Korean Army, discrimination at the hands of the South Korean authorities was more subtle and certainly less severe than that suffered by Kim Dong-Man’s family. Also, Oh Hyŏng-Jae’s choice of post-war career as an officer in the South Korean Army must surely have had a considerable bearing on how the South Korean government assessed the degree of ‘risk’ he posed to state security. However, despite his service in the ROKA, Oh Hyŏng-Jae still found his advance through the ranks hindered by his brother’s actions:

29 Interview 2. Appendix.
30 According to anecdotal evidence from reunions between Korean-Americans in North Korea, many divided family members usually remarry while their wives in North Korea follow the ancient Korean custom of suyul – remaining faithful to their husbands and not remarrying. See, Yi Ch’yan-Sam (1991), P’yŏngyang i’ŏk’awŏn (P’yŏngyang Special Correspondent), Seoul: Ch’u’n’g’ang ilbo-sa, p. 185.
31 Interview 1. Kim Dong-Man.
I retired as a major. I couldn’t be a colonel due to yŏnjwaje... so I retired as a major in 1978. I was a major for eight years. My classmates all became colonels - even those below me - it was very frustrating. I came top in the entrance exam, so I was selected as a professorial candidate for the Military academy. I got the chance to go to Colorado for two years and I got my MSc there. I returned to the Academy in 1964, and 1966 was a crucial time for me... At that time the KCIA summoned me to KCIA Headquarters - actually, it was Military Counter Intelligence. I thought my time had come. A military investigator told me: ‘Your elder brother is in North Korea, do you know?’ I said, ‘Yes, I know. He was drafted. He was only sixteen.’

‘He is living in North Korea, so you must be retired immediately.’

‘Why should I be retired?’, I asked.

‘If your brother visits South Korea, maybe on a mission, then he may visit you first because you are in the military. You know some secrets... if you tell him something, that’s a crime. so you should be retired.’

‘I won’t retire!’, I said, ‘I’m doing my best in the Military academy. What have I done wrong?’

And the person who told me my brother was in North Korea was Roh Tae Woo - the future president. He was a major then. He was an old major, and I was a fresh captain. Finally I was OK’d. But after that, yŏnjwaje applied to me. I became a major, but I was promoted after my classmates.

Interviewee number 4 and her family escaped ‘punishment’ for her brother’s flight North because another elder brother had served in the South Korean Army, and because of testimony given by the family’s neighbours to the effect that neither her elder brother nor her family were in any way ‘political’. Asked if she had suffered repression at the hands of the South Korean authorities after the war, interviewee number 4 answered the following:

No, there was nothing like that. If my brother had been involved in politics here in the neighbourhood... some people were involved like that. Some people did suffer repression... some people who were involved in politics during the occupation. Not because of my eldest brother, but my other elder brother was in the South Korean Army. So, if the Inch’ŏn landing had been later, I don’t know whether we would also have been killed. In Inch’ŏn there’s a place called Wŏlmindo, and the families of the police, soldiers... well, I can’t even speak of it.

The people living next door suffered. We were terrified. When the UN forces landed, then it was the other way around. The people who had suffered took their revenge on those who had helped the KPA. They (pro-North Koreans) had had a list of houses and we were on the list, with the dates and times of when people had been shot. If the landing had been late, we too would have been killed like that. Not because of our eldest brother, but because of the other brother who was in the South Korean Army.

Having one brother in the South Korean Army and another who had gone North could have placed interviewee four’s family in the worst possible of situations. However, as the KPA were forced out after the Inch’ŏn landings, and what had happened to her eldest brother did not become clear until after the war, interviewee four’s family luckily escaped the fate of so many who suffered because of the ‘ideological cleansing’ of both sides.

Comparison of the accounts of the interviews of families whose relatives had gone North with the interviews done 4 years previously in 1997 of North Korean refugees during research for the author’s PhD thesis reveals some similarities in both Korean states’ treatments of divided families. Anecdotal evidence from interviews with divided family members whose relatives live in North Korea shows that one policy that has been applied to divided families in North Korea, who are deemed to be ‘politically unreliable’ by the North Korean authorities, has been to force those whose relatives went South to relocate from their hometowns to other more isolated and inhospitable areas of the country farther away from the border with South Korea.

Now I’ve no idea where my younger sisters, my sister-in-law or my nephews and nieces are living. Everyone from my elder brother’s house has been chased away. Throwing them out of their hometown - what kind of policy is that?

