

# Pride of the People: South Korea and Korean Nationalism

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The July 6 plane crash in San Francisco airport that killed three passengers caused guilt amongst South Koreans because the flight was operated by South Korea's second-largest flag carrier Asiana Airlines. President Park Geun-hye published a statement of regret and the chief executive of Asiana Airlines apologized, not only to the passengers and their families, but to the entire South Korean nation.<sup>1</sup> Being a strongly united race, South Koreans felt a shared sense of responsibility over the incident. They are embarrassed over how it will reflect on their country and worried that it could tarnish the Republic's image worldwide.

And of course South Koreans feel proud and honoured when their nationals succeed internationally, as when Ban Ki-moon was appointed Secretary-General of the United Nations and Kim Jim-yong became President of the World Bank. Their enormous nationalistic spirit engenders a great sense of collective pride as well as shame.

Nationalism is a widespread ideological force in the modern world, supporting the nation-building of newly-independent countries. It has different meanings. To Miscevic,<sup>2</sup> nationalism is comprised of two fundamental values: the attitude of the citizens of a nation in caring about their identity as citizens of that nation, and the actions taken by citizens in seeking to achieve or sustain some form of political sovereignty.

For the South Koreans who experienced two distressing historical events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely the Japanese occupation and the Korean War, nationalism was a prominent factor in their nation-building. It helped them recover from the trauma of colonization and war. Koreans have exhibited a strong sense of national pride,

and worked diligently to break away from the misery of colonization and war. The nationalistic feeling among South Koreans is vibrant; they feel connected to their country, and are inspired to participate actively in improving it.

During the 1950s, South Korea was identified as one of the poorest countries in the world and remained so for over a decade. The 35 years of Japanese occupation and the three-year Korean War that resulted in the split of the country into two caused enormous economic losses and huge casualties devastating the South Koreans. Nevertheless they understood the importance of letting go and focusing on the reconstruction of their nation. Nationalism has been the stimulus for South Koreans in the rebuilding of their country through hard work.

Today, South Korea, with its weighty economic position, has risen from poverty to become one of the most influential states in the world. It is a member of the G20<sup>3</sup> major economies and is ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in the world economy as at 2011. It has a total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$ 1.116 trillion according to World Bank statistics.<sup>4</sup> South Koreans proudly attribute their economic miracle to the strong solidarity amongst them.

## South Korean National Identity

South Korean national identity is based on ethnic homogeneity.<sup>5</sup> The population of South Korea in 2011 was 49.78 million, 97.25 per cent of them ethnic Koreans. This single ethnic society facilitated the smooth spread of the nationalistic sentiment among the people. Their strong sense of unity and national pride stem from an identity based on a common bloodline and a shared ancestry.

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The Koreans have a common belief that their country was established when Dangun, the legendary son of the Heavenly God and a woman from a bear-totem tribe established the first kingdom, namely the Gojoseon, dating back to 2333 B. C.<sup>6</sup> This belief is seen in the proclamation of October 3 as the National Foundation Day, a public holiday to honour and commemorate the establishment of Gojoseon. Having faith in the Dangun myth, Koreans proclaim themselves descendants of the bear, unlike the Chinese who identify themselves as descendants of the dragon.

The Korean language is another aspect that unites ethnic Koreans. Hangeul is the unique Korean alphabet created in 1446 by King Sejong the Great and scholars of that period.<sup>7</sup> Before the creation of Hangeul, Koreans borrowed Chinese characters to express themselves in writing. The common people found Chinese characters both difficult and time-consuming to learn. Hence, only the noble class managed to express their thoughts in writing.

King Sejong, feeling pity for his populace, worked together with scholars to develop an alphabet that could be easily learned by everyone. He officially announced the new alphabet in 1446. It includes 17 consonants and 11 vowels, which, in various combinations, make up all the sounds of the Korean language. The creation of Hangeul effectively distinguished ethnic Koreans from neighbouring societies such as the Chinese and Japanese.

**Nationalism: Benefits and Disadvantages**

The influence of nationalism can be examined from two perspectives: it can be a positive or a

destructive force. There are three benefits. The *first* benefit of nationalism is that it discourages imperialism. Nationalism was the driving force for colonized countries in their gaining of independence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eighty-five per cent of global nationalistic movements were initiated to oppose colonial or feudal-absolutist rule.<sup>8</sup> Territorial nationalism can be interpreted as anti-colonial. Nationalism is the desire to reject various economic controls and foreign pretensions to cultural superiority.

Japan, through her conquest and rule of Korea, caused the awakening and sustaining of Korean nationalism,<sup>10</sup> providing a negative, yet most powerful motivator for it to grow — a national enemy. Japanese colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula for about 35 years was seen as involving political suppression, economic exploitation, and cultural assimilation.<sup>11</sup>

Under Japan's iron-fisted rule, Koreans endured severe living conditions for years. They struggled to regain their state autonomy and dignity. Their common desire to restore their cultural, economic and political identity and to expel the Japanese from their homeland was seen in their constant resistance to Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and that developed into sustained nationalism. Japanese imperialism in Korea ultimately ended when Japan surrendered during the Second World War.

The *second* benefit of nationalism is that it boosts economic development. Nationalistic sentiment helped in the economic growth of the 1960s. The 1950-53 Korean War led to a wide rift

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among the Koreans with the division of the nation into North and South Korea. An estimated three million people lost their lives as a result of the three-year battle. Besides, the country's economy suffered serious destruction. Infrastructure such as roads, government buildings, and bridges were destroyed, together with half of all homes.<sup>12</sup>

The South Korean GDP per capita in the 1950s was below US\$100.<sup>13</sup> The United States provided huge economic assistance to maintain order and stability in the economy<sup>14</sup> and assisted in the postwar reconstruction programme. Thus, the South Korean economy was heavily reliant on US support from 1953 to 1960.

This changed under the administration of Park Chung-hee. Park was the third South Korean President to seize power through a military *coup d'état*, in 1961. He was in power for 18 years until his assassination in 1979. The leadership of Park Chung-hee was viewed both positively and negatively. He was criticized for being a dictator, disallowing any form of opposition to his authoritarian government. He did not hesitate to use force to gain absolute obedience from the people. Park justified his dictatorship by stating that absolute control of the people was necessary to develop the economy.

On the other hand, Park illustrated strong leadership that led to rapid economic growth. Despite his controversial rule, Park Chung-hee's contribution in transforming South Koreans from rags to riches was undeniable.

The economic plan proposed by Park Chung-hee would not have succeeded without the support of the masses that were encouraged by Park's foresight in helping their country prosper.

One of the predominant factors leading to Korea's economic growth was an ample supply of high quality workers. The lack of natural resources and capital was compensated for by a diligent human work force. Koreans worked an average of fifty hours per week in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>15</sup> A favourite phrase in the daily life of South Koreans today is *pali-pali*, meaning 'being fast.' Their collective willingness to sacrifice for the well-being of their nation together with effective economic policy led to the success of their industrialization causing South Korea to change from a country which was once a receiver of foreign aid to one that now provides it.

*Thirdly*, nationalism promotes democracy. Democracy is the idea that political power is held lawfully by the people and that the governments who exercise that power only act as the agents of the people.<sup>16</sup> The spirit of nationalism encouraged South Koreans to seek an end to the military dictatorship of their country. They fought for political democratization in the 1980s, courageously challenging the military government of President Chun Doo-hwan.<sup>17</sup>

The assassination of President Park Chung-hee in 1979 gave Koreans the hope of democracy. They were desirous of a civilian government ruled by the people for the benefit of the people. However, sadly, military style ruling continued as Chun Doo-hwan seized power through a *coup d'état* in 1979. Infuriated by the continued suppressive dictatorship of the nation



Workers in a Korean garment factory

since the Korean War, and demanding a transparent and just government through a direct presidential election system, the people frequently organized street protests to force the military government to change.

The democratization battle was finally won in 1987 when the Chun Doo-hwan regime surrendered ruling power. Since then, democratic governance has prevailed in South Korea. At present, the South Korean head of state, the president, is chosen by means of the direct presidential election system.

From the examples above, it can be seen that nationalism serves as a medium to strengthen the unity of the people. However, while nationalism has reinforced the coherence of ethnic Koreans, it is also feared that it would distance them from others. One of the negative traits of nationalism is the lack of concern for others. People feel a sense of duty to facilitate only their own people. South Koreans value overseas Koreans more than foreigners staying in Korea. Upsetting events involving others evoke less notice as opposed to such events happening to Koreans which provoke outraged reactions.

Koreans feel that being tied together by a common bloodline, it is their responsibility to ensure the well-being of their own people. Nationalism might also result in the development of exceptionalism (the belief of the people of a nation that their nation is better than other nations) and xenophobia (the suspicion, dislike, or fear of other nationalities) among the people. This negative side of nationalism is that it might instill hatred for other nations or cultures and seek the advancement of the well-being of one's own nation at the expense of others.<sup>18</sup>

The South Korean government and people were deeply ashamed of the involvement of Korean-born American resident, Cho Seung-hui in the 2007 Virginia Tech Massacre.<sup>19</sup> President Roh Moo-hyun even publicly apologized for the



*Display of Korean nationalism*

behaviour of the Korean gunman and expressed his deepest condolences to the American people.<sup>20</sup> Though the killing was in the United States and viewed by Americans as an individual act by Cho, South Koreans felt a collective sense of unease and guilt.

On the other hand, some South Koreans expressed discomfort about Philippines-born Jasmine Lee being elected the first non-ethnic Korean assemblyman in the 2012 Congressional Election.<sup>21</sup> Although Lee is a naturalized citizen (citizenship granted by the government after the person fulfills specific immigration requirements) of South Korea, she is still viewed as an outsider as she is not ethnically Korean.

Typically, a Korean is someone born to Korean parents, who speaks Korean and has Korean looks and nationality.<sup>22</sup> Koreans do not think someone is a Korean just because he or she has a Korean citizenship. They have been taught to be proud of being ethnically homogenous over a long period of time. While there has been a high influx of foreigners into the country in recent years Koreans are adapting to the change slowly.

Many scholars have criticized nationalism as obsolete and extreme in the current globalized world. Some scholars even predict its decline and demise. Such predictions are, however, highly speculative; nationalism remains a key element, a powerful force and in countries like South Korea, an influential instrument.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Associated Press, 2013, *For South Koreans, high-profile jet crash point of shame*, accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2013, available at: <[http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-07-09/world/40455527\\_1\\_south-koreans-korea-inc-korean-life](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-07-09/world/40455527_1_south-koreans-korea-inc-korean-life)>.
- <sup>2</sup> Miscevic, N 2010, *Nationalism, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2013, available at: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/nationalism/>>.
- <sup>3</sup> Members of The Group of Twenty that comprises of the 20 major economies in the world, represent almost 90 per cent of global GDP and 80 per cent of international global trade.
- <sup>4</sup> World Bank, 2012, *Korea Republic*, accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2012, available at: <[http://data.worldbank.org/country/korea-republic#cp\\_wdi](http://data.worldbank.org/country/korea-republic#cp_wdi)>.
- <sup>5</sup> Shin, GW 2006, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- <sup>6</sup> Korea Overseas Information Service, 2003, *Facts about Korea* (Seoul: Government Information Agency).
- <sup>7</sup> Choy, BY 1982, *Korea A History* (Japan: Charles E. Tuttle).
- <sup>8</sup> Yaakub, A 2010, *Nationalism: The Issue of Territorial Disputes between Malaysia and Indonesia In the Celebes Sea* (Sarawak: UNIMAS).
- <sup>9</sup> Breuilly, J 1993, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- <sup>10</sup> Lee, CS 1963, *the Politics of Korean Nationalism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- <sup>11</sup> Choy, BY 1982, *Korea A History* (Japan: Charles E. Tuttle).
- <sup>12</sup> Tudor, D 2012, *Korea: The Impossible Country* (China: Tuttle).
- <sup>13</sup> Kim, YK 1978, *A Handbook of Korea* (Seoul: Ministry of Culture and Information).
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid
- <sup>15</sup> Korea Overseas Information Service, 2003, *Facts about Korea* (Seoul: Government Information Agency).
- <sup>16</sup> Rourke, JT & Boyer, MA 2006, *International Politics on the World Stage*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (USA: McGrawHill).
- <sup>17</sup> Lee, GS, 2007, *Korea: More Accurate Facts and Information* (Seoul: The Academy of Korean Studies).
- <sup>18</sup> Rourke, JT & Boyer, MA 2006, *International Politics on the World Stage*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., McGrawHill, USA.
- <sup>19</sup> Thirty three people were killed on the campus of Virginia Tech as a result of what appeared to be a shooting rampage.
- <sup>20</sup> Choe, SH & Norimitsu, O 2007, *South Koreans React to Shooting in Virginia*, New York Times, accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013, available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/18/world/asia/18cnd-korea.html>>.
- <sup>21</sup> Choe, SH 2012, *In Changing South Korea, Who Counts as "Korean"?*, New York Times, accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013, available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/30/world/asia/demographic-shifts-redefine-society-in-south-korea.html?pagewanted=all>>.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid