
South Korea and The Bomb: A Not-So-New Story

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Opinions expressed this winter, both in government statements and by the media, strongly suggest that South Koreans' fear of a war precipitated by US-North Korean antagonism far outweighs their fear of possible nuclear capability in the north. Another full-scale armed conflict on the Korean peninsula is viewed as the classic case of a war both sides would lose. Thousands would surely die, including many Americans, and Seoul, the commercial and communications center for South Korea's hard-earned prosperity, would almost certainly be devastated. People believe that South Korean forces, with U.S. military support, would eventually prevail, but not before the country had tumbled into the chaos of refugees and rubble still redolent of the Korean War (1950-1953). This potential is seen as a tragic affirmation of the Confucian maxim: "in human endeavor nothing is harder to build than what is good, and nothing is easier to destroy (Sai On, 1682-1761)." Even if the north were defeated in a less devastating

confrontation, Kim Il-Sung's government would likely collapse, bringing disorder and destitution to Koreans in the north. The economic repercussions for people in the south, who could hardly refuse to shoulder the burden of rescuing their long-estranged brethren, would make the disruptions in western Germany's post-Berlin Wall economy look like a minor downturn.

This is not to suggest, however, that people in South Korea are unconcerned these days about nuclear weapons. On the contrary, the height of their awareness is reflected by the enormous popularity of a novel, selling briskly despite its three-volume length, based on an incident from the late-1970s when Park Chung-Hee was President. US President Jimmy Carter had openly discussed the possibility of removing from South Korea—widely believed to be armed with nuclear weapons—most of the 40,000 U.S. forces stationed there. Even with the focus of recent U.S. government attention on a nuclear program in North Korea, at least one American military think-tank has continued to argue that U.S. garrison forces in Korea and Japan are not necessary for the defense of South Korea; and, that their presence only increases the chances for miscalculation and ensuing war with North Korea. The Center for Defense Information in Washington, D.C. explains that South Korean forces, though fewer in number (approximately 650,000) than North Korean troops (approximately 1,000,000), would repel an invasion from the north because they are far better equipped and supported; additionally, a successful invasion requires overwhelming superiority in numbers and weapons, which the North Koreans lack.

Meanwhile, anti-American sentiment has been building in South Korea since the early 1980s, generated by: (1) the U.S. military's ultimate command over divisions of South Korean forces, which Koreans see as an infringement on their sovereignty; (2) the belief that the U.S. military presence has had the effect of prolonging a series of repressive regimes, such as Park Chung-Hee's; (3) the far too common incidents of GI crime,

including muggings and murders; and (4) the belief that the notorious Kwangju Massacre of protest demonstrators in May, 1980 was precipitated when the U.S. military released South Korean troops under its command who killed the protestors. The people of Kwangju had been demonstrating against the Korean military's seizure of government power and declaration of martial law during what was supposed to have been a transition period to civilian rule. Before 1980, the gratitude South Koreans felt toward the United States for economic and military assistance engendered the image of America as a benevolent "big brother." But more recently, South Korea's strengthened military, its spectacular economic growth, and its political reform have contributed to a rising nationalism that encourages Koreans to seek a more equitable relationship with the United States.

The aforementioned novel, so widely popular today, touches on the possibility of a nuclearly armed north, but has much more to do with U.S.-South Korean relations. It articulates another suspicion sometimes expressed in South Korea: that the United States government played a role in assassinations carried out there, including that of President Park in 1979. *The Rose of Sharon has Bloomed* (Mugunghwa kkochi piotssumnita) by Kim Jin-Myong (Seoul: HaeNaem Publishers, 1993) is a historical novel based on reports of a top-secret program, undertaken by Korean scientists during Park's presidency, to develop atomic weapons for the South Korean military. After President Carter's proposal—later withdrawn—to remove large numbers of U.S. forces, the leaders of the Seoul government purportedly organized a research project to build a bomb. The central character in the story bears the same surname as the person he is modeled on, the late Dr. Lee Hwi-So, a Korean physicist of enormous talent and energy. Born in 1935, the real Dr. Lee came to the United States in 1955 where, known as Benjamin Lee, he completed a doctorate in nuclear physics at the University of Pennsylvania before the age of thirty. He later did research at Princeton's prestigious Institute for Advanced

Study, and taught at the University of Chicago. While residing in the United States in the mid-1970s, he was killed in an automobile crash. It is widely believed in South Korea that, during the months before Dr. Lee died, President Park had been urging him to return and head the project to develop nuclear weapons, but that he declined. Suspicions have lingered about the circumstances of Dr. Lee's death, but because it was ruled accidental by the police, no one was ever charged or tried in the case.

