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History Overshadows Japan-South Korea Rapprochement

by Kosuke TAKAHASHI

KAWASAKI, Japan - The shrill voice of one old woman with humped shoulders still leaves a distant but lasting memory. When I was an elementary and junior-high-school student in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, I frequently visited my ethnic-Korean friends after school. One day, on the way to a Korean friend's house, an old woman just down the way suddenly snarled at me, saying, "Ilbon ka!" I was stunned. Later I found that what she meant by those few words was something like "Hey, Japanese!" or "Are you Japanese?" (Ilbon means "Japan" in Korean, and ka is an interrogative in Japanese.) She had expressed her deep distrust of all Japanese nationals, even of a boy like me. I was definitely intimidated. As can be readily understood, the older the Koreans, the more distrustful they were. Today I understand why.

Although my parents are Japanese, I grew up in a Koreatown in the southern part of Kawasaki city, adjoining Tokyo, and still live nearby. Kawasaki is known as a working-class city and is well-known for the fact that many Koreans live here. Thousands of ethnic Koreans live in my neighborhood alone. There is also a pro-North Korean elementary and junior high school, one of the 110 affiliated schools of Chongryun (The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan), the organization of North Korean residents who for years boasted iron-clad solidarity with their motherland.

Today relations between Japanese and Koreans, including those affiliated with the South and North, are much improved in the old neighborhood. My junior high school is promoting cultural and sports exchanges. For example, students of the pro-North Korean school participate in the school's annual cultural festival and sporting meet together with Japanese and South Korean residents who attend the school. And vice versa. Japanese and South Korean students also take part in the cultural and sporting events of the pro-North school. This represents an extraordinary opportunity for change in grassroots thinking among young people about both Koreas, although anger still simmers among many Japanese about the Japanese abductees.

This racial melting pot was created by the Japanese military regime, which forced people from Korea to work at military establishments in Kawasaki, such as steel and shipbuilding industries, namely NKK and Hitachi Zosen, while colonizing Korea between 1910 and 1945. Consequently, in my youth, Japanese and Koreans in Kawasaki were always at odds. I often saw Japanese and Koreans scuffle on the street, frequently resulting in injuries, and sometimes murder. Racial problems never ceased in those days. Today, at 36, I still remember that old woman. Now I also understand why she was so deeply resentful.

Because of my personal background, I greatly welcomed the recent South Korean culture boom. Korean soap operas such as Winter Sonata and movies have become very popular, as symbolized by the immense popularity of South Korean actor Bae Yong-joon, or "Yon-sama" (sama is an honorific), as his admirers and Japanese media call him. Meanwhile, Japanese entertainers are seen on Korean TV, and young Koreans like to listen to Japanese pop songs called J-pops on their MD (mini-disc) players. The two countries' youth, especially teenagers and those in their 20s, are well connected by the Internet and increasingly communicate with one another through e-mail and chat rooms on personal computers, using automatic translation software. (The Japanese and Korean languages are amazingly similar structurally.) Young people are capitalizing on the two countries' extremely high Internet-diffusion rates, which are both more than 50% of the populations. As many have noted, this exchange and familiarity is unprecedented in the history of Japan-Korea relations. Times have changed, indeed, in the bilateral relationship.

South Korean president brings up issues of history

Against these recent favorable social and cultural exchanges by the peoples of the two countries, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, on February 25 and March 1, repeatedly urged Tokyo to continue grappling with its past. On March 1, in his speech commemorating the March 1, 1919 uprising against Japanese colonial rule, he urged Japan to offer a heartfelt apology and settle its past history with Koreans - invasion, occupation, enslavement and forced labor, and comfort women - by paying compensation as appropriate to facilitate real reconciliation.

Japan has offered apologies and, in effect, compensation in the form of hundreds of millions of dollars in loans and grants. South Korea, however, is planning a probe of collaborators with Japanese occupiers, something that could embarrass some of South Korea's top families who benefited during the occupation. The opposition, by contrast, wants to probe collaboration with North Korea.

"Japan should take a more positive attitude. More than a legal issue, this is an issue of universal ethics and a matter of trust between neighbors," Roh stated. Moreover, he linked Japan's colonial-era atrocities to North Korea's kidnapping of ordinary Japanese in the 1970s and 1980s. "In the same light, Japan should put itself in Korea's shoes and understand the anger of our people, who suffered thousand and tens of thousands of times as much pain over issues such as forced labor and comfort women." Roh himself added this section to a draft of his speech, according to the Japanese media.