Question: So, now you’ve no idea where the rest of your family are in North Korea?

No, none at all.

32 Korean Central Intelligence Agency.
33 Kor. - Pungch’ap’ae.
34 Roh Tae Woo was elected president in December 1987. He served in office from 1988 to 1993.
35 Interview 7. Oh Hyoeng-Jae.
36 Those who had assisted the KPA occupation.
37 Interviewee number four’s other elder brother was wounded in the Korean War and died from the effects of the wounds he had received shortly after the war ended.
38 This is an apparent reference to ‘ideological cleansing’ carried out by pro-North Koreans during the 3-month North Korean occupation of Inch’ŏn in 1950.
39 Interviewee number four’s family were ‘on the list’ for ideological cleansing because of her elder brother’s service in the South Korean Army.
40 Interview 4. Appendix.
41 The term ch’ok’a in the original Korean is not gender-specific and can refer to both nephews and nieces.
42 Kor. - k’in chip - ‘house of the head of the family’.
As with the South Korean system of yŏnjwaje, however, the practice of enforced internal exile in North Korea has clearly not been applied across the board to all relatives of those who 'crossed to the other side'. Similarly to the cases described above of Oh Hyŏng-Jae and interviewee number 4, a person's record of military service seems to have played an important role in the authorities' considerations of whether or not to apply discriminatory measures against them or their families. When asked whether his relatives were still living in his hometown in North Korea and had not suffered the fate of the above interviewee's relatives and been sent into internal exile, one North Korean refugee informant in the author's 1997 survey replied the following:

...my brother was killed in the army, their side's army. There you have it. Brother fighting brother! I was in the South Korean Army, and he was in the North Korean Army. So, they can't very well chase my sister-in-law away from her home, can they? After her husband was killed fighting for them.44

Another factor which appears to have played a significant role in determining the North Korean authorities' treatment of relatives of those who went South has also been personal relationships. One interviewee in the author's 1997 thesis, and one of only a handful of informants who had actually been able to contact their relatives in the North, explained why his sister and her family had enjoyed a relatively privileged lifestyle in North Korea:

My elder sister's husband, he died a few years ago, was quite high up in the regime. Everyone from the North knows him if you mention his name (name deleted to preserve anonymity)...even after he died, they continued to receive his salary. Because of Kim Il Sung they don't want for anything... Also, my nephew, my sister's boy, is a (North Korean) state representative. He is (name deleted).45

This testimony seems to support the view that, in the North as in the South, personal connections have played a vital role in determining a person's chances of success in life. It is, of course, impossible to state on the basis of such anecdotal evidence, whether such examples are mere exceptions to the rule, or whether repression or discrimination against the relatives of those perceived to be of 'unsafe' class backgrounds is in reality not as widespread as North Korea's policy of extreme secrecy would encourage us to believe.

Estimation of the true extent of North Korean government repression or discrimination against those whose relatives left North Korea for the South is, therefore, very problematic. All the evidence we have of such repression is based on interviews with divided family members such as those reported here and in the author's 1997 survey, and the testimony of North Korean defectors. The evidence from the interviewees here is also indirect, in that the small percentage of divided family members who have learnt something of their relatives' fates have done so through other parties, i.e., they themselves have not been witness to events in North Korea, but have succeeded in tracing their relatives by clandestine means. The evidence of defectors is also impossible to verify because of the DPRK's refusal to allow access to its territory or citizens for independent researchers. This policy, which P'yŏngyang has pursued vigorously since 1963, has proved to be a rather double-edged sword for North Korea's image in the rest of the international community. While the degree of secrecy North Korea has imposed on the release of any information pertaining to its people or society has undermined efforts to criticise the DPRK's human rights record for the simple reason that it is impossible to verify the true nature of the human rights situation in North Korea because of an absence of data; it has also given rise to a plethora of accusations and claims, many of which seem to be based upon anecdotal evidence from defectors, which may or may not be completely accurate, and exaggerated data. Unsurprisingly, many, but by no means all, of these claims and criticisms have come from South Korea. On the issue of the forced relocation of families in North Korea, one South Korean publication from a semi-official research centre in Seoul states the following:

North Korea has been classifying a massive group of separated families, which comprise 25–30 per cent of the entire population, as "traitors who defected to South Korea" and is treating them as part of the hostile masses. These people continue to have their fundamental rights deprived and they receive various disadvantages because of the behaviour of their ancestors or events which occurred during the Japanese occupation or the Korean War.46

The publication then proceeds to support its argument with the testimony of one defector who recounts how one of his classmates had been banished to Jagang Province in North Korea because of his father's alleged pro-South Korean behaviour in the Korean War. While it is not my intention to discount or cast aspersions on such testimony – the vast majority of such anecdotal evidence does strongly support the view that there is discrimination against the relatives and families of those who went South – the point here is that such evidence cannot be used as a basis for claiming that all family members with 'unsafe class background' are repressed in North Korea. Also, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the claim that separated families make up '25–30 per cent of the entire population' is not supported by any believable demographic evidence and appears to be based on the exaggerated estimates of numbers of divided families in Korea claimed by

44 Foley, James, op. cit., p. 300.

such organisations as the OAFNP and the ROKNRC. Our lack of access to North Korean society, while naturally raising our suspicions, means that, quite simply, we are unable to ascertain the true extent of such human rights infringements in the DPRK.

In the ROK also, although primary research among divided family members and their relatives is possible, and many informants such as Kim Dong-Man and Oh Hyöng-Jae are now prepared to speak openly about their family histories, without further research among a much larger sample of divided family members, it is also difficult to say to what extent the ‘guilt by association’ system has been applied. Nonetheless, the fact that two interviewees out of the five whose relatives had gone to the North had suffered as a result of this system would indicate that its application was relatively widespread, certainly in the days before South Korea’s democratisation.

The politicisation of this humanitarian issue by both states on the Korean Peninsula has proved a powerful deterrent to separated family members’ desires to trace their relatives in order to ascertain their fates. Although the ‘guilt by association’ system was officially abolished in the ROK in 1989, before the 2000–2001 reunions only one of the interviewees had made any attempt to trace his relatives in North Korea through official South Korean channels:

I applied... I sent them (South Korean Red Cross) a letter and telephoned. They said they could only do it if they had a name and address. Well I know the name of course, but how could I possibly know the address? He went to the North... So, I wrote ‘don’t know’ for the address and explained that he had gone north. So they said it wasn’t possible. They couldn’t find him. They could only do it for people living here who had hometowns in the North, those who had come south.48

Evidence from other interviewees suggests strongly that the agreement reached between the two Korean leaders at the 2000 Summit was an important watershed in this sense. Apart from Hwang Pyöng-Wōn, all the interviewees had remarked that it had been virtually unimaginable for them to consider tracing their relatives before the agreement was reached by Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong II on reuniting divided families at the June 15th Summit in P’yöngyang. This was particularly true for those whose relatives had gone North:

That was unthinkable then for the relatives of those who had gone to the North. Even now there are many families like that. The ‘guilt by association’ system was only relaxed in 1989. Before that, people couldn’t work in
government institutions or in many jobs if they had relatives who had gone north. Many bright and talented people couldn’t use their abilities because of that... Even now after the 2000 Summit, while some have applied (to trace their relatives) there are still many people who stay quiet. During the military regimes here, many people lived in fear that they would be suspected of having links with the North.49

Given the history of both governments’ attitudes to those of its citizens who had relatives ‘on the other side’, the willingness of the interviewees to provide such information as has been published in this book provides impressive affirmation of the process of democratisation and liberalisation which has swept South Korea since the success of the democracy movement against the Chun Doo Hwan dictatorship and the advent of free elections in 1987.

However, despite the impressive and rapid process of democratisation that has transformed South Korea into a thriving democracy in less than 14 years, for Korea’s divided family members—whether they are of North or South Korean origin—the ongoing confrontation between the two Korean states still plays an overarching role in determining the majority of first-generation divided family members’ attitudes to their tragic situations. As has been discussed above, the majority of divided family members in South Korea are, as yet, unaware of the fates of their relatives in North Korea, and, perhaps what is more revealing of the state of inter-Korean relations, the majority of them have made no attempt to even trace their missing family members.50 Whilst the ‘sunshine policy’ and the subsequent 15 June 2000 Summit between the two Korean leaders in P’yöngyang have done much to encourage divided family members to make efforts to trace their relatives, comparison of the total numbers of applications for the 2000–2001 reunions (116,000) with the estimated total numbers of first-generation divided family members in the South would indicate that the continuing tension in inter-Korean relations, and lack of any real progress towards a comprehensive peace settlement between North and South still inhibit the majority of divided family members from attempting to trace their relatives. The most commonly quoted reason for this given by first-generation divided family members themselves, both in the author’s 1997 survey and during the interviews conducted in 2001, was ‘fear of causing problems’ for their relatives. When asked whether he had tried to contact his relatives, one respondent to the 1997 survey answered the following:

I was going to try, but I was worried it might cause problems for them, so I won’t try. I know people who have tried, and it’s difficult anyway, but even

47 By official channels here, I am referring to the South Korean Unification Ministry or the ROKNRC.
48 Interview 7, Hwang Pyöng-Wōn.
49 Interview 1, Kim Dong-Man.
50 According to the results of the author’s 1997 survey of North Korean refugees in South Korea, 83 per cent of respondents to the postal questionnaire survey had no knowledge of the fates of their relatives in the North, and 68 per cent had made no attempt to verify their relatives’ whereabouts or status. Foley, James, op. cit., pp. 218–220.
Both the respondents to the 2001 survey who had gone South from their native homes in North Korea answered in a similar way, and both emphasised that political liberalisation under Kim Dae Jung, and the 15 June 2000 Summit had persuaded them to change their minds and apply to meet their relatives in North Korea:

...I didn’t even think about it before. It’s only since things have been liberalised that we can do that. At that time (1972) you could have been accused of being a ‘red’ or something. It wasn’t thinkable then. We couldn’t even dream of meeting people from the North.

People from Yŏnbyŏn work here don’t they. I’ve met some women from there. They said they could help me to meet my family. But that’s just too dangerous. It’s dangerous for them also if people find out. Some people have met through the US, but when you consider that the politics of the two countries are completely opposed, I don’t think it’s a good idea... but, after the Kim Dae Jung government came in, after the establishment of exchanges and links, that’s when I applied.

Interviewee number 3, who had joined the ROK Army after being taken prisoner during the Korean War, also cited the fact that he had served in the KPA and that the North Korean authorities were believed to withhold mail from their citizens as reasons for his not having applied to trace his relatives sooner:

I didn’t apply then (1972). I didn’t even think about it. I was in the KPA so they (the North Korean authorities) will think I’m dead... I didn’t even try... They say you can send letters between North Korea and Japan. When I went to the US I was going to try, but I didn’t. And, if you write a letter, they don’t pass it on. Even if you try, it’s a waste of time.

The key point here is that even though both informants had the opportunity to trace their relatives, one by clandestine means and the other by mail from a country which had postal links with the DPRK, neither had tried because of their past histories – one had joined the South Korean Army and the other had served in the *ch'andae* during the UN occupation of his village – and the fear that this would somehow endanger or disadvantage their relatives in North Korea. Without access to North Korea’s divided families, it is impossible to say whether or not their fears are indeed justified. Nor was such reluctance to attempt to contact relatives restricted to those who had come South from their native northern Korea. Only one interviewee among the six whose relatives had gone North – Hwang Pyŏng-Wŏn – had tried to contact his family member in the North.

**UNOFFICIAL CHANNELS OF CONTACT**

Another issue raised by the politicisation of the divided families issue is the unreliability and lack of continuity in official efforts to solve the problem. Progress on resolving the issue is clearly wholly dependent on political progress between the two Koreas. While inter-Korean relations enjoy a period of improvement, progress is allowed on the issue of the divided families. However, as relations deteriorate, progress is halted and divided family members are faced with further frustration as relations between the two Koreas’ Red Cross societies collapse and divided family members are again forced to wait years for an improvement in the situation which will allow negotiations to resume.

The poor state of inter-Korean relations, therefore, and the ongoing politicisation of the divided families problem have meant that rather than run the risk of attempting to trace or contact their relatives by official channels, those divided family members who have tried to trace their relatives in North Korea have relied on clandestine means to do so. Such means can be divided into three approaches:

1. Contact through overseas Koreans – private citizens, usually of Korean ethnic descent, of Japan, the PRC, the USA, Canada, etc. – who have some sort of contact with North Korea from their country of residence.
2. Reunion agencies that have appeared in response to the lack of official channels – these agencies are private organisations which operate from third countries such as the USA, Canada and the PRC. A fee is charged for their services, but usually only in the event of success. Most of these agencies operate from Yŏnbyŏn – (Ch. – Yanbian) – the Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province in the PRC.
3. Contact through participation at international events – conferences, etc. – which are attended by North and South Koreans.

