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Where Politics Won't Die

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Dear Peter,

I never intended to write about politics in this report, but I seem to have no choice. In late November I visited South Cholla Province with a friend who grew up in a village there, and left it a decade ago. I wanted to try to see through his eyes what he thought of his old home, to see how people live, and how far the economy had progressed in South Korea's poorest province.

I knew that South Cholla had a special political significance in Korea. In May 1980, just after General Chun Doo-hwan (now president) declared martial law, the cities of Kwangju and Mokpo rose in rebellion. Paratroopers were sent in to Kwangju to suppress student demonstrations against military government. The troops brutalized the city, indiscriminately attacking people on the street. After about three days, people spontaneously decided to defend themselves. As a result of universal military training in Korea, they knew how to do it. They attacked, disarmed, and drove the troops out of the city. They invaded and took over city and provincial offices, and set up a provisional government of their own. For the next week peace and democracy, of a sort, reigned in these two cities, before government troops retook control.

Only last spring, after the opposition's strong showing in national elections, did anyone dare broach the subject of the "Kwangju Incident" in public. But the debate sadly bogged down in a numbers game. The government now says that 193 persons died. Although the opposition insists that the death count is closer to 2,000, it has not yet produced a full list of missing persons.

The real issues are still too hot to touch. Who ordered the troops into the city? Why did they brutalize the population? Who is responsible for the deaths? Why did people rise in insurrection? Why is the government afraid of an open inquiry into the incident?

One thing, though, is clear. Thousands of people experienced a deep catharsis. Thousands of people threw away their personal safety and their futures to fight for something they believed in, and they will not be the same again. The violence of hundreds dead,

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and many more hundreds injured, has etched the experience deeply into the collective consciousness of the province.

I knew about the legacy of the Kwangju Incident, in part from a brief visit I made to Kwangju last January. I did not know that my friend's relatives were deeply involved in keeping alive the memory of May 1980.

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Meeting my friend, I'll call him Lee, turned into a stroke of luck for me. In his early 30s, he was an unemployed graduate of Yonsei University, one of Korea's top three universities. He was unemployed by choice. He could easily find a job in one of the business conglomerates, since he graduated last year from a prestigious university. He didn't like the idea of working in a big company, though, and was trying to find a way to study overseas in a graduate program in social work. I met Lee through a mutual friend with whom Lee used to meet for Bible-study classes, and he began to come to my apartment twice a week to help me with Korean conversation.

Lee got to Yonsei the hard way. He grew up in a farm village on the southern coast of South Cholla Province, outside the rural market town of Kangjin. Although his political ideas lean toward the opposition, he has never been a political activist. After finishing primary school, he worked in the fields for nearly ten years on his family's land before deciding he would try to get out of the village. On his own, he studied and passed high school equivalence tests. He sat for the national college examinations and did well enough to place in a first-rate university.

His success is nothing short of phenomenal. He competed against the children of middle-class families, who went through all the proper schools, stayed up late every night for half a dozen years, and studied legally or illegally with highly-paid tutors, all in a maniacal (and adolescence-robbing) effort to perform well at eighteen years old, on the single examination day that would determine their entry into college and their futures.

Despite Lee's obvious intelligence and capabilities, he has some strikes against him that complicate the task of finding a wife. Both his parents have died. He was a youngest child, a last-ditch effort by his aging father and a second wife to produce a male heir. Seoulites see him as a bit of a country bumkin, which is unkind, because it isn't true. He is from South Cholla Province, where people for centuries have suffered scorn and prejudice. South Cholla is something of a Sicily of Korea.

Lee wanted to return to his home village to take care of business--to raise money from relatives to open a coffee shop in Seoul. He hopes the shop will help finance his way through graduate school. So in late November Lee and I drove together for seven hours to Kangjin.

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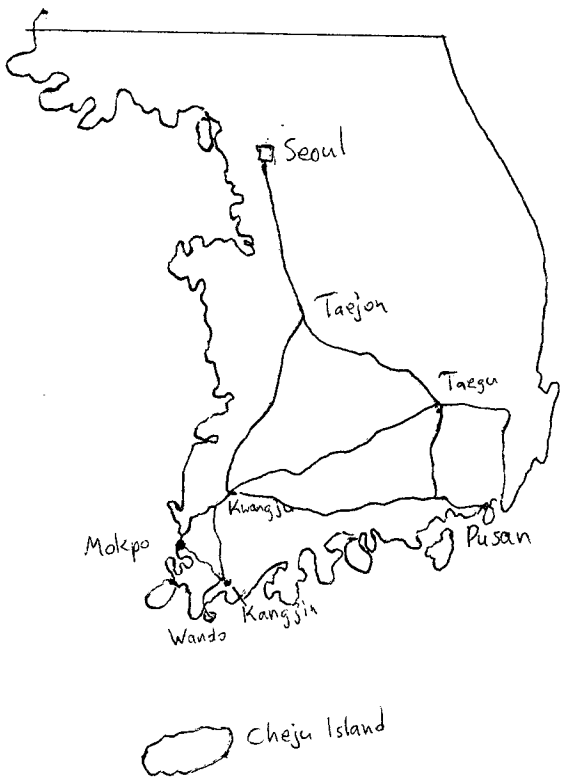
I arrived in Kangjin exhausted and sleepy, having stayed up late the night before to finish some work. A cousin of Lee's led us to a "modern" inn off the main street--modern inns being multisto-



ried with private baths. We went to a tiny room on the second floor where, everyone agreed, the floor was deliciously hot.

