

JOINT U.S. – KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

Volume 14, 2004

**The United States and South Korea:
Reinvigorating the Partnership**

**Symposium Sponsored by
The Asia/Pacific Research Center,
Stanford University
The Korea Economic Institute, and
The Korea Institute for International Economic Policy**

October 22–24, 2003

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Comments on Anti-Americanism in South Korean Society

*Kim Won-ho**

For my comments on this topic, I prefer to make use of my personal experience in journalism rather than my academic background. One day in the mid-1980s when I was covering student demonstrations at Seoul National University—a site notorious for militant anti-Americanism at that time—I witnessed an interesting contrast. The student leaders wanted a press conference and called in the press. They did not allow Korean government newspaper representatives to be present, however; they welcomed U.S.-based members of the press instead. I had to ask myself what their real objections were when it came to the United States. I concluded that one had to distinguish their anti-Americanism over U.S. government policy from their feelings about U.S. societal values. The demonstrators were anti-American in terms of the conservative foreign policy adopted by the Ronald Reagan administration that allegedly supported the dictatorship of the Chun Doo-hwan government; on the other hand, the demonstrators admired the freedom of the press in the United States.

Historically, Korea had been an exception to the worldwide discourse on anti-Americanism. Even though there was a series of protests, demonstrations, and strikes related to the U.S. Army's policies and its presence in Korea since the 1940s, a generally favorable feeling toward the United States permeated Korean society. The United States had introduced Protestantism to Korea in the late 1800s and had played a key role in Korea's modernization by improving medical service and education. The United States also contributed to the liberation of Korea in 1945 by defeating Japan in World War II. The United States dispatched its army during the Korean War and promoted Korea's postwar reconstruction through a large program of economic and military aid. It contributed to the high growth rate of the Korean economy by acting as Korea's principal business partner. Through this process, a kind of illusion was forming about the United States being the epitome of democracy and justice. Thus, the anti-U.S. behavior of the students could be interpreted as an act of disappointment with the United States in its role as Korea's model for democratization.

More fundamentally, one needs to remember Korea's anti-hegemonic sentiments to better understand its anti-Americanism. Most important is Korea's suppressed history that comes mainly from Korea's geographical location. Korea suffered from constant invasions by neighboring countries and it has been influenced by Sino-centrism. Also, Russia needed Korea in its quest for a warm-water port, and Japan in the late 1800s

* *Kim Won-ho is a Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy.*

regarded Korea as a bridge to the Eurasian continent. Finally, Korea was incorporated into Japan as a colony, and later Korea was even divided completely according to the interests of the superpowers.

Second, this historical background inevitably caused most Koreans to hold a sense of persecution and even loathing toward powerful countries. Anti-hegemonism can arise at any time as anti-Chinese or anti-Japanese feelings as well as anti-U.S. sentiment.

Third, Koreans place a high value on equal rights and obligations of individual countries as basic principles of international society. This is a somewhat understandable sentiment from a small nation surrounded by major powers, a situation that has characterized Korea since the unified Silla dynasty. Most Koreans evaluate the principles of international society on the basis of this tradition, also supported by the principle of reciprocity.

On the basis of this background, Koreans demonstrate anti-Americanism when they believe it is warranted by the treatment or behavior of the United States toward Koreans, toward members of the Korean diaspora, or even toward citizens of another country when proper reciprocity and obligations are not followed. Further, there is no denying that Koreans today appear more anti-American than before because Koreans today feel freer than before to express their opinions.

Professor Cumings's anecdotal style is more of a journalist's offering than an academic verification based on fact and evidence. A systematic analysis of anti-Americanism in South Korea would have been more desirable. Although he tries to tell a story about his firsthand experiences in Korea, he seems to over-generalize separate incidents he witnessed and felt without actually understanding the Korean sentiment and mentality. His observations, quotes, excerpts, and citations, however unique and interesting, are in fact seen from an outsider's viewpoint, looking down on Koreans—such as his reference to Ian Fleming's book, *Goldfinger*: "Koreans have 'no regard for human life,' . . . and that's why the Japanese employed them: to get the 'cruellest, most ruthless people in the world'"; or his description of Seoul during his encounter with a professor: "U.S. military bases are all over the place, surrounded by a nauseating scene of prostitution and poverty"; or a U.S. expatriate's comment: "All the people we've seen so far have been filthy beggars, or farmers living in huts worse than animals. They're not even civilized, let alone dignified or proud." I doubt the relevance of such quotes to the topic being addressed here. Furthermore, Professor Cumings's colorful anecdotes could even lead readers to form a prejudice against Koreans. Perhaps a balanced combination of surveys, anecdotes, and objective systematic analysis would have made his argument more convincing and fair.