The most commonly accepted view among Japanese scholars is that about 700,000 Koreans had been taken and forced to work in Japan in coal-mining regions, munitions factories, dam-construction sites and other places across the country under colonial rule. The South Korean government has claimed that at least a million of its citizens were mobilized to Japan. In addition to Kawasaki, many Koreans were carted off to places such as Manchuria, northern China, and Sakhalin Island, also in forced-labor industrial projects and coal mining.

As to the comfort women, girls and women rounded up in Korea, China, the Philippines and elsewhere and forced into prostitution to "comfort" Japanese troops, an estimated 100,000-200,000 were forced into this sex slavery, about 80% of them said to have been Korean. Others were Filipinas, Chinese and a handful of Westerners.

On both February 25 at the National Assembly and on March 1 Roh urged Tokyo to acknowledge past wrongdoings fully, face up to history and move toward the future. "The different attitude in Japan and Germany in handling their past history teaches us many lessons," Roh said in the February speech marking the second anniversary of his inauguration. Japan "should be candid about the past. Only by doing so would Japan move toward the future without being tied to the past".

Although Roh said, "There is no change in Seoul's position not to make the two countries' past history a diplomatic issue," Japanese political circles were abashed by his remarks. This is because Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and Roh had previously agreed to develop bilateral relations in a forward-looking manner. Roh said after their meeting last July on the South Korean island of Cheju that he had no plans to make history a formal issue with Japan while he remains in office.

Moreover, on January 13, at a nationally televised news conference from the Blue House presidential office in Seoul, Roh said that if Japanese Emperor Akihito visits South Korea, he would be "met with the most cordial reception". A visit to South Korea by the Japanese emperor is a highly sensitive issue because of latent anti-Japanese sentiment over Japan's colonial rule. Tokyo has been reluctant to proceed with such a visit, fearful of arousing latent anti-Japanese sentiment. The current Emperor Akihito has never visited Seoul, let alone his father, the wartime Emperor Hirohito.

Faced with Roh's seemingly sudden change of policy, calling for apologies and reparations, Koizumi said on March 1 that Tokyo and Seoul had agreed on a future-oriented friendship. "He must be thinking of domestic situations as well as friendship with Japan," Koizumi said, apparently downplaying Roh's harsh words. Koizumi emphasized that the two countries need to move forward in a future-oriented manner.

Some experts in Japan have been more critical of President Roh's speech. "Roh is just taking another populist line," said Lee Young-hwa, an associate professor of economics at Kansai University and a third-generation Korean resident in Japan. "His analogy comparing the issue of Japan's colonial rule to Pyongyang's abductions [of Japanese] is inappropriate." Lee pointed out that North Korea involved and used innocent Japanese, mostly believed to be have been forced to teach Japanese language and culture, for its covert operations and subversive activities. Lee is the representative of Rescue the North Korean People! (RENK), a Japan-based citizens' group supporting North Korean asylum seekers in China since the early 1990s.

Indeed, the historical conditions from 1910 to 1945 were grim, while the social climate since the 1970s and 1980s has been warmer and more peaceful largely as a result of Japan's pacifist policies. The historical backdrop and the social climate are different.
Behind Roh's policy change is a sovereignty dispute over Takeshima, known in South Korea as Tokto, a group of uninhabited islands in the Sea of Japan, known in Korea as the East Sea. On February 23, a group of assembly members in Japan's Shimane prefecture submitted a bill to set up a prefectural ordinance to establish "Takeshima Day" which spurred public fury in Seoul. A comment on February 25 by Takano Toshiyuki, the Japanese ambassador to Seoul, saying that the islands are part of Japanese territory, also exacerbated the situation.

The timing of this bill and Takano's comment was very unfortunate coming so close to the anniversary of the March 1 uprising against Japanese colonial rule. For Koreans, recent unfavorable rulings by Japanese courts toward former military conscripts and comfort women further fueled public anger toward the Japanese government.