Koreans traditionally heated their homes by burning wood or straw and running the smoke through clay flues in the floor. The concept of a warm, steady, comfortable temperature is poorly accepted even today in Korea's cities. Koreans like the feeling of touching, sitting and sleeping on a hot floor. And on that day, with the mercury slowly falling through the thirties, and the window to my room wide open, I had to agree that the hot floor felt very good when we sat on it. My friends directed me to the darkest spot on the floor, which was covered with paper that had browned from the heat. As the guest of honor, I merited the hottest seat.

My friends noticed that I was fading quickly, so they left. I closed the window, turned off the floor (modern heating is through hot-water pipes), stretched out on some bedding piled in the corner, and slept for a few hours.

Shortly after I woke up, Lee returned with his elderly nephew, Kim Young-jin, and from then on, Kim gently took charge of my trip to South Cholla Province. A brief look at Kim was enough to establish his credentials as a dissident. In his early forties, Kim's black hair was thinning on the top. What remained hung loosely down, almost to his shoulders, as though he had simply forgotten to go to the barber for the past year. For our days together, Kim wore the same loose, ill-fitting black suit and a white shirt. After the first day, though, he doffed his bright red cravate for a bolo tie.

Kim's face was sallow, his features too broad and roughly cut to be handsome. But they projected an air of reassuring friendliness, like a big woolly sheep dog who would let the kids ride him around all day and then stand firm when the wolves come.

Kim looked right into my eye while he told me the story of how he became a dedicated opponent of the government. I found, strangely for me, that I could understand nearly 100% of what Kim told me in Korean, even though he did not slow down appreciably for my benefit and did not appear to make great efforts to simplify his vocabulary or sentences. Kim obviously knew how to communicate with people.

Kim talked for a long time. Like many from South Cholla Province, Kim was swept up in the excitement of the 1971 presidential campaign of Kim Dae-jung, the charismatic opposition leader. Kim Young-jin quit his job in the Kangjin Agricultural Cooperative for a few months and worked on Kim Dae-jung's election campaign.

Park Chung-hee won the official vote count by a slim margin, although many claim that Park rigged the counting. Even today, the belief that their man is the rightful President of the nation gives Kim Dae-jung's supporters, like Kim Young-jin, a moral fervor unmatched by any other political machine in Korea.

As Park became more and more dictatorial in the 1970s--rewriting the constitution to extend his term in the Presidency, stripping the National Assembly of its power, clamping down on the press, throwing his opponents, including Kim Dae-jung, into jail--Kim Young-jin became more politically active. Kim Young-jin is also a deeply religious man. He is an elder of the Presbyterian Church of Kangjin, and much of his political activities took place in the context of religious work.

When the head of Park's CIA shot Park in October 1979, all the political stops came out. Kim Dae-jung was out stumping the nation again, rekindling his bid for the Presidency. But this soon came to a premature end. On December 12th tanks guarding South Korea from the North rumbled down from the mountains into Seoul. By the time the guns at Army Headquarters fell silent, General Chun Doo-hwan had seized control of the army. By spring he had taken over the government, and on May 17th when he declared martial law, the city of Kwangju rose in rebellion.

Kim Young-jin was travelling at the time, and could not enter the city. But the coup and the uprising made a lasting change in his life. In the Social Purification Campaign that followed the coup, Kim lost his job at the Kangjin Agricultural Cooperative, fired for his political activities. Agricultural cooperatives in Korea function much as they do elsewhere--marketing agricultural produce and providing fertilizer and other farm inputs, providing credit for farmers. But Korea's agricultural cooperatives are firmly controlled by the government and not by farmers.

After scratching around to find a way to earn a living, Kim decided to make use of the accounting skills he had learned in his former job. With a few like-minded friends from his church, he founded the Kangjin Credit Cooperative--an organization, Kim says with great pride, owned by its members, and democratically run, which lends money to merchants and other "poor people" in the area. The Credit Cooperative, Kim says, is completely independent of the government and illustrates the kind of democracy Korea needs.

Between his job as a director of the Credit Cooperative and his position as elder of the Church, Kim now has plenty of opportunity to travel and meet people, and has virtually become a full-time political activist. Since 1979, he has served two year-long terms as President of the Korean Ecumenical Christian Youth Council, and has served two shorter terms in jail for political crimes, generally involving demonstrations against the government.

His political star has risen fast. The New Korea Democratic Party, composed of many former blacklisted politicians, invited him to run for the National Assembly in Kangjin last February, but he declined. While Kim Dae-jung is still banned from politics, he said, he did not feel right working in the National Assembly, and would do better to concentrate on grass-roots organizing, something he knew he could do well. He travels back and forth to Seoul and meets frequently with Kim Dae-jung, planning strategy and picking up a bit of inspiration from the great man.

After an hour of twisting my ear, Kim Young-jin took me out into the cold night air, when I first realized that I had not brought enough warm clothing. Lee had told me his home town is never very cold. I should have known. Kangjin was warm compared to Seoul, but having grown up in a village, Lee has a different standard for cold. We walked across the main street--past the credit cooperative and a small jewelry and watch shop run by Kim's wife--to a restaurant off a side street where Kim treated me to the first of a series of fabulous multi-course Korean meals. Kangjin sits near the sea, and is not far from the small port of Wando, where Kim would take me the next day. Wando boasts some of the cleanest waters, and best fishing anywhere in Korea. Hotels in Seoul send tank trucks to Wando and fill them with live fish which they serve in Seoul's best raw seafood restaurants.