Although all these means are unofficial, South Korean citizens still have to apply for government permission from the Ministry for Unification before initiating any contact with North Koreans.

Table 4.1 gives a breakdown of family reunion applications and successful reunions using these three clandestine methods in 1997.

The first thing to note about the data represented in the table is that as the numbers are from the ROK Unification Ministry, some divided family members may have traced their relatives without the permission of the ROK government. However,
5 Reunion

INTRODUCTION

After having looked at the personal histories of the interviewees, in this chapter we will examine their personal experiences during their brief reunions with their family members—their memories of reunion, the difficulties they felt in communicating with their lost family members, and some of the psychological effects of the trauma experienced through meeting loved ones they had not met in some cases for over 50 years.

The reunions agreed by the two Korean leaders at the 15 June 2000 Summit in P’yŏngyang were only the second officially sponsored reunions of divided family members to have ever taken place in Korea since the armistice agreement was signed on 27 July 1953 to bring the Korean War to an end. The first reunion of first-generation divided family members took place in Korea in 1985. On that occasion, visiting groups of 50 divided family members were exchanged between Seoul and P’yŏngyang, but only 65 were successfully reunited with their relatives. Because of the pain and disappointment caused to those divided family members who were not able to meet their relatives on that occasion, the Red Cross societies of South and North Korea, while agreeing to follow a similar format for the 2000–2001 reunions, also agreed that whereabouts and status of relatives be ascertained before finalisation of the lists of divided family members chosen to participate in the reunion programme. Accordingly, lists of relatives were exchanged by the two sides prior to the reunion in order for the authorities on both sides to ascertain status and whereabouts of those concerned. According to the format agreed, 100 persons of North Korean origin living in South Korea applying to meet their relatives would be reunited with them in P’yŏngyang, and 100 persons of South Korean origin living in North Korea applying to meet their relatives in the South would come to Seoul. These three agreed reunions would take place simultaneously in the respective Korean capitals. Each visiting first-generation divided family member

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Table 4.1 Clandestine reunions – 1997

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<th>Overseas Koreans</th>
<th>Reunion agency</th>
<th>International event</th>
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</tbody>
</table>


given the draconian nature of South Korea’s National Security Law (NSL), it is reasonable to assume that such cases will be few in number. As can be seen from the numbers of applications for that year and the low rate of success (11.6 per cent), tracing family members in North Korea by whatever means is a procedure which more often than not meets with failure. Also, of the three methods available to divided family members, ‘overseas Koreans’ is by far the most popular and shows the highest degree of success. Only two family reunions were achieved by the good offices of ‘Reunion Agencies’ out of 139 reported attempts in 1997. Given the considerable time and expense reportedly involved in this method, and the heartbreak of failure, it is clear that only the most determined divided family members can be expected to resort to such clandestine means to contact their relatives. Furthermore, as North Korea’s economic deterioration and political isolation have worsened, border controls between the DPRK and PRC have been tightened considerably. This must clearly have exerted a negative effect on efforts by Chinese Koreans to contact DPRK citizens at the behest of their South Korean relatives.

Among the respondents to the author’s 1997 survey of North Korean refugees living in the ROK, only 17 per cent knew the whereabouts of their relatives in North Korea, and only 12 per cent had succeeded in exchanging correspondence with them. All of these had traced their relatives and exchanged correspondence through ‘overseas Koreans’, usually through relatives or friends in the Korean Autonomous Prefecture in the PRC, Yŏnbyŏn (Ch. Yanbian). None of the respondents to the 1997 survey had been able to actually meet their relatives.

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55 South Korea’s National Security Law (Kor. Kukka poan-pip) is a catch-all piece of legislation which has been employed by the South Korean government to ensure state security in the confrontation with the North. First passed by the administration of Yi Sŏng-Man (Syngman Rhee) in 1948, it has been strengthened and used by successive presidents in the South to quash dissent. According to the terms of the law, South Korean citizens must first obtain permission from the ROK government before attempting to contact North Korean or North Korean citizens. The NSL has frequently been the target of human rights organisations in Korea and abroad, who have called for its abolition or substantial revision.

57 Ibid., pp. 220–221.