

# The KEI Exchange

personal view of individual staff at KOREA ECONOMIC INSTITUTE

## Red Devil Fever and the Branding of Korea

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Red is a strong color. It is a color of passion, energy, power, and confidence. According to some studies, it can actually produce physical results, such as increasing the rate of respiration and blood pressure. Red also captures people's attention and incites them to take action. In some cultures, red signifies celebration, happiness, and prosperity. In Korea, however, the color red is linked more closely with violence and warfare. Koreans do not write names in red ink because it signifies the death. The color red has long been associated with communism North Korea. But the 2002 World Cup transformed the meaning of red into establish a new paradigm in social, political, and cultural realms.

Korea's soccer team traditionally plays in red and white uniforms, and their fans often fill the stadium wearing the team colors. During the 2002 World Cup, however, millions of Koreans wearing red T-shirts came out of their homes to join collective cheering on the street for the national soccer team. According to the estimates, 800,000 people flooded the streets for the game vs. Poland, 1,500,000 for the game vs. the USA, and 2,800,000 for the game vs. Portugal. During the quarterfinal game vs. Italy, an astonishing 4,200,000 fans wearing red T-shirts were on the streets sending fervent messages to the players. A cumulative 22 million people came out to the streets of Seoul and other major cities in Korea's seven World Cup matches. More than 2,000 large screens were setup at approximately 1,800 locations during the competition. The worldwide

media were taken by surprise at the passion with which the Korean public cheered. The world was watching the red wave of an orderly gathering of people in amazement. They demonstrated the unique culture of supporting the national team. At the same time, they created a phenomenon—street cheering led by so-called Red Devils (붉은 악마).



### Birth of the Red Devil

The Red Devils is an official fan club of national soccer team. It is a non-profit organization made up of Koreans who simply love soccer and interest in cheering for the national team. The origin of the Red Devils goes back to the 1983 FIFA World Youth Championship in Mexico when the Korean national team rather unexpectedly advanced to the semifinals. Shocked foreign media began referring the team as the "Red Furies." Ahead of the Asian qualifiers for the 1998 France World Cup, Koreans felt that a well-organized support group was necessary to cheer for the

national team. From such discussion, the first fan club for the Korean national team was born. It was temporarily called “Great Hankuk Support Club.” In early 1997, soccer fans shared views through an online forum discussion, and “Red Devils” was adopted as a formal name for the group.

The Red Devils numbered approximately 80,000 before the opening games of the 2002 World Cup, but within two weeks the number skyrocketed to 200,000. Over the one month duration of the World Cup tournament, more than 450,000 joined the internet-based soccer fan club. Networking through the Internet, most people registered through its official website [www.reddevils.or.kr](http://www.reddevils.or.kr) to become members. Most of the club activities are organized and planned online. The Red Devils exchanged their views and ideas about the matches through the Internet and instant messages, the new communication tools for mainly the younger generation. It was IT-friendly Internet generation that mobilized the entire nation and attracted global attention. The Red Devils were one of Korea’s earliest examples of a growing trend of bringing together the online and offline worlds.

### **Influence of Korea’s Informational Technology**

Korea is one of the most wired nations in the world. Although the Internet infrastructure was available in early 1990s, it was not until late 1990s when usage expanded dramatically. According to the statistics, the number of Internet users in Korea more than doubled from 1999 to 2001. By 2001, Korea became an Internet society with more than half of the total population using Internet as a means of communication. This was particularly true for the younger generation. According to Korea Network Information Center, nearly 99% of junior and senior high school students were using the Internet on a regular base in 2001, thus creating an Internet generation.

The Red Devils were created through an online club. This fan club would not have been possible

without Korea’s Internet infrastructure. It was the Internet that motivated the young generation of “2030” to take part in mobilizing national unity and passion in their cheering for Korea’s team. The “2030” generation refers to people in their 20s and 30s who tends to be more individualistic, apathetic to social issues, and wired. But it was the rapidly advancing informational technology that connected these people to become major players in newly created cyberspace. They came to realize that the Internet is a powerful instrument in building consensus and mobilizing massive crowds within a short period of time. The Red Devils phenomenon has clearly demonstrated that the Internet, combined with a human network, can have a significant influence on social and political front.

### **National Pride & Nationalism**

The Red Devils have initiated a new wave of patriotism in Korea which is different from what the older generation had been upholding. To the older generation, nationalism usually means seeking liberation from foreign occupation. Korea is surrounded by four big powers—the United States, Russia, Japan, and China. Korea is known as the shrimp between the whales. It had been invaded by foreign countries throughout the history—China, the Mongols, and Japan. Korean peninsula was under Japanese rule for 35 years, from August 22, 1910 to August 15, 1945. Shortly after the liberation from Japan, the country was confronted with the Korean War which eventually divided the nation into two Koreas.

But the Red Devils redefined nationalism to include a renewed sense of national confidence and pride. Spontaneous gatherings of millions of people wearing the same color shirts have demonstrated a collective expression of national interest and pride. Regardless of people’s background, gender, age, or religion, they voluntarily organized themselves into a cohesive group, and in doing so they rediscovered the sense of their national identity. This was particularly true for the youth who had often been criticized for their lack of patriotism and self-

ishness. Chanting Dae-han-min-guk (Great Republic of Korea) in time with the beat of a traditional drum and singing Oh Pilsung Korea (Victorious Korea) on the every street corner, the Red Devils came to represent national pride, patriotism, and fervor during the 2002 World Cup.

The Red Devils have also displayed the manner in which can be described as patriotism. They have reversed the traditional images of dirty and trash filled streets after a large crowd gathering. After Korea's first game, the streets where the crowd had been were filled with trash. After the second game, the Red Devils organized an effort to clean up the litter and involved citizens to participate in the cleaning process. They showed that they were model citizens by keeping things clean at the stadiums and streets. It was done in an orderly fashion, as if it was previously agreed upon among participants. At the same time, the Korean media constantly reminded the public that messy areas after games may damage the national image. Citizens began encouraging one another to pick up the litter on the streets after each game. One of the major Korea newspapers reported that "several middle-school students cleaned the streets until late at night, and one of the student said, 'We felt the need to clean up the streets after the tournaments; we need to do this for the sake of the Korean team and its victory'." People were picking-up trash to protect Korea's reputation and its image. The act of cleaning was indeed an act of nationalism.

## Branding of Korea

To Koreans, the 2002 World Cup was more than a sporting event. It was an opportunity to showcase Korea to the world and to enhance the national image. It was all about the pride of overcoming past wounds and achieving international recognition.

Korea had just overcome the Asian financial crisis that began in 1997. The financial turmoil and the IMF intervention had severely damaged national pride and nationalistic confidence. People were distrustful of the government's policy direction.

The decades of the nation's economic miracle had to come to a sudden halt. Their lives were impacted by drastic changes in corporate and public sectors reforms. With the new labor market laws, workers were no longer guaranteed lifetime employment. People became depressed and frustrated with economic hardship. Under such circumstances, the 2002 World Cup became the perfect vehicle to rebound from the national slump. Korea's Deputy Prime Minister at the time said that the government's hosting the World Cup was a chance for "brand-making of Korea, rather than making money directly." It was an opportunity to show to the global community that Korea has successfully recovered from the crisis and that the nation was reentering the global stage.

The 2002 World Cup was indeed a grand entrance for Korea to demonstrate its accomplishment to the world. Korea, the miracle on Han River, has every right to show-off its achievement. The nation conquered the military government of 1980s to a democratic nation. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita grew from \$100 in 1963 to \$3,200 in 1980 to \$10,500 in 2000. The GDP growth is estimated to be \$27,700 in 2009. Korea's national soccer team was being recognized as an outstanding player by the global community. People were proud of being Koreans and they regained confidence in themselves and their country. The Red Devils brought people together in unity. It was the collective expression of national pride and dignity. The world will remember the images of patriotic and organized gathering of millions of Red Devils which were replaced by the past memories of militant and angry protesters. Korea, you have come a long way, baby!

## Language of Red

- Red Letter Day: important or significant day
- Red Carpet Treatment: make someone feel special
- Paint the Town Red: celebrate or go out partying

- Seeing Red: to be angry
- Red herring: something distracts attention from the truth
- In the Red: being overdrawn or losing money
- Red flag: denote danger, warning
- Caught Red-handed: act of committing a misdemeanor
- Red in the face: to become embarrassed
- Not worth a Red cent: having no value
- Red tape: excessive formalities in governmental process
- Red-blooded: describes someone who is audacious, robust, or virile.

#### Red Around the World

- China: good luck and fortune and is used as a wedding color
- Japan: red is traditional color for heroic figure
- Sweden: it is used only in privileged families.
- India: means purity
- South Africa: the color of mourning
- Cherokees: Success, triumph
- Central Africa: symbol of life and health

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