We took off our shoes and sat on mats on a heated floor in a small private room. Lee asked me if I had ever been to a Kisaeng party--a party with professional hostesses. I laughed and told them the story of how the government Information Ministry had treated me to such an evening. They thought that was very funny. Kim and Lee are straight-laced people. I was the only one who had anything to drink that evening--a glass of beer. As strict protestants they are now both teetotalers. Before the meal began, Kim bowed his head and said grace, asking that peace and democracy, and protection for human rights come quickly to Korea.

The low table between us was soon piled high with several dozen dishes--sliced raw fish, freshly opened clams and oysters, raw and cooked octopus, bean curd, barbecued beef, spicy hot soup, and Kimchi--Korean pickled vegetables--in every possible permutation. Freshly cut tentacles of live squid danced about one plate. This dish, a famous one, is something of an art to eat. You have to slip the tentacles deftly past the front teeth. If the suction cups catch hold, they are not easy to remove.

Kim, in good Korean tradition, would not let me help pay for dinner. It was an embarrassment I suffered repeatedly over the coming days. He would not even let me pay for my room at the inn.

After dinner, Kim ran off to another of his interminable meetings. I was taken to a house nearby, and into a small room piled to the ceiling with books, photographs, and plaques. The room soon filled with brothers, cousins and friends who had come to watch the

show. As guest of honor, I sat in a broken-down couch at one end of the room and turned toward the television. I had not, until that evening, appreciated what a marvelous thing a video tape recorder is. A cassette was fed into the machine and on came a special Japanese news program on the Kwangju Incident.

If ever there was forbidden fruit in Korea, this was it. In Seoul, most people have no clear idea what happened in Kwangju because the government suppressed all news reports of the incident. Yet here it was in bold color--troops attacking people on the street, bodies lined up in a temporary morgue, with families wailing over the coffins. Cars did not move through the great intersection before the Provincial Offices. Thousands and thousands of people sat on the street on a warm, sunny day while men and women took the microphone one at a time, some in tears, and pleaded for democracy in Korea. Trucks pulled into city hall, loaded in the back with students who had armed themselves with automatic weapons they had taken from the troops.

I looked around the room. Surely these people had watched this news special a dozen times. Yet all eyes were riveted to the screen. They were reliving what for them was a triumph, a victory, and a defeat.

The people put their arms away, and set up barricades around the city. Government troops took the barricades apart and moved back in, meeting little resistance, and firmly reestablished control over the city. There was some shooting, and many arrests, but most of the violence had ended.

After the news special, we watched a video tape of a long memorial service held five years after the insurrection--on May 17, 1985. Much of the opposition party came down from Seoul and assembled at the cemetery where many victims of the incident are buried together, side-by-side. Kim Young-jin did much of the reading at the podium. He has a good speaking voice.

Finally we watched a tape of the great man himself--Kim Dae-jung's speeches while he was in exile in the United States. The tape was a slick, professional product, with a strong woman's voice providing narration. My friends laughed because they say the voice sounds like a North Korean announcer, rather than the typical South Korean fast monotone. To my ears, it sounded more like Madison Avenue.

Kim and Lee walked back with me afterwards to the inn. "Your floor is cold!" Kim said with alarm as he started out the door to complain to the inn manager. I stopped him.

"I like it this way," I said. "If it is too hot I can't sleep."

Kim looked at me strangely. Lee seemed amused, having already learned to expect that I would behave differently from Koreans--and doing an admirable job of accepting it at face value. Neither made a fuss, and we agreed to meet for breakfast.

I was still too hot, and slept fitfully for most of the night.

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The morning was clear and cold, but there was plenty of hot water. I turned on my short wave radio as I shaved, and found out that the New York Stock Exchange had once again shot through the

roof. Lee came over to take me to breakfast, but not without first taking advantage of the inn's bounty of heat to wash himself.

Breakfast in Kim's home was predictably sumptuous--fish, soup, bean curd, rice, and, naturally, kimchi. Kim's wife served us all, and then sat down to eat. She was the sort of women who is attractive not so much because of any natural beauty, but because she radiates health and vigor. (Kim looked almost sickly next to her.) Kim then did something unusual. He patted his wife and said, "I could never do all this work without her support. She pulled the family through when I was in prison."

This is not exactly sexual equality, but in Korea, acknowledging the contribution of a woman has to be counted as progress.

The drive to Wando was gorgeous. We sped down a smooth paved road through rolling farmland that was broken up abruptly by mountains of tall granite spires. Farmers has mostly done their work for the year, although some fields of cabbage had yet to be taken in. We passed over a recently-built bridge to Wando, which is an island, and on to the small port. Wando, with its beaches and clean water, is increasingly popular as a tourist destination for Koreans during the summer, and the government has made a successful effort to tidy up the place and make it attractive.

Our destination, naturally enough, was a Presbyterian Church with a credit cooperative next to it. If Kim looked to me like a dissident, no one else I met on the trip did. The manager of the Kangjin Credit Cooperative came along for the ride and he and everyone we met in Wando looked...well...like businessmen. They wore ties and suits and had short, well-groomed hair. They did look like country businessmen, though--far more relaxed and jovial than their counterparts in Seoul.

They were different too because they had a mission. They were the salt of the earth--the little guys, the independent men, the ordinary Koreans who worked hard, lived simply, worshipped god, and got nothing as a special favor from anyone, certainly not from the government.

These churches, and credit cooperatives, and the stores and farms and fishing boats--these are the things that ordinary Koreans have created by themselves, that they own, and that they have fought to control, to preserve a little bit of their lives, and a minor chunk of their nation that is free from the control of a government they despise.

