

The Essential Korean Spirit

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April 9, 2019
The Korea Times



Recently a woman remarked to me that she hoped the nation would return to the essential Korean spirit. Of course I immediately asked her what that spirit was. She was not sure and we agreed to think about it and she would get back to me. To me, it was something that was worth thinking about.

She also thought about it and when she did get back to me she had an interesting perspective. She said the essential spirit of Korea was the spirit of Goguryeo. Now that's going into the distant past but I could relate to it right away.

I vividly recall seeing a tomb painting from that distant era that depicted horsemen on the hunt. They obviously were experts at riding and archery. The scene immediately reminded me of the North American plains Indians hunting buffalo on horseback. Both groups of hunters rode "hell-bent-for-leather," as the saying goes in the American west. The other term that comes to mind is "reckless abandon."

The expression is actually "play with reckless abandon." Of course it originates with football and means to disregard and abandon everything else, including life and limb, to make the yardage, the catch, or cross the goal line. It's a single-mindedness that is considered a virtue in not only sports but in successful people in all aspects of life.

In the words of the legendary University of Alabama football coach Bear Bryant, "I want my boys to be agile, mobile, and hostile." All pronounced in a southern accent so they rhyme. Is this the essential Korean spirit? Maybe. It resonates with me.

Of course other people had slightly different takes on the question. Among the things mentioned were the intense competition and comparing with others, the tendency or ability to unite in a crisis, the ppalli-ppalli culture, and the next to uninterpretable into English, jeong, han and hwa or anger.

Jeong is a word that might mean something like affection but in fact I've come to understand that it means much more. It may describe the state of a relationship that is unbreakable. Unbreakable because it is bound by common experiences of love, hate, familiarity and contempt. It could describe an old married couple that have lived together for a long time or people that have lived together even longer.

Han is often translated as resentment but that doesn't cover it. I would say that han is resentment over unfulfilled desire. Folks are filled with desires big and small, legitimate or not, and also reasonable or not. The bigger and more basic the desire is, if one is blocked from achieving it, then surely the resentment goes much deeper.

Just about everyone has heard of the kimchi temper. Maybe you have been on the receiving end of it. They say that Koreans have a tendency to fly off the handle but I don't think such a tendency is exclusively a Korean thing, so I'll put this one aside.

Several people also mentioned that Koreans have an uncanny ability to unite and make one mind and act as one when the chips are down. During the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis common people responded to the national financial emergency by digging deep and donating gold and other personal valuables to the national government.

Some cited the 2002 FIFA World Cup and the over-the-top support in the streets for the national team. Not long ago I heard a top-level North Korean diplomat who had defected to the South answer a question about what might happen if the Kim Jong-un regime was suddenly deposed.

He replied that there might be chaos temporarily but as soon as a new leadership emerged the people would quickly unite around it. I'm not so sure I can believe that.

The other thing that was discussed was the spirit of Hwarangdo, or Flowering Knights of the Silla Kingdom. This highly patriotic, trained in both the military and cultural arts, connotes the highest ideals of selfless loyal youth. They may have been affiliated with a women's group with the same ideals known as Wonhwa.

From the same time period comes the term Hongik Ingan. It may mean a person who lives for the sake of others. The origin of this concept may be in the old text, the "Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms" (Samguk Yusa). I hope to do some more research to track down not only the origin but also its usage yesteryear and today.

As an American who has lived in Korea for 20 years, I've formed some impressions of the Korean people. The following is an excerpt from a novel set in Korea that I am pushing to finish. As I am wont to do, I've put some of my own impressions into the mouth of a fictitious character. In this case it is an elderly professor endeavoring to explain about Korean people to a visiting foreigner.

"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 the 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."

What a people think of themselves is surely important for their national identity. What an outsider thinks also may be helpful. What is more important than what people believe about themselves is how they act. This is just my two cents.

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