

The Base National Korean Mind is Utterly Incomprehensible to the Japanese

by Kou Bunyu

(Summary)

At one point, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak spoke of improving relations with Japan. The Japanese welcomed Lee's statements with optimism, as a dramatic shift in attitude compared to previous South Korean administrations, which were stridently anti-Japanese, anti-American and pro-communist. However, President Lee's recent actions, his visit to Takeshima and calling on the Emperor of Japan to apologize to those who died for independence, while highly distressing, should not be entirely unexpected to level-headed Japanese. Taiwanese author and commentator Kou Bunyu (Gao Wen-xiong) explains that such conflicting behavior is indeed inevitable, given Korean denial of their own history and of their tendency to fawn to those who are of greater military and political strength. Because such behaviors are deeply ingrained in the Korean psyche, especially within the youth (the "Hangul generation"), Mr. Kou expects that irrational behaviors, such as virulent anti-Japanese protest and repeated demands for apologies, will persist for some time.

Mr. Kou suggests that Koreans need to know more true Korean history, more than the empty rhetoric ("we have been invaded a thousand times and beaten back the invaders each time") that currently passes for deep understanding. The Hangul generation, Mr. Kou points out, has been exposed to history that is mostly fabricated. Korea has in fact been invaded and its people enslaved by Manchu-Mongolian armies not once but twice in history. To further their own ends, Korean leaders at the time even assisted the invaders. More recently, the Hangul generation wail about the "seven depravations" brought about by the period of Japanese annexation. However, even a superficial study of the period will show that the Korean population and food production increased and Korean sovereignty expanded. Korean society during the annexation period is described as "ultra-stable," in contrast to the usual state in which Korean elites constantly attacked each other for control. While the generation that actually lived during the annexation period may publicly denounce Japan, their actual, private sentiment is based on real-life experience and is positive. Indeed, as the older generation fades, the fabricated history concocted by the Hangul generation will likely strengthen.

While the Japanese may have reached exasperation over the seemingly never-ending Japan-bashing and demands for "apologies," Mr. Kou suggest that this would be a good time to seriously reflect on why Koreans think and act the way they do. A better understanding of the issue may help Japanese people not to succumb so easily to what are in essence groundless demands and accusations.