The novel develops the theory that the murder of Dr. Lee (given the only slightly altered name of Lee Yong-Hwi in the story) was part of "covert operations" directed by the American C.I.A., which included other murders in South Korea as well as the assassination of President Park. The book's title, *The Rose of Sharon Has Bloomed*, refers to Korea's national flower, and was the code phrase used to notify President Park that a nuclear weapon had been successfully assembled. The story is told from the viewpoint of Kwon Soon-Beom, a newspaper reporter known for skillfully ferreting out concealed information for articles that often "scooped" his colleagues. Kwon's reputation as a crack reporter leads a district attorney, Mr. Kim, to ask his assistance in investigating Dr. Lee's death. Kwon agrees and enlists the help of his close friend Mr. Park, a detective assigned to Seoul Police Headquarters. At District Attorney Kim's suggestion, Kwon visits a professional hit-man in prison who admits that he was hired to kill Dr. Lee, and volunteers to tell everything he knows about the murder. But midway through their series of jail-house interviews, the prisoner is killed by another inmate. And, while investigating this murder, which he believes was ordered by someone else, Detective Park is killed in a staged automobile accident while returning on the highway to Seoul.

Reporter Kwon now finds himself at an impasse, without sources or clues, as he tries doggedly to find out how and why three men have died violently in quick succession under highly suspicious circumstances. Lacking any leads in the case, he

agrees to represent his newspaper at a conference in the United States where, on a hunch, he visits the late Dr. Lee's home in Boston. There he meets Lee's daughter Mi-Hyon, now teaching at Harvard Medical School, who shows him a watch her father had given her before his death. Examining the watch, Kwon accidentally discovers a deposit slip folded inside for a Swiss bank account in Dr. Lee's name. Kwon and Mi-Hyon trace money from the bank account to a physicist in India, whom they decide to visit together. In India, the physicist tells them that he and his government had agreed to sell plutonium to Dr. Lee and the South Korean government. And, upon his return to Seoul, Kwon is able to confirm that such a purchase was made by the South Korean government through Dr. Lee.

Now, Kwon is determined to find out what happened to the plutonium, and arranges to meet with the director of the Korean C.I.A. who, in turn, arranges for Kwon to meet with the current president of South Korea. The President tells him that the plutonium, sufficient to manufacture a bomb, is hidden inside the trunk of an elephant statue that stands in the garden of South Korea's chief executive residence, called the Blue House. The President further explains that since President Park—who had vigorously pushed the bomb project—and Dr. Lee were both dead, the responsibility now fell on his shoulders to complete it.

Marginally plausible up to this point, the story now merges into an ironic fantasy that is the realm of mystery stories everywhere, especially those with political overtones. The current president expresses the belief that South and North Korea have to agree on the development of nuclear weapons as a cooperative project. The bomb, he insists, must be deployed to protect the security of the entire Korean Peninsula, rather than as a tool that Koreans can use to threaten each other. And, he reveals that he sent the South Korean C.I.A. chief on a secret mission to North Korean President Kim Il-Sung, who has agreed to a joint project. Everything would be proceeding smoothly, he explains, except that now a Korean C.I.A. official who has

knowledge of the plan is about to fly to Washington, where he intends to sell this top secret to agents of the American C.I.A. In the novel's climactic, if improbable, conclusion, reporter Kwon manages to board the same plane on which the turncoat spy is travelling, and to kill him on board before he can deliver this information. Kwon then hijacks the plane to the North Korean capital of Pyongyang where the passengers and plane are released to complete the trip to the United States, and Kwon helps to conclude arrangements with North Korean officials for the joint nuclear project. As the final drama unfolds, Kwon comes to a deeper understanding of what it means to be Korean, and is eventually recognized as a national hero.

The first question that those familiar with the long history of censorship and repression of speech in South Korea might ask is, why could this novel be published? *The Rose of Sharon has Bloomed* plays off historical events and prominent personages in ways that certainly would have made it unpublishable while South Korea was ruled by a series of army generals excessively sensitive to questions about the legitimacy of their power. With the election of Kim Young-Sam, the first civilian president in thirty years, the book's publication now suggests that, although some people identified by Amnesty International and other organizations as political prisoners are still incarcerated, the current South Korean government is more confident of its legitimacy and less suspicious of its citizens. Perhaps the most astonishing departure from the past in this work is the portrayal of Kim Il-Sung as a president whose underlying concern for all of Korea would move him to join hands with his oft-vilified "U.S. puppets" in the south to develop the "ultimate weapon." Publishing such a depiction would have been unthinkable during the Cold War, when the specter of an aggressive