

A People of Destiny

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That Saturday afternoon they met at Insadong and walked the three blocks to an old apartment block for their appointment with professor Yu. In the elevator on the way up to the sixth floor he put his arm around her, leaned in close and tried to kiss her. She pushed him away.

"Be serious. This is important." She told him.

He reached for her breast and kissed the top of her head. She laughed and pushed again.

"Hey, CCTV" she pointed at the camera eye in the corner of the car.

"I don't care. I ain't shy" he said but he backed off with a promise of later.

On the sixth floor the door creaked open, they exited and began looking for number 607. The view from the walkway was spectacular. The Blue House, the presidential mansion, with Buk Han Mountain rising behind it was front and center. They located the apartment they were looking for halfway down the walkway. She rang the bell and turned to him.

"Don't forget to take your shoes off." She told him in her big sister voice.

"Jesus, you think I'm stupid," he replied.

At that moment the door was opened by an elderly lady with a huge smile.

"Oh so oh sei yo" she welcomed them and bid them come in. Chung Sook stepped back and indicated he should go in first. He did kick off his shoes and stepped into the small entranceway. Their hostess ushered them into the living room and indicated they should take a seat on the couch. The room, in fact the whole apartment, was quite small in comparison to any living space that an American was used to. The old lady and Chung Sook began chatting in Korean as if they had known each other all their lives. He caught enough of the Korean to understand that Chung Sook was addressing her as Emo, mothers elder sister. He was constantly amazed at how Koreans could so quickly be on such familiar terms with people they had met for the first time.

Within a few minutes they were standing to greet Professor Yu Ki Bak. The old man was dressed in suit pants, a white shirt and an old frayed cardigan. He had a full head of snow white hair and wore horned rimmed glasses pushed down to the end of his nose. He shuffled over to them in ancient looking carpet slippers, stuck out his hand, beamed from ear to ear and greeted his guests.

"Welcome to Korea and to my humble home" he said in flawless English. "Please be seated."

His hand, although boney, was strong and his hand shake was no wet fish. Professor Yu took a seat in an overstuffed chair at the head of the low coffee table. They sat side by side on the couch. Mrs. Yu, or so he assumed her to be, remained standing, continued to smile and asked if she could bring us some tea. The professor grunted what sounded like coffee at her. Chung Sook asked if there wasn't any ginseng cha. When she was assured there was she took the liberty of ordering for both of them. He knew better than to interrupt. It was feeling more and more like an introductory Korean lesson where guests visit a teacher's home. Of course the formalities must be observed and there would be no substantial conversation until the tea and snacks arrived and were sipped and nibbled.



While waiting for tea Professor Yu chatted with Chung Sook in Korean. Guy tried to follow the conversation but it was too fast. Instead he examined the room. He had visited lots of Korean apartments and the layout was always uniform. The seating area was against one wall and the sofa faced another. The coffee table was in the center. On the opposite wall was a low settee with a television and an audio system. There were several bookshelves with various knickknacks and ornamental looking books. In one corner was a glass display case with unopened bottles of various bottles of high end liquors such as Corvosiuos and Johnny Walker Red. In the hallway near the entranceway was another display case with tall bottles of clear liquid and human shaped ginseng roots. Behind the sofa was a wall size painting in the Asian brush and ink style with lots of calligraphy.

Of course Chung Sook addressed the old man using the formal style of speech reserved for an honored teacher. Yu spoke to her in a more familiar style as if she was a favored student. Yu asked her about this foreigner. Especially he wanted to know his age, where he came from and what organization he was a part of, all things that were necessary for him to know. She told him he was a writer and was working on a novel set in Korea. She asked the professor to share his esteemed understanding of the history of their country.

After ten minutes of rattling noises coming from the kitchen, the refreshments arrived. Still smiling and assuring everyone that the snacks were of poor quality and the tea not delicious, the diminutive grandmother arrived with a silver tray arrayed with coffee, tea, traditional Korean cakes of several varieties and an artfully arranged pile of Cho-co pies. She gracefully served first the coffee and then the tea. Her pride in calmly and beautifully serving her guests was evident. Of course her husband nonchalantly stirred sugar and cream into his coffee as if he expected nothing less. Nothing of this was lost on Chung Sook. She felt both immense pride in Korean culture and Korean women. Her respect for this lady only increased. After another ten minutes of small talk and sipping tea, Professor Yu cleared his throat and started.

"I'm Professor Yu, Yu Ki Bak," he began. "I am seventy nine years old. That is in the western reckoning. Here in Korea I am eighty years old." He continued in his slightly hesitant, accented English. It was as if he was weighing every word. "I am a professor of Korean Studies at Korea University. Of course I am now retired. I taught for four years at the University of Heidelberg in Deutschland. I also spent two years at Oxford in England as an exchange lecturer. Most recently I taught at the University of Colorado in Boulder. So you see I know a lot about the world. My specialty is Modern Korean History. She tells me you are writing a book."

"That's right. I hope you can fill me in a little on how things go here in Korea. I'm real interested in the background of the North South division. I want to write a historical novel that will explain it in a way that Americans can relate to."

"As you know Korea has a history of more than 5,000 years. It is very complicated. I think it is hard for westerners to grasp the depth and complexity." Professor Yu continued as if he were addressing a packed lecture hall.

Guy wondered what was so difficult. He had always been good at history. To him history was all about stories with good guys and bad guys. Once you figured out who were the good guys and who were the bad guys it was easy.

"Although my specialty is modern history, we can't separate recent history from the past. The key to today lies in the reality and experiences of our ancestors who have lived on this peninsula for so long."

