

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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On Being Corrupted by the Korean Government

Mr. Peter Bird Martin, Director  
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Dear Peter,

I'm a prude, an inveterate wet blanket.

The Vice Minister of Culture and Information, a Mr. Kim, invited me to dinner a few days ago, and I did not want to go. The Vice Minister's staff are the ones who phone me up when they do not like something that I have written. They invite me to lunch and give me indigestion. It is bad enough that they take the foreign correspondents out to lunch every couple of weeks--chewing up a few valuable hours in the middle of the day for no good purpose, filling me with rich food (I usually pass by the wine), and making me sleepy for the rest of the afternoon.

My fondness for Korea tends to vary inversely with how often I see these people. They are the inventors of such concepts as "humanitarian preventive detention." This is what they called it when the police put dissident Kim Young-sam under house arrest in January to prevent him from attending political meetings. They stopped Kim from violating the provisions of a political ban placed against him, they said, thus saving him from formal arrest and prosecution.

Anyway, I consulted with my friend Tom, who was also invited. Tom heads one of the major international news wires in Seoul. He is about twenty years my senior and has long experience in Asia.

"You must go," said Tom. "If you cut yourself off from these people they can make life very nasty for you, especially when your visa comes up for renewal."

Tom was right, of course. So I said yes and at the appointed hour, drove to a restaurant called A-Seung, located in a wealthy neighborhood south of the main business districts.

A-Seung was purple on the outside. And it was purple on the inside. A few cream-colored lamp tables--French neo-classic revival or some such--adorned the inner hallways.

I did not have to identify myself when I walked in the door. An attendant immediately ushered me upstairs into a private room, also purple, naturally. Tom was already there, sprawled comfortably on a couch. A pretty Korean girl, Miss Choi, sat next to him, wearing a dress that occasionally flapped open in the middle to reveal a good twelve inches of inner thigh. She filled a short

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stout glass with ice and water for him, and poured straight Scotch into a shot glass whenever Tom emptied it (which turned out to be fairly often).

Mr. Baek, Director of Foreign News at the Korean Overseas Information Service, sat at Tom's right, and the two discussed in excited tones Korea's latest political flap--a proposed "Campus Stabilization Law." The government wants to pass the law as part of an effort to clamp down on campus leftism. The law would empower a non-judicial panel to incarcerate student activists for up to six months, during which time the government would force feed the students with lectures on the evils of Karl Marx, Kim Il-sung, et al.

Mr. Baek droned on about the government's latest difficulties with the English language. An initial translation into English of the place where the students would go came out as "reeducation camp." That, Mr. Baek said, gave completely the wrong impression. "It sounds just like a communist country," he said. So instead the government has settled on "reorientation program."

I started to comment that the government, in any case, would have trouble disguising the fact that students were to be punished for their political ideas. But before I could finish, the door swung open again, and in came two more girls. One, a thin girl with pale skin, pouty lips and a low-cut dress, sat down opposite me, next to Mr. Baek. Each time she leaned forward to fill Mr. Baek's glass, her dress failed to hide what was beneath. I, for better or worse, got the ugly one--probably a price I paid for being the youngest. "Ginny" wore a neck-to-ankle white jump suit. She unashamedly snuggled up next to me and began to fill my glass with cheap Korean "Scotch." (It is blended locally from imported malts. Next year the importation of malts will be shut off in order to foster a local whiskey industry. That will provoke a horrific cry of pain from the British government, which is already planning for it. But the loudest cry may well come from Korean drinkers.)

We managed to keep up the conversation for a few more minutes, until Vice Minister Kim waltzed in with Mr. Yu, Director of the Korean Overseas Information Service. Mr. Kim is a former journalist, and two-term Assemblyman who received his Vice Ministerial appointment in last February's cabinet reshuffle. He always wears a smirk on his face, even when ponderously defending government policy. It is not a malicious expression, but a signal, I think, that he is having fun, despite the pomp and power of his position, and that we should not be too serious in his company. His face was red, as it generally is.

The drinking began in earnest after Mr. Kim and Mr. Yu arrived, each with an escort. Korean drinking habits are unforgiving. A Korean host will hand you his glass empty. He will then fill it to the brim with hard liquor, and expect you to drink it dry before rinsing the rim in your own glass of ice water and returning it. Another trick is to send an empty glass round the table, with each person forced to down a shot before sending it on. This sort of drinking custom works wonders for quickly loosening up talk...and other forms of social interaction.

For everyone but me, that is. I had to drive. When my hosts discovered this, they apologized for not providing me with a car and driver for the evening. How disappointing that a foreigner could be so thoroughly middle class as to drive his own car! The dismay

showed in their eyes. I downed a few shots, but after that, Ginny silently cooperated by regularly emptying my glass into hers.