What could be more...if it is possible...American? But there it is in Korea, where I had not expected to find it, something so familiar that I had to look at it and touch it again and again, like meeting an old friend who was thought to be dead, and feeling the face and the hands over and over because they cannot be real. But it is real--as American as hating government and big business, buttressed by a strong belief in God and the church, and a burning desire to carve out just a little bit of the universe where no one can tell them what to do. Topping it all off is an unshakable belief that democracy--free, unfettered, legally-sanctioned elections--is the answer.

In Wando, as in Kangjin, and in every other city and county seat in Korea is a large two or three story cement building, with a courtyard in the front for cars and buses, and a high fence surrounding all, usually with a guard posted at the gate. This is the government, staffed by civil servants appointed by and under the control of the Home Ministry in Seoul. Local people do get into this system of government, particularly if they happen to be local chapter chiefs for the ruling party, but all authority stems from above.

Few would argue that this government is entirely incompetent. Wando is one of those fresh, attractive, growing towns that I wrote about in my last report. The government is building a new harbor in Wando to handle larger ships, and there is talk of a new rail link to the city. The ferry to Cheju Island, a large resort island off the southern coast, takes less than three hours, and a hydrofoil less than an hour from Wando. With the improvement in roads to Wando, more and more traffic is being diverted from Mokpo, the traditional port for transit to Cheju. Wando seems assured of a prosperous future, and the government has recently taken action to preserve the area's clean water and beaches.

Yet that government, and the police who back them up, can seem ominously like an occupation force. In October, farmers from the area gathered in Kangjin to express their anger. They had worked on government public works construction projects, and after months of procrastination the government finally paid the farmers in old, low-grade rice. The farmers were incensed as they gathered on the main street of the town, and the government responded predictably. Riot police arrived in buses and chased the farmers away with tear gas.

Farmer's organizations, such as the Union of Catholic Farmers, have recently received a boost from another ill-conceived government policy. The government imported large quantities of cattle and encouraged farmers to raise them for meat. As the price of cattle dropped, many farmers lost all their savings. There were some suicides and cases of farmers illegally slaughtering the animals in public markets and leaving the carcasses to rot. The government has admitted it blundered, but it has let the farmers suffer the consequences. And when farmers see the ruling party pass tax relief measures for insolvent business groups, as it did in late November, they feel inevitably that the government has someone else's interest in mind first.

The call for local democratic control is a very practical matter, not a theoretical nicety. With agricultural cooperatives and aquatic product cooperatives under the control of the government, the little guys in Korea have no channels to express their political interests, and no way to call the government to account for what it does. Democracy in Korea is a popular cause--not just the brain child of urban intellectuals and late adolescent student radicals. Korea has no tradition of democratic rule, as many government leaders are fond of pointing out. But if Korea is not ready for democracy it certainly is not the majority of ordinary people who are holding back the nation.

Kim seemed to know many people in Wando. He led me to the Aquatic Products Cooperative building, where merchants were peddling piles of dried laver, a kind of seaweed used for sushi rolls or just to wrap up rice to eat. All around the island, farmers who lived by

the water gather the seaweed during low tide. They roll it into sheets and leave it to dry in the sun on walls of straw.

Kim was wonderful to watch. He does not walk so much as he bounces, with each leg swinging forward one at a time as though drawn along by an invisible magnetic force. After visiting the cooperative we went again to another sumptuous multi-course meal, and then Kim disappeared for an hour. He did not say where, but Lee told me that the police found that he was in town and wanted to have a word. The police get nervous about Kim and keep a close eye on him. They think he is a bad influence on young people.

On the drive home, we stopped off briefly at Lee's home village to visit his older sister, Kim's mother. She appeared in baggy padded farm clothes, and invited us into her house to eat persimmons, obviously pleased by the surprise visit of her son and brother. We sat on the floor inside, peeling our fruit, and she looked worried as Lee explained how much money he needed to open the coffee shop he dreamt about. She said nothing. On the wall hung a recent photo of her sixtieth birthday celebration. Koreans consider the sixtieth birthday to be one of life's great events, on par with birth and marriage. Before the assembled celebrants in the photo sat two bouquets of flowers each with an inscription attached--one from a famous elderly human rights lawyer in Kwangju, Hong Nam-soon, and another from Kim Dae-jung.

On the way back to Kangjin, and a nap for me, we stopped outside the village to visit the church that Lee had attended while growing up. There is a new church building now, made out of cut stone, and beside it a new building for bible study classes and social programs.

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As I awoke from my nap, I realized that I was coming down with a cold. Drat! I don't mind getting sick in strange places, but I live in fear that my friends would take me to see a strange doctor.

Kim and Lee came to get me for yet another of those meals. This time I had little appetite, but did my best to get through it. Afterwards Kim took me to the next event on my program. He had invited young people in the church to join me in a discussion of political and economic questions.

Kim introduced me. Kim has a charming way about people. He is always terribly impressed by other people's achievements and the goodness of their character. After describing so-and-so to me, talking quietly into my ear, he inevitably ended with the observation that, "He is a v-e-r-y good person," stretching out the "very" and squinting his eyes to add emphasis.

So it was with me. Kim told me repeatedly how impressed he was that I wanted to know how ordinary Koreans--farmers, merchants, and fisherman--lived, and what they thought about political questions. He even added a few slights about the visitors from international human rights organizations who come to Kwangju under the auspices of the Korean National Council of Churches. He sometimes picks them up at the Sinyang Park Hotel, a pretentiously luxurious and overpriced hotel on a mountain overlooking the city, and introduces them to Kwangju's famous personalities. He says he can never seem to coax

them out of their plush and comfortable haunts and into the countryside, where life is rougher.

