

One cannot explain the nation's problems by simply blaming Park

Korea: What the Students Want

BY KAI HONG

After two decades of relative political stability and unprecedented economic progress, South Korea is once again racked with political disorder, civil strife, and student unrest. The trouble began in Seoul in May with massive demonstrations by students demanding free elections for a new government and a quick end to martial law. What followed was a virtually total military takeover of the government and even more inclusive martial law. The initially peaceful demonstrations escalated into grave civil strife, bringing Kwangju, the country's fourth largest city, under the control of protesting youths.

There is a sense of *déjà vu* about what is happening in South Korea. Indeed, from within and outside the country the Park government had been warned continually of simmering discontent among students and of dire consequences if political liberalization was not carried out. Of course Park failed to heed these warnings, resorting instead to ever harsher crackdowns on those who might possibly oppose him. Toward the end of his regime the accumulated resentment against repressive policies was such that Park's assassin, Kim Jae Kyu, contended that as a patriot he had to eliminate Park to prevent a potentially violent and bloody outbreak that would tear the country apart.

While succeeding in his assassination plot, Kim's hope of restoring democracy evaporated with the emergence of a new strongman, General Chon Too Hwan, a fervent Park loyalist. By taking over the two most powerful intelligence agencies, the Army Security Force and the Central Intelligence Agency, Chon became the real ruler of Korea, stripping almost all power from the interim President Choi Kyu Hah and his cabinet. One would hardly expect the students to acquiesce to a new version of Park. In May they burst into the streets in what was said to be one of Korea's largest demonstrations, the number estimated at more than fifty thousand.

The trouble in Korea is political, of course, but the less visible and ultimately more important cultural and social problems that face the nation are not sufficiently appreciated. It is too easy to explain the problems of Korea by simply blaming Park. More important, such an explanation misses the key point: That Park was able

to function as he did indicates a structural problem in Korean society at large.

SUBVERSION AND CATHARSIS

From 1978 to 1979 I was a visiting professor in the department of philosophy at Ewha Woman's University and in the department of aesthetics at Seoul National University, during which time I had the chance to observe students and the educational system close up. My trip to Seoul was my first to Korea since 1964. Though Korean is my native tongue, my formal education had not taken place in Korea, making it difficult to lecture on technical subjects. After my first lecture one student, I later learned, commented that it was a disgrace that a Korean could not speak his language properly. Notoriously chauvinistic, students and colleagues alike regarded me with a certain suspicion. My problem was compounded by the fact that I did not know how to play the elaborate social games one plays with students, colleagues, relatives—even strangers—in Korea. The ice was broken only after I was introduced to a group of students who were enthusiastic *Tal-Chum* dancers. Until then I had never heard of *Tal-Chum*, meaning Mask-Dance, said to predate the better-known Japanese *Noh* dance theatre. I learned that some students at Seoul National University had literally rescued the dance from extinction and had begun to give performances.

A *tal* (mask) was worn by popular entertainers who, in their dance, satirized their oppressors. A traditionally strict, conformist people, Koreans possess great reserve and are not given to saying what is on their minds. Only behind masks did the dancers dare to speak against the *Yangbans*, the ruling class. In short, the Mask-Dance performance provided a cathartic event whereby the accumulated frustrations and resentments of the citizenry could be openly vented in laughter and satire in the presence of the *Yangbans* and other spectators.

Thirty-six years of Japanese colonial rule followed by the ravages of the Korean War made a shambles not only of the country's economic infrastructure but also of the cultural underpinnings of the society—almost extinguishing the traditionally outcast class of entertainers who could dance *Tal-Chum*. It is extraordinary, then, that some time about 1970 young college students rediscovered this dying art, studied it under a handful of *Tal*-dancers now in their seventies and eighties, and then themselves propagated the dance by teaching it at

Kai Hong is Guest Investigator in Logic at Rockefeller University.

different universities. That it so quickly caught on at campuses across Korea is intimately related to its inherently subversive implications and its cathartic function, as well as to the political and social situation in Korea. (In fact, until this boom there was no mention of such an important traditional art form in the history or literature textbooks, having been deemed obscene and subversive by the education ministry and by scholars.)

Mindful of 1960, when student demonstrations forced Syngman Rhee to resign from his long presidency, Park had battalions of riot police permanently stationed at most university campuses to prevent mass rallies. Under these conditions the *Tal-Chum* performances provided the opportunity for students to gather in the hundreds and thousands, usually resulting in a political rally. The first such performance I witnessed was in October, 1978, at Ewha Women's University stadium. It was all very new and exciting to one who realized how ignorant he had been of his own heritage and at the same time felt he was finally at home among his people. As the darkness slowly gathered, the audience began to assemble in groups like waves, filling the stadium silently, almost sullenly. When darkness finally engulfed the stadium, the prepared torches were lighted and dark figures in masks and colorful costumes darted about—gesturing, mimicking, hurling obscene one-liners at their tormentors. The audience came to life, clapping in unison and even shouting approval when a character made a witty remark against the vanity of the *Yangban*. The dance steps were exhilarating and liberating; no wonder these students found *Tal-Chum* to their liking! It is difficult to be young, but it is excruciating to be a young student in Korea.

A MIRROR OF SOCIETY

Visitors to Korea are bound to notice young boys and girls in their early and mid-teens wearing neat black cotton uniforms, rubber sneakers, and black student caps that rather resemble police officers'. They walk in groups, carrying heavy book bags that seem to make one shoulder incline to the side. These students are going to or coming from a few hours of study at a private after-school learning institute. Once, while I was visiting a relative in Seoul, I was startled to find eight or nine pairs of black sneakers, smelling of rubber, at the entrance. (In Korea it is still customary to leave your shoes in the foyer.) As it turned out, my relative's son—a seventh or eighth grader—was part of a private group tutorial conducted on their second floor. I was told that he had such group tutorial sessions twice a week for English and mathematics and that for other subjects he was going to one of the after-school centers that number in the hundreds in Seoul alone.

The boy's sister, who was in her final year of high school, was also taking group tutorials as well as attending after-school classes for all the subjects on which she was to be tested for college entrance the following spring. She rose at dawn to attend a private institution for a couple of hours, went on to regular school for five or six hours, and ended the day with another round of tutorial sessions, arriving home at 10:00 P.M. or even later. Only the midnight curfew prevented tutorial sessions from going on longer.

Astounded, I asked my students at Seoul National and Ewha Women's University if they had gone through the same routine. Yes, without a single exception they had. From about age ten until they enter college Korean youngsters suffer from an irrational testing system. If they fail the exam for the college of their choice, they stay out another year to try again. (There are many private institutions just for these "try-again" students who number in the hundreds of thousands. I have visited such an institution and witnessed grim-faced, sullen students preparing for the entrance examination.)

Korean college students dress much like their American and Japanese counterparts, but there the similarity ends. Unable to provide a stimulating intellectual environment, Korean colleges leave students with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction and oppression. For one thing, students still face years of compulsory military service; for another, they are continually subject to a strict behavior code. Seniority is everything in Korean society. The range of possibilities for individual expression—whether artistic, political, or just personal amusement—is strictly circumscribed. In fact, students cannot so much as openly hold hands without inviting social ostracism (though it is all right if one does so discreetly).

rites of spring

Since the years of Syngman Rhee's regime student discontent traditionally has been expressed in annual spring rites in the form of street demonstrations. These have been directed as much against the cultural and social foundations of the nation as against the regime in power. In short, students demonstrated against the entire established order, not just those in power at the time. The importance of this point cannot be overemphasized, especially because some liberal, so-called opposition figures tend to mistake these demonstrators as supporting their side. For example, when student demonstrations forced President Rhee to resign in 1960, the opposition Democratic party came to power almost accidentally—by being in the right place at the right time—and not at the students' will.

The unique aspect of these student demonstrations is their lack of an informing vision. Unlike most countries, in Korea there is no figure around whom student opposition unites; it is only their common hatred of the dictatorship that binds them. But what kind of society do the students seek, and what kind of society do they think it possible to construct, given the reality of present-day Korea? The answer is not at all clear. **WV**