Ginny came from Pusan, and lived in the neighborhood with her mother and two brothers. She worked a number of the drinking houses nearby, whenever the house matrons called her. She knew Mr. Yu, and especially Vice Minister Kim, as regulars at A-Seung. "They come here all the time and spend money," she said, "these people who work in the government. One of these days they will meet their punishment."

Her cynicism caught me by surprise. The bill for that evening would have come to at least several hundred dollars per guest, and it is a sure bet that the Vice Minister does not pay for his frequent visitations to A-Seung out of his own pocket.

Dinner arrived, and predictably it was beef steak. Waiters set our plates on a low coffee table between the two long, velour-covered couches. As I leaned forward to slice my meat, I sank lower into the cushion, squeezing my stomach and making it difficult to eat anything at all. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that I was at last enjoying some luxury in Korea.

Tom, who is something of a frustrated thespian, began to take advantage of the levity of the evening.

"Mr. Vice Minister..." he started up.

"No, no, no," the Vice Minister interrupted, his face having turned a slightly brighter shade of red. "You must call me Yoon Whan. Y-o-o-n H-w-a-n," he repeated slowly.

Yoon Hwan is the Vice Minister's given name. Generally, only very close friends in Korea use given names. Mr. Kim was making an exaggerated bow to Western custom, and trying to be a gracious host. Tom struggled to pronounce it correctly a few times (and failed), and then continued.

"This campus stability law is the stupidest thing!" he said, stretching out his words in a long drawl. "You don't need this law at all. It just makes the government look terrible. I can't believe that Roh Tae-woo really believes this law will do the government any good."

Roh Tae-woo is Chairman of the ruling Democratic Justice Party. Although he is a former general and can be very tough, he is also cagey and flexible. Many people believe he will succeed Chun Doo-hwan in the Presidency.

Vice Minister Kim's smirk did not fade.

"This is off the record," he said. "You can't publish this." We all nodded.

"Today I met with Roh Tae-woo and I told him that this bill was no good," Kim said. "And he agreed with me."

We all paused for a moment to absorb that. Roh was publicly one of the bill's staunchest supporters, although the real push came from some of the President's hard-line personal advisors. The President had already purged a number of prominent moderate leaders in the ruling party for failing to support the bill. Apparently the government was now pushing forward, in the face of overwhelming public opposition, just to save face, in full recognition that it had made a major political blunder.

Mr. Yu, and especially Mr. Baek, squirmed in their seats. Mr. Baek had been on the phone all week trying to explain to foreign correspondents why Korea needed the legislation and why it did not

violate any principals of democracy or the Korean constitution, as the opposition claimed.

Mr. Baek turned to me so the Vice Minister could not hear, and said timidly, "Some of us believe that this bill is the right thing."

The door suddenly swung open again. In walked an elegantly beautiful woman wearing a thin, clinging mauve dress. She sauntered over toward the Vice Minister. Tom's eyes began to bulge, and he pointed toward her.

"Look at her!" he said with approval.

The Vice Minister smiled broadly.

"Do you like her?" he asked. "This is Miss An. She is a former Miss Pusan."

"Well, she should be Miss Korea!" said Tom.

She had competed in the Miss Korea contest in 1978...and lost. "If she had won, she wouldn't be working here," Ginny said to me.

Miss An sat next to the Vice Minister who, with each of his arms around a beautiful woman, relaxed back into the sofa with evident content.

Next came the band. The band consisted of an electric guitar player with an electronic drum beat to keep up the rhythm. He began to strum away and to sing into a microphone. Tom was first off the sofa, hugging Miss Choi and prancing about the floor. He beckoned to me, and after some hesitation, I relented. I assumed the traditional dancing position with Ginny, with a respectable inch or so between us. That lasted less than a minute. Her arms soon found their way around my neck, and she pushed her body against mine. We were very comfy, except for her head, which kept butting into my chin and nose.

Tom leaned toward me and said, "If this is what they mean by a reorientation program, I love it!"

Tom grabbed the microphone and launched into a bawdy rendition of some English folk songs. Next came the Vice Minister, and finally Mr. Yu. Once Mr. Yu got the microphone, it would not be coaxed away. His crowning performance was a medley of Egyptian folk songs that he learned while serving as Cultural Attachè of the Korean Embassy in Cairo. Unfortunately we could not figure out how to dance to them, so we sat and watched Mr. Yu, who was bent over the microphone in apparent concentration, oblivious to the rest of us. Ginny found a pair of chopsticks and alternately fed into my mouth peeled grapes and spears of asparagus that had come out of a can.

When the clock stuck 10:30, the party came to an abrupt end. Tom and the Vice Minister agreed that they would be "friends." We said our good-byes at the front door, while our Korean hosts retreated back into A-Seung.

As Tom stepped into his black chauffeur-driven sedan he turned to me and said, "We beat them at their own game. We can out drink them, out dance them, out sing them, and out XXXX them!"

Still quite sober, I got into my car and drove home.

Best,



Steven B. Butler