Kim began with the list of my credentials that stretched on and on. If any of this resume made much of an impression, it seemed only to be the fact that I was an American, and wrote for an American audience. I said I was interested in local perceptions of Korea's economic development, to start with, but what I got back was a barrage, some of it not in the most polite language, about the messages I was enjoined to carry back to the American government and people.

I was unprepared for this reaction, and so too, apparently, was Kim. Kim had told me in detail of his disappointment in President Reagan and in U.S. policy toward Korea. He wanted the U.S. to do more to promote democracy in Korea, rather than publicly embrace a "military dictator." He placed high hopes that Ted Kennedy or at least some democrat would sit next in the White House, and that the clock would be turned back to the Carter years, when the U.S. made strong noises about human rights abuses in Korea. (It is nice to find someone, I suppose, who remembers the Carter years fondly.)

Kim, though, also had a keen sense that I would have known enough of this from living in Seoul, and that in fact the most useful thing for me was to understand what people thought about their lives in Korea. When he explained this to the assembled students, it brought scowls. The U.S. props up Chun, and he can't survive without U.S. support. The U.S. has to get rid of him. And why is the U.S. pressuring Korea to open up its markets, when all of the little guys suffer as a result? The current theory here is that the U.S. is threatening Chun with a withdrawl of political support which would lead to his fall from power, unless Chun gives in on trade issues. (In fact, Chun is a committed free trader, at least in principle, and has been forced to go slow in part because of the exaggerated propaganda of his own government about how trade liberalization would damage the Korean economy. Most of that ended a few months ago, when Chun decided that it was politically damaging.)

I can't say I learned much about conditions in the countryside from my evening at the church. They did say that farmers are suffering from a failure of the government to raise grain prices, which I already knew. And they tried to explain why the ruling party did better in the countryside in last February's election than in cities--the government threw in lots of money. There were implied threats of a withdrawl of money for public works. Police illegally obstructed campaigning by the opposition. It is very easy for the government to do all of this, and very difficult for outsiders to verify one way or the other.

That evening was, though, the first time since I arrived in Korea that I was put on the spot and harangued **because** I was American. It would not be the last time on this trip. Afterwards Kim congratulated me on remaining calm and polite in the face of such abuse. I did not want to tell him that I could not understand all the nuances of what I heard, so I did tell him what I was thinking, "Why should I care? I do not represent the U.S. government."

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The sky clouded over and the wind picked up by the time we left for Mokpo the next morning. We stopped en route at the establishment of another of Kim's "v-e-r-y good persons." Mr. Park owns and runs juice canning operation that caters to local farmers. He is a church man and a political activist and I was beginning to see that Kim's network of political buddies was far more extensive than I had imagined. I got the harangue from him, before he took us all out to lunch, this time, unfortunately, at a "Western" restaurant. But I had completely lost my appetite by then anyway, and could feel that something was amiss somewhere.

When we arrived in Mokpo, the skies had opened up in a steady downpour, and the city looked tired. Mokpo had none of the freshness and spark that I have found in so many small Korean cities. Koreans say the same thing about Mokpo, and many blame the government, saying the city has been punished for having produced Kim Dae-jung.

While South Cholla was left behind in the rapid development that Korea experienced in the 1970s, Mokpo seems to have been left out of the mini-boom of the 1980s that has hit the rest of the province. But in the case of Mokpo, I accept some of the government's argument. Mokpo is still the principal harbor in the region, but it can only accommodate ships up to two-thousand tons, tiny by modern standards. While it might be possible to deepen the harbor, it would be pointless to try to cut a channel through the long stretch of islands and shallow water that fan out from the city. Mokpo is being left behind, and looks like it.

We drove down the city's main street nearly to the end before turning off and parking in front of a small drug store. Kim went ahead and then signaled for us to follow. We climbed up a narrow staircase beside the store, and entered a second-floor room with a large bookcase to the side and a kerosene heater in the middle. A man came forward to shake my hand, and I was impressed. If Kim Young-jin exuded a reassuring shaggy-dog friendliness, this was a man of power. His body was short and compact. He moved gracefully, as though every muscle under his dark suit was relaxed, yet under careful control, and ready to spring into action. The angling of his eyebrows down toward the bridge of his nose added drama to each movement of his eyes.

The name card that he handed me said, simply, An Chul, pharmacist, because that is what An Chul is. He owns and runs the drugstore downstairs, at least he has since getting out of prison in a Christmas amnesty in 1981. Like Kim Dae-jung, An Chul today is stripped of his civil rights as a citizen of Korea.

An Chul led the Mokpo insurrection. Unlike the Kwangju insurrection, in Mokpo no one died, in part because An insisted that all guns be collected and locked up. For a man who was defeated by the army, convicted and put into jail, and who today is legally denied his political rights and watched and harrassed by agents of the National Security Planning Agency (formerly the KCIA), An is an amazing bundle of self-confidence and optimism.

"In the past we felt frustrated because we thought we were a minority," he said. "But now everything has turned around."

An was talking about last February's National Assembly election, in which 65% of the electorate cast ballots against the government. (Because of a bonus seat system, the government party

still won a majority of seats in the Assembly.) His confidence surprised me because in Seoul there is widespread disappointment over the opposition's failure to overcome internal factional problems--a disappointment effectively fanned by the government-controlled media. But far away in the provinces, An and others in the opposition discount what the media says about their colleagues in the Assembly. For them, it is far more significant that the Korean people support them in their quest for democracy, and that time and history are on their side. It was a perspective that I would appreciate more deeply in the coming days.

