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Popular Cultural Exchanges between South and North Korea as “Light Step”

Kim, Sookyung

(Research Fellow, Center for North Korean Human Rights Research)

The Panmunjom Declaration on April 27 has provided an opportunity to facilitate inter-Korean cooperation, exchange, visit, and contact in various fields. The inter-Korean popular cultural exchanges have so far focused on political neutrality and symbolism rather than something that can induce public interest. Millennial Generation, who will lead the national unification, communicate with each other through emotions rather than reasons, images rather than texts. Therefore, there should be inter-Korean popular cultural exchanges that can appeal to their sentiment. To that end, it is necessary for both Koreas to recognize each other as a subject for interesting cultural exchange, going beyond a burden of grand discourse of unification.

Spring has arrived at the Korean Peninsula in 2018 with a sound of singing. A South Korean troupe traveled to Pyongyang on April in a reciprocal cultural visit after North Korea staged performance in Gangneung and Seoul, South Korea in February. The scene of South and North Korean singers holding hands and singing together “Our Wish is

Unification” struck a chord in the hearts of North and South Korean people that had been frozen so far. The Panmunjom Declaration on April 27 has provided an opportunity to facilitate inter-Korean cooperation, exchange, visit, and contact in various fields.

The Millennial Generation and Inter-Korean Exchange of Popular Culture

Culture can do things that politics cannot do, as evident from the fact that the thaw between the two Koreas began with North Korean troupe’s performance in South Korea. Over the past decade from 2008 to 2017, only eight cases of social and cultural exchanges had been reported between South and North Korea.¹⁾ During that period, cultural differences between the two Koreas had widened and a cultural common ground had narrowed. It is very important to find some common grounds in promoting cultural exchanges with North Korea. Culture is a symbol as well as an entertainment. Songs such as “Our Wish is Unification” may symbolize the desire for unity between the two Koreas, but if failed to provide an entertainment factor, they will just be consumed as one-time event. In the end, the continuation of cultural exchanges depends on how much attention they can draw from South and North Koreans.

Although there are various fields that can promote cultural exchange, such as sports, academics, and arts, popular culture is the area that induces people’s participation the most in the process and achievement of cultural exchanges. When the news came out earlier this year that South Korean troupe will visit North Korea for musical performance, which South Korean girl groups would be picked to go to the North became a hot topic among South Korean netizens. There was also some criticism that which entertainers would get to go was not really important at this critical juncture when grand discourses were discussed, such as the declaration of an end to the war and denuclearization. And the older generation blamed young

1) Ministry of Unification, Monthly Report Inter-Korean Exchanges and Cooperation, July 2017.

people for their lack of knowledge and perception in history.

However, it cannot be overlooked that issues of peace and unification of the Korean Peninsula have always been regarded as a heavy topic due to their political aspect, making young people indifferent toward the issues. However, their viewpoints on unification are very important given that the young generation will drive a sea change of unification. Today, those in their 20s and 30s, the so-called Millennial Generation, communicate with each other through emotions rather than reasons, images rather than texts. Moreover, this young generation, whose youth was dominated by the shadow of low growth, is characterized by its pessimistic outlook on the future and a cool-headed perception of reality.²⁾ Therefore, it is important to make a theme of unification an interesting and familiar subject for young people, rather than preaching the grand vision of unification.

Difficulties in Inter-Korean Popular Cultural Exchanges

One of the problems with inter-Korean popular cultural exchange is that there is not much common ground in popular culture of the two countries that can be enjoyed by South and North Koreans. Since North Korean popular culture has only served as a means of political instigation and education of the masses, there is virtually not much content that can appeal to the universal sentiment of South Koreans. The North Korean troupe had struggled to select songs before it staged performance in the South last February, because it was difficult to choose North Korean songs that did not contain the aspects of regime propaganda. Among a total of 46 songs, only nine songs were selected. “Moran Bong” was excluded from the selection since its lyrics such as “revolution” and “construction of socialism” were considered problematic. “Baekdu and Hanna are My Country” was performed after

2) The Millennial Generation was a term first used in *Generation: The History of America's Future* written and published in 1991 by Neil Howe and William Strauss. This refers to the younger generation who were born between 1980 and 2000. They are the most well-educated generation in history, but are facing real challenges, such as low average income and burden from student loans since they entered a society after the 2007 global financial crisis.

some of its lyrics that symbolize Kim Il-sung were revised.

In addition, from the perspective of North Korea, South Korean popular culture is defined as “capitalist vulgar style” and strictly cracked down so there are restrictions on pop culture exchange between the two Koreas. By revising its penal code in 2013, North Korea has increased the punishment level for those who bring in and distribute the “decadent, erotic, and obscene” external culture from five years of hard labor to the maximum of ten years. This may be regarded as a precautionary measure to block the secret distribution of South Korean videos in the North. Kim Jong-un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission, said at the 7th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea in 2016, “We must never let flamboyant ideological culture and perverted lifestyles invade our nation,” which in fact indirectly refers to South Korean pop culture.

As a result, the inter-Korean popular cultural exchanges are usually consumed as one-time event only when a dramatic opportunity for the inter-Korean reconciliation occurs. And even that, the content is filled with a repertoire that focuses on political neutrality and symbolism rather than something that can induce public interest. Folk songs, classical songs, and traditional songs that largely comprise the repertoire make it difficult to attract the public interest in the long term. Therefore, it seems natural for South Korean young generation to enjoy writing comments on the internet about whether South Korean girl group Red Velvet will sing its representative song “Red Taste” in front of the North Korean public in Pyongyang. Though it may seem thoughtless and pathetic to the eyes of the older generation who directly or indirectly suffered the horrors of war, the inter-Korean relations will be led by younger generations, who do not experience war and anti-communism.

Popular Cultural Exchange Measures for Building Consensus between South and North Korea

Interviews with North Korean defectors reveal that cultural demands of

North Koreans are unexpectedly high. Defectors say that North Koreans secretly watch South Korea's soap operas and listen to its songs not because of the longing for South Korean society, but because there is no North Korean culture they can enjoy. Since the Panmunjom Declaration has paved the way for inter-Korean cultural exchange, it is necessary to help North Korea develop its pop culture on its own. It is not an easy task considering that North Korea has thus far been extremely vigilant about the influx of foreign culture and used popular culture as a means of the regime propaganda. However, Chairman Kim Jong-un, who attended the South Korean art troupe's performance in Pyongyang, expressed his interest in South Korean popular culture, which could be a kind of signal that North Korean society is gradually changing. Once North Korea is able to produce quality cultural contents on its own, those contents can also be consumed and enjoyed by South Koreans.

In addition, it is necessary for the two Koreas to jointly create cultural contents that can be enjoyed by the two. A consensus can be built only when the involved parties have mutual experiences in the same period. Therefore, in order to restore the inter-Korean homogeneity, it is required to make as many opportunities as possible for both Koreas to see, hear, and talk about the same things, going beyond an emphasis of sharing history and language. However, the cultures of South and North Korea greatly differ in terms of contents and period. The pop culture of South Korea is too post-modern for North Koreans while that of North Korea is too pre-modern for South Koreans. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to create repercussions on a large scale simply through inter-Korean cultural exchange. Rather, it is better to find common grounds between the two Koreas that may hold mutual interest, create cultural contents together, and share them with each other.

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The so-called “policy of small steps” of the West German Prime Minister, Willy Brandt, is assessed to have ultimately become a cornerstone of unification

of East and West Germany by inducing “change through rapprochement.” It is time for South and North Korea to take a “light step” for recognizing and learning about each other as a partner for cultural exchange, while staying a bit away from the grand discourse of unification. There should be a change of viewpoints of the older generation, who are dissatisfied with the outpouring of soft tales and discourses about North Korea. After all, unification is a culture, not politics, for the Millennial Generation, who considers trivial today more important than grandiose tomorrow.

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