On March 4, the South Korean government postponed indefinitely a visit to Tokyo by Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon, originally scheduled for the following week, because of the Takeshima/Tokto islands row. Ban was to have consolidated relations between the two countries on the 40th anniversary of the normalization of bilateral ties in addition to talks on the North Korean nuclear standoff.
Last August 15, the day his country celebrates liberation from Japanese rule, the Roh administration and his ruling Uri Party looked into the history of South Korea's collaboration with the Japanese. This settlement of past issues is becoming a billboard for his administration. Indeed, his call for reparations from Tokyo or for Seoul to renegotiate the 1965 treaty that normalized relations between Seoul and Tokyo came after it was revealed in documents - compiled in 1963-65, the final years of the country's 14-year normalization talks with Japan - that the Park Chung Hee administration had agreed to make no further compensation claims on Tokyo. This was after Seoul received US$800 million in loans and grants from Tokyo. The main opposition Grand National Party is led by Park's daughter Park Geun Hye.

The unspoken warning

While Roh is apparently trying to maintain momentum at a time when his ratings have fallen far below the 70% achieved just after his inauguration in February 2003, he also seems to have conveyed an unspoken warning to Tokyo, reflecting domestic public opinion. Many Koreans are alarmed by changes in Japan's post-war pacifism and the growing right-wing bias in Japanese politics and society.
Historically, like China, South Korea has always been concerned about Japanese remilitarization, projection of military power and revival of neonationalism. In the early 1990s, Seoul harshly criticized Japan's participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, despite its own participation in them. But the situation drastically changed at the end of 2001, after terrorist attacks on the US and the subsequent US attack on Afghanistan. As a US ally, it was difficult for Seoul to criticize Tokyo self-righteously for modifying its self-defense posture. So now Roh appears to be using historical issues with Japan to counter a more expansive Japanese military posture.
Japan's aggression in Korea from the 1890s forward was, indeed, brutal. The assassination by Japanese bandits of Korea's Queen Min in her palace in 1895 was one of the most heinous crimes. Most Koreans believe that Japan arrogantly still refuses to face up to such historical issues and particularly its wartime crimes.

Koreans, however, might want to know that Japan's efforts to deal with the past got off to a bad start soon after World War II. The United States occupation forces then absolved the Showa Emperor of war responsibility, especially his personal moral responsibility as wartime head of the nation, in order to better control the Japanese. Moreover, the US released from Sugamo Prison many suspected war criminals, including political and business leaders, such as the right-wing godfathers, Sasagawa Ryoichi and Kodama Kiyoshi, as well as Kishi Nobusuke, who served as minister of commerce and industry during Tojo Hideki 's militaristic administrations. Kishi, who became prime minister in 1957, was the grandfather of Abe Shinzou, acting LDP secretary general, who is known for his hardline stance against North Korea.

Thus to seriously probe past wrongs leads to criticism of policies of the United States, Japan's strongest ally, and undermines the legitimacy of the imperial family. For any Japanese journalist to touch upon the Showa emperor's war responsibility requires extraordinary courage, indeed. One so daring would have to be ready for attacks from fanatical right-wing groups. Moreover, many Japanese feel that they have already repeatedly apologized and expressed regret. Moreover, although South Korea, China and others waived war reparations and Tokyo has no legal obligation to compensate war victims, including to forced laborers and comfort women, not a few Japanese have tried to make efforts to compensate in some way for their ancestors' crimes. The Asian Women's Fund (AWF), which was privately established in 1995 to follow Germany's "Germany-Poland Reconciliation Fund", collected money from the Japanese public and distributed it to former comfort women.

For Japan's part, it should reconsider its approach to modern history in the school curriculum. Japanese education appears to have emphasized Japan's postwar position as a defeated nation, which suffered from crippling attacks including two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, thus portraying Japan not as an aggressor and victimizer in Asia but as a victim. In addition to this reluctance to face up to the past in the postwar period, Japanese education seems to have taught little about neighboring countries'

history and geography. Many high-school students who probably cannot cite the name of five cities in South Korea, can cite the names of five cities of the US.

For Japan, to face up to its troubled past and reconcile with its neighbors is also strategically important if it is to establish regional diplomacy. This is especially important in light of the fact that South Korea and China vigorously oppose Japan's permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council. The China-Japan-Korea trade now exceeds 15% of total world trade and calls for establishment of an East Asian Community emphasizing economics, social and cultural issues are growing among intellectuals here and elsewhere. By narrowing perception gaps and removing the thorn of festering past issues, Japan and South Korea could and should lead in realizing that community and contributing to improved relations throughout the region.

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