By the time we left for Kwangju in the late afternoon, the rain began to fall more heavily. I could feel the pressure building in my stomach, and I knew finally that I **would** have to have to pay for all of those meals. I just prayed that the bill would not come due before I reached a comfortable hotel in Kwangju. The drive to Kwangju was slow. The road was all torn up, being widened to four lanes and each bus that passed in the opposite direction splashed mud all over the windshield. The expansion of the Kwangju-Mokpo highway has received a great deal of attention in the Korean press, with progress reports sometimes coming over the noon radio news. The decision to expand the highway is widely seen a President Chun's apology to the province for the Kwangju Incident.

I did reach the hotel in time, and settled down for the next day and a half to recover from my first serious bout of food poisoning in Korea.

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On Monday morning, December 2, Lee came to get me at my room in the hotel and we took a cab across town to meet Kim for lunch. Kim had invited me to sit in on the sentencing of a student activist. I was not very keen about it. I had been to sentencings before in Seoul. They are boring. I appreciated that the presence of a foreign journalist, who would obviously stand behind the idea of free speech, might give a small moral boost to the accused. But I could not help feeling it was futile. After skipping the last six meals, though, I did not have enough energy to work out my own schedule for the day, so I went along.

We arrived in the coffee shop first and sat down. Lee joked that his cousin, Kim, still operated on Korean time; you could never tell when he would show up. Kim was unpredictable, but "Korean time" is a joke precisely because industrialization and urbanization have made most Koreans punctual.

The first to arrive was a man of medium build, about fifty years old wearing a plaid sports jacket and tie, and a dark shirt. He was preoccupied, although he seemed glad to talk with us, as though he wanted to get something off his mind. Kang Bong-nam was the father of Kang Sung-ho, whose sentencing we would attend in an hour and a half.

The younger Kang had become president of the student council at Chosun University in Kwangju and had led a series of demonstrations against the government that resulted in violent clashes with police. As part of the government's "get tough" policy with its opponents, the prosecution arrested and filed charges against Kang under the harsh National Security Law.

The National Security Law was designed to prevent subversion, and allows for a maximum penalty of death. In this case, the prosecution was asking for seven years in jail. Kang was being tried on the grounds that he is pro-communist.

No one doubts that student political thinking has taken a sharp turn toward the left these days in Korea. Korean students are now better organized and more violent. Students have begun talking about mass struggle and they would clearly like to overthrow the government, in the now vaunted tradition of 1960, when massive student demonstrations in Seoul forced the resignation of President Syngman Rhee. The students were incensed then because of obvious fraud in the recent presidential election.

"Dependency theory" is the latest rage, along with a host of conspiracy theories about links between multi-national companies, the U.S. military, and the government and big business groups in Korea--exploiting the little guys in Korea for the benefit of domestic and international fat cats. Students say they want to break up Korea's business groups.

But are the students pro-communist? Are they working to further the interests of North Korea, as they have been charged in the courts? Government analysts have taken excerpts from student political tracts and lined them up side-by-side with similar ideas found in North Korean propaganda, and have taken that as grounds for legal action. The government has also launched a vigorous public campaign to discredit the students.

The campaign doesn't seem to be having much effect. Although a lot of Koreans don't like student violence, the government's harder line is alienating more and more people. The parents of students who occupied the U.S. Cultural Center in Seoul last May turned up initially appealing to the U.S. Embassy and the Korean government for mercy and forgiveness, apologizing on behalf of their children. Before very long they started leading demonstrations of their own against military dictatorship and U.S. support for it.

By the time Kim showed up, all the other luncheon guests had arrived--four protestant ministers, and the young Kang's lawyer, Lee Ki-hong, a well-known human rights activist. The senior Kang was a fertilizer merchant from Kangjin, and also happened to be an elder at Kim's Presbyterian Church. The ministers had come together to hold Kang's hand throughout the trial.

When we arrived at the courtroom, I discovered that Kang had many more hand-holders than I had imagined. The church in Kangjin had chartered a bus, as it had on every previous session of the trial, and loaded it up with parishioners--farmers, merchants, some retired. One old man with a long, thin white beard showed up in rubber farm boots and silk pantaloons. Kim pointed me toward a woman who was smiling at me, and it took me a few seconds to recognize her. It was Kim's mother! For the special event she had put on a purple dress and fake fur. Was this the same woman I had seen just a few days earlier on the farm?

The gallery of the courtroom was packed, and Kim pointed to some men standing at the side, and said they were plainclothes agents.

Kang Sung-ho soon came in with two police escorts. Kang wore husky padded clothing (Korean prisons are cold in winter) that looked like a cross between pajamas and a white marshal-arts uni-

form. He smiled and nodded toward his family and friends as he walked toward the center of the courtroom and sat down. His expression suggested he was about to receive an award or a diploma rather a sentence to prison. Kim leaned forward and said in a loud whisper, "How is your health?"

"Fine, fine," the student answered quickly.

A three judge panel arrived ("They need three judges because it is such a big case," said Kim.), and one judge read the sentence, which took about two minute.

Kim whispered to me, "Five years."

When the judge finished reading, Kang leapt up and turned toward the audience. With both arms raised over his head, he suddenly looked very powerful as though he could toss away his police escort in one gigantic chop.

"**LONG LIVE DEMOCRACY! LONG LIVE DEMOCRACY!**" He managed to say it twice before police hustled him out of the room.

As the judges escaped through a small door behind the bench, the audience simultaneously rose to its feet and began to sing a church hymn.

When finished, they bowed their heads while the Reverend Shin Kyung-sik, of the Sung-ji Church in Kwangju, lead a long prayer.

"We bear witness before God," the pastor said, "that Kang Sung-ho is not a Communist!"

Silence descended over the courtroom for a moment. It was all over. Kang's mother wept quietly, along with other women in the audience.

Kang's father stepped to the front. "Thank you everyone for the support you have given us during the trial," he said softly, his own eyes watery.

Outside the courtroom, Kim introduced me to an attractive, well-dressed woman in her late forties. When she heard that I was American and wrote for the American media, she launched into a tirade.

"Our children are going to jail because they protest against the Jenkins bill!" she said. "Why is America doing this?! Why doesn't America support democracy in Korea?!"

Lee, who had been with me long enough to know my responses, began to talk to her. He told her that Reagan was going to veto the Jenkins Bill, and that it was unlikely to become law.

That quieted her for a moment, but hardly satisfied her. Her daughter, I learned, had already begun to serve a five year prison term, convicted under the National Security Law. Her husband, a university professor, was recently demoted for speaking out publicly against the "Campus Stabilization Law," a bill proposed by the government that would have empowered a non-judicial panel to incarcerate radical students for up to six months of "reorientation."

After finishing a long enumeration of her complaints against the U.S., she suddenly switched to English. "I love America **SO** much!" she said apologetically. "But I **HATE** America!"

Many Koreans have begun to feel betrayed by the U.S. This is a recent phenomenon, and surprising, because the reservoir of good will toward the U.S. in Korea is extremely deep. Koreans are grateful that the U.S. saved the south from communism during the Korean War. They appreciate that the U.S. security commitment to South Korea continues to protect them. Even radical students do not call

for a withdrawl of U.S. troops from Korea. Koreans recognize that U.S. economic aid in the past has helped Korea enormously.

Koreans also love what the U.S. is--a big place, with lots of room and opportunity, and freedom. That love of the U.S. produces a long line outside the U.S. Embassy each morning in Seoul. Everyone, it seems, wants a visa to go there.

When Park Chung-hee staged his military coup in 1961, the U.S. denounced it and called for a return to constitutional government. The call failed, but Koreans perceived that the U.S. stood on the side of democracy, and many Koreans credit the U.S. for some of the trappings of democracy that Park eventually adopted.

When Chun Doo-hwan came to power the U.S. reacted very differently. On the night of December 12th, Chun pulled the 9th Division of the Army off the front line at the Demilitarized Zone and staged a coup that brought him control of the Army. The 9th Division was formally under the control of the U.S. Commander in Korea. Movement of the troops would apparently have been a breach of command, but the U.S. did nothing. Faced with a fait accompli, the U.S. decided it **could** do nothing. But many Koreans concluded that the U.S. tacitly or explicitly supported the coup.

The U.S. did not denounce the violence against civilians that occurred during the Kwangju Incident. (It deplored the violence in general, taking neutral stand.) It released Korean troops under U.S. command to retake the city.

Ignoring the advise of the U.S. Ambassador to Korea, President Reagan's first invitation extended to a foreign head of state to visit the U.S. was to President Chun. With a hearty public embrace in Washington, President Reagan effectively restored credibility to the U.S. security commitment to South Korea, which had suffered under President Carter. But most Koreans concluded that the U.S. did not care much anymore about whether Korea had democracy or adequate protection for human rights.

In 1985, as the Korean government encouraged Korean newspapers to fly off the handle publicly in exaggerated accounts of protectionist trends in the U.S., and their effect on the Korean economy, anti-American sentiment has reached the level of concensus. U.S. diplomats have begun to worry privately about the long run consequences, as a younger generation comes to age convinced that the U.S. is trying to exploit Korea.

Many people say that friction between the U.S. and Korea is normal and natural as Korea develops economically and becomes more independent-minded. But the extent of the hostility has already gone beyond the normal and expected.

As I turned to leave, Kim tugged my arm. "You're just in time," he said. "Nine students have just taken over the U.S. Cultural Center."

We hopped into a cab, and off we were. I would be writing a news story tonight.

"Do you think this will have a big impact on U.S. policy toward Korea?" Kim asked.

Even after our long political discussions, I was still amazed at his naivete, although I think I liked him for it. Honesty, I decided, would be best. "No," I said. "It probably won't have any effect at all."

When 82 students occupied the U.S. Cultural Center in Seoul last May, they turned it into a field day for the U.S. media. The only practical effect seems to have been to tip the balance of power inside the government toward the hard liners, resulting in a crackdown on dissidents. The protesters in May left the Center peacefully (into waiting police buses) after four days of "dialogue" with U.S. officials.

The Kwangju occupation would not be nearly so glorious. Police had cordoned off the approaches to the Center by the time I arrived, although I was able to walk by police lines by showing my press pass. The students were already hoarse from singing and shouting slogans, but when they saw my face outside the gate they started up again.

A plainclothesman asked who I was, and when I told him, he told me the name of the small hotel where I was staying. It was not guesswork. A plainclothesman was stationed in the lobby of the hotel for the rest of my stay. The police were interested in how I had heard about the sit in and how I happened to be in Kwangju. (A couple of U.S. diplomats were also curious later too.)

It was cold outside of the Center, and boring. The director of the Center was in Seoul for a meeting and returned by helicopter. When I telephoned inside the Center, I was informed I would have to call the Embassy in Seoul for any information. So much for being the man on the scene.

The students had brought in a few gasoline bombs, and later in the evening, when they refused to meet for another session of "dialogue" with U.S. officials, the U.S. ambassador in Seoul lost his patience and called in the police to arrest the students. (They tried to light one of the bombs, but did not know they had to leave some air in the top of the bottle, and it fizzled out.) They are not likely to be heard from again for some time. As the students surely knew well, storming into the U.S. Cultural Center with molotov cocktails, one way or another, would give them a free ticket to spend the next few years in jail. What they probably did not count on was that few people would take notice.

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I spent my last full day in Kwangju with the "enemy." I went to talk to the South Cholla Provincial government. Lee accompanied me to help me over some of the rough parts of the interview.

The provincial government offices are housed in one of those pastel concrete cubes, a bit larger and more grand than most. Upon entering, these buildings always remind me of schools built in the U.S. during the 40s or 50s. The stairs and hallways are too wide, as though built to accommodate the crush of students changing class. The windows seem impossibly tall. I find it hard to see how anyone could accomplish something in a place with so many vacant spaces like this. How much better just to enjoy the sun coming in through the windows and push papers from one office to the next, but that is, of course, not what happens. It isn't easy to cure Koreans of their habits of hard work, even in a government bureaucracy.

We met with Kang Young-gi, director general of planning and management in the province. He has responsibility for putting together a public investment program in South Cholla. Kang reminded

me of many government bureaucrats I had met in Seoul--smart, dedicated, and pleasant, more pleasant than most. To become an official of such a high rank, Kang had to pass the "higher level civil service examination." The examination is highly competitive, and I have yet to meet anyone who passed it who did not strike me as intelligent.

Kang is a native of South Cholla. After working for many years in Seoul, he requested a transfer to his home, a request that is easy to sympathize with. Kwangju is a lovely city--cleaner and less crowded than Seoul, and with its own cultural and intellectual traditions. Kwangju also has good food. I spent a pleasant afternoon wandering around the city, something I have never managed to do in Seoul.

Poverty has driven many people from South Cholla away to Seoul or Pusan. The province has had the highest rate of out migration of any province in the country. The public investments that went along with Korea's rapid economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s passed by South Cholla in favor of the region surrounding Pusan (President Park's home) and the Seoul region. From a purely technical standpoint, that may have been a wise strategy. But part of the rage that spilled over during the Kwangju uprising stemmed from a widespread feeling that the central government had neglected and exploited the province. People were all too ready to blame the centuries' old prejudice against people from South Cholla, and the President's bias toward his old home. (As Kang tells me, people from South Cholla are friendly and emotional, yet stubborn and sometimes argumentative.)

Since coming to office, President Chun has moved effectively to tip the balance in the opposite direction. The Kwangju-Mokpo highway is just the tip of the iceberg. The expressway from Taejon to Kwangju is being widened to four lanes, and a new highway from Kwangju to Taegu is finished. The railroad from Taejon was expanded from single to double track. Secondary roads throughout the region are being paved at breakneck speed. New road construction over the past five years is equal to all new road construction in the previous forty years. Industrial estates are being expanded, harbors are being dredged, piped water supply has tripled.

The average per capita gross regional product, the value of everything produced, in Cholla still lags behind the national average by ten to fifteen percent. But Cholla is now well integrated into the rest of the nation and has most of the infrastructure needed to support rapid economic growth.

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Living in Seoul, watching the opposition falling apart into factional bickering, watching on television a recent brawl on the National Assembly floor between the ruling and opposition parties, watching the escalating violence of student attacks on the government, and the government's ever more determined efforts to crack the whip to keep its opponents in line--watching what seems to be steady deterioration of political dialogue, I find it easy to be pessimistic about Korea's future.

Yet on the long drive back to Seoul, I realized that some of the optimism of people who I met in Kwangju had rubbed off on me.

The opposition in Seoul often seems to be a head without a body, yet the body is there. It is healthy and strong.

Before meeting with provincial officials I had a long discussion with a man who has long been a leader of the movement to promote democracy and protection for human rights in Kwangju. He received one of the longest prison terms after the Kwangju Incident, although, like others, he was freed from prison in an amnesty. He asked me not to use his name, for fear of creating more trouble with the police.

Mr. Chang, I'll call him, believes that the goal of his life's work, to realize democracy, is within sight. Christianity in Korea has taken off like a rocket, bringing people together, and giving the nation a base of spiritual strength that it has lacked since Japan colonized Korea after the turn of the century. The last election showed clearly that the Korean people support democracy, and that they understand how to exercise democratic rights and responsibilities.

Although the gap between the opposition and the government appears unbridgeable, both sides have strong incentives to compromise. The government needs the opposition in the Assembly to give it legitimacy, and sooner or later it will have to come to terms with a movement that the Korean people plainly support.

The opposition too needs the Assembly, not least because opposition assemblymen are not wealthy, and went deeply into hock during the election. If they are too unruly, and the President dissolves the Assembly, as the Constitution allows him to do after April, many could not face the expense of another election so quickly. The opposition may not achieve its goal of constitutional revision before 1988, but a compromise deal of reform early in the term of the next president might be possible.

If the process breaks down and the military steps in again, this can only be temporary. Even the military cannot stop history.

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Mr. Chang's vision sustained my optimism for at least a few days in Seoul.

Soon after I returned, Lee came to my house, bitterly disappointed because he could not raise enough money to open his coffee shop.

Two weeks after that, he called to say he could no longer come over in the early mornings to help me with Korean. He had just taken a job with Hyundai Engineering and Construction Co., the flagship company of Korea's largest business conglomerate.

Best,

Steven B. Butler

Received in Hanover 2/5/86