Guy leaned back and glanced at Chung Sook. She was sitting on the edge of the sofa and concentrating on the lecture. He had to wonder, as he often did, how much English she actually understood. It was often a source of contention between them. Both English and Korean were fraught with opportunities to misunderstand. He wanted to reach over and pinch her leg but he restrained himself.



Yu didn't stop to take questions, "You have to remember Korea is a small proud country. Our country has always been surrounded by much larger and ambitious neighbors. From the earliest times our ancestors had to deal with encroachment by the Chinese dynasties and northern tribes. The early walled town countries, including Old Chosun, were Bronze Age civilizations. Through trade with the Chinese Han they acquired some iron making technology but iron implements were only for the elite. The early Koreans got social and political ideas as well as iron technology from the Chinese. Their genius was to get these cultural and technical improvements from China while maintaining their political independence. We learned to bend to the realities of power but to never give up our unique Korean identity. Tell me, young man, what you know about our early history."

"Well I know the foundation myth about Dan Gun and the Chosun Dynasty if that's what you mean." Guy replied. He was referring to the story of the Tiger and the bear who had petitioned the god of heaven to become humans. Hanulnim, the god of heaven, gave them a test. He put them in a cave with only garlic and mogwort to eat for 100 days. According to the legend, the tiger could not endure and went out early. Then bear, on the other hand persevered, passed the test and became a human woman. She was given in marriage to the son of Hanulnim. Their union produced a son who was Dan Gun the founder of the Old Chosun Dynasty. Everybody in Korea knows that story. There is even a national holiday to recall Dan Gun called Foundation Day. The North Koreans claim they have discovered his tomb and preserved remains. Of course they also claim Dear Leader Kim Jong Ill shot a hole in one on his first day out on the links.

"Ah yes, Dan Gun Halaboji, do you believe that story?" Yu had a gleam in his eye.

"Anyway, every civilization has their own creation myth. It's like asking if I believe in Adam and Eve. It is a good story," he conceded.

"I have to agree with you. It is a good story but is it history?" The professor obviously knew the answer.

"As far as I know myth isn't history. History is made up of facts, right?" Guy wanted to know.

"Well yes and no. Do you know what Dan Gun means?"

"I suppose it's a guy's name." It made sense to him.

"We don't call our parents or grandparents by their names. We also don't call a king by his given name. Actually Dan Gun is not a name at all but a word that meant king. Until the Chinese word for king, wang, was adopted, all the walled city states used the word Dan Gun for their chieftain or king. Most scholars nowadays say that Dan Gun refers to as many as nine kings of Old Chosun." Professor Yu leaned in towards Guy and Chung Sook as if to be sure they were getting it.

"Ok, I can see that, how about his mother, the bear?"

"Since before time began, our ancestors practiced animism, totemism and shamanism. As you well know in the practice of totemism a tribe will take as their totem or protector a powerful or magic animal. They may be known as snake, eagle or the bear people. I recall so well visiting British Columbia and seeing the totem poles of the Native American people. Of course, the bear and the tiger in the story represent the bear people and the tiger people, two competing Stone Age tribes. Or, as some say, it describes a Stone Age tribe's encounter with a newly arrived tribe with bronze tools and weapons. Our population is made up of the blood of successive waves of peoples that drifted out of northwest Asia into our peninsula." With a big smile on his face Yu now leaned back and said "Can you understand?"

"I think so. It makes a lot of sense. Were they Koreans?" Guy wanted to know.

"They were our ancestors. The best answer is that they became Koreans. Over time they first resisted the encroachments of the many competing tribes, walled cities and invaders from the north and west. Next they consolidated and absorbed smaller or weaker neighbors. Old Chosun became the first Korean nation. The dynasty continued for more than nine hundred years. In the end, like all dynasties, Old Chosun declined. The torch of being Korean was picked up by others but some things never changed." Yu spent the next two hours outlining the scope of Korean history including the Three Kingdoms, United Shilla and other dynasties and nations. He spent a lot of time on the coming of Buddhism and Confucian culture. It was a lot and Guy did his best to keep up. He had a lot of questions.

"What things never changed?" Although fatigue had set in after the hours long discourse, at this Guy perked up. This may be the key point he thought.

"Two things you need to remember about these stubborn proud Korean people. In many ways they are the product of a dangerous environment. From early times until today they have had to bend with the prevailing winds and at the same time stay true to their destiny. The other thing is they always fight among themselves.

At this point the old professor seemed to backtrack a little. The root lies somewhere in the long history of the Korean people. In many ways it may lie in an accident of geography. Who knows why but the Korean people have lived on this peninsula, wedged between much larger and more aggressive nations for thousands of years. Invaded, occupied and preyed upon countless times they have survived with intense pride in being Korean. Pride in their unique language, culture, and history is a thread that runs deep in Korean people no matter where they live, north, south, east, west, at home or abroad. While nurturing this pride survival demanded that Koreans often had to defer to geopolitical realities that continually swept through East Asia and the world. This seems to have produced a deep inferiority complex running just as deep as Korean pride. Here lies the dilemma at the very heart of the Korean soul, an absolute belief in all things Korean and at the same time bowing to the powers that be, at least temporarily."

Guy wondered what the professor meant by a people of destiny and wanted to ask but he didn't get a chance. The old man closed his eyes, leaned back and his chin dropped to his chest. The interview was over. The professor's wife reappeared and a few soft words passed between her and Chung Sook.

"He's tired. Let's go" Chung Sook said as she rose.

At the door the wife said thank you for coming and please come again.

"He's happy but exhausted" Chung Sook said as they made their way back to the elevator.

"It's a lot to think about" Guy replied.