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Braving the odds for one Korea dream

Three decades of struggle fail to tire Kiyul Chung

By Manzie Vincent Doh, in Beijing, China, for Silent Heroes, Invisible Bridges

Seated among a handful of his countrymen in small tents right in front of the United Nations headquarters, he drank salty water for 24 days, punching the air and holding placards in a move to oppose the admission of North and South Korea into the United Nations as separate nations.

Please meet Kiyul Chung, founder of the 'Young Koreans United USA' in 1984, a movement that later became the forum to spearhead frantic calls for the unification of the North and the South into one Korea.

"We decided to go on a hunger strike during those days of the UN General Assembly from October 1 till about October 24," Chung who now lives in Beijing, China, recalls. "Somebody needed to tell the world that Korea is still one; that the separation came against the wishes of the people."

This ocean of commitment has spent over 30 years of his life on Earth crusading for the unification of the now Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK), and Korea Republic - otherwise referred to, as North Korea, and South Korea respectively, into one country.

The Korean peninsula was ruled by Japan from 1910 until the end of World War II. Following the surrender of Japan in 1945, American administrators divided the peninsula along the 38th Parallel, with United States troops occupying the southern part and Soviet troops occupying the northern part.

The 38th Parallel increasingly became a political border between the two Koreas. Although reunification negotiations continued in the months preceding the war, tension intensified, eventually leading to open warfare on 25 June 1950.

The incentives behind Chung's deeply rooted dream for a 'One Korea' were far from being ordinary.

"I fully realized that we the Koreans, Africans, Black Americans, Native Americans, Palestinians, and all the other oppressed and colonized people around the globe are much in the same shoes in terms of being exploited and enslaved by Western and American imperial powers," says

Chung.

The atrocities of foreign powers against the Korean people in the early 1950s, consuming over four million people lives, followed a complete destruction of the entire land in the course of the 3 year-long war along the 38th Parallel.

According to Chung, the bloodshed became unbearable for any conscious Korean.

At 55, Kiyul Chung lives in in Beijing, China, is ready for more sleepless nights and painful times in the wake of his struggle.

The movement according to Chung is about diverse views, traditions, customs, religions, languages and philosophies.

Apparently treading a narrow road, this dream was transported overseas. Koreans in over 50 countries across five continents got together for this goal, as Chung, in different capacities over different periods. Expression of vivid solidarity also came from 'friends' of Korea.

Travelling almost non-stop across Australia, Europe, Central and South America, Asia, Africa, and the former Soviet Union, Chung held talks and addressed forums with both Koreans and non-Koreans to spotlight the need for rub off imperial lines of division.

With activists from other 33 countries in July 1989, Chung led an International Peace March for the Reunification of Korea in North Korea.

"The people here were excited. It was the first time an event of this magnitude was taking place in this part of Korea," says Chung. The activist could motivate local people who came out support the cause in numbers.

Even though some of his efforts for a reunified Korea may have fallen on bad soil, some efforts actually fell on fertile one too.

After over six decades since division of Korea, the Korean people were able to achieve a milestone on June 15, 2000 when the two national leaders met in Pyongyang, capital of the North, for an all inclusive and first ever summit to set the future tone of the reunification of "our divided land."

The sensitization campaigns towards a 'One Korea' bore more fruits. Chung says another historic milestone came on October 4, 2007 with a Joint Declaration by the two national leaders; President Roh Moo-Hyun also visited Pyongyang to meet Chairman Kim Jong Il. This move, Chung believes, further cemented the June 15 Joint Declaration of 2000 which called for greater understanding among Koreans, among other things.

Chung still has strong reasons to believe in the full realization of his dream; but there are also regrets for the big wall put forth by those he refers to as 'Korean national traitors' to stall sincere peaceful efforts.

"Most of our socio-political and financial achievements have been lost, robbed, taken away by these traitors in three years of Lee Myongbak regime," Chung says.

Chung says colonialism and imperialism around the globe pushed him to adopt a more holistic approach in his 'One Korea' dream.

In 2003, he was appointed founding secretary general of the World Culture Open, founded in New York. The WCO is a movement of anti-cultural imperialism.

"Seeing people of all races, religions and cultures living peacefully, without discrimination, and other forms of prejudices is the biggest thing that would have happen to the world," says Chung.

As Kiyul Chung continues his reunification drive for North and South Korea, many today, both Koreans and non-Koreans attest to his work and attitude.

"Kiyul is a man who has always believed in the reunification of the two Koreas. But what has attracted me more to his activities is the passion and conviction with which he speaks on very difficult and 'delicate issues' surrounding the Korean peninsula," says Yoichi Shimatsu, Former Editor of Japan Times Weekly.

The Japanese origin journalist who has long-time acquaintance with Chung says the issues raised by Chung are those which can only come from a person who is ready to sacrifice all he is left with in the world for the sake of a course he strongly believes in.

Japan plays a significant role in issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula and is one of the nations involved in the six-party-talks aimed at re-drawing the destiny of the region.

Shimatsu believes that Chung has been able to highlight that something terribly went wrong in determining the destiny of the region.

But to Lee Gaehwan, President of Tongilnews in Korea Republic, it is Chung's commitment and consistency in his course that has sustained their friendship.

Gaehwan says many Koreans now know their true history, but for fear of becoming prisoners of conscience, some have unfortunately either gone silent or supported the reunification campaign underground.

"This is why I really respect Kiyul in all he is doing to our land. Our children will grow up and learn this struggle he's been putting up with," says Gaehwan.

Restless Kiyul Chung is embarking on his 81st trip to North Korea in connection with the reunification of the two slices of what has historically been one country.

Soaring escalation after the North Korean missile attack resulting in killing of South Korean citizens highlights the hurdles on the way to realizing the dream in reality. In three decades, Chung has not only kept his own candle alight but also shared the flame with countless others.

Realistically speaking Chung is one of many humble advocates of peace and harmony in the Korean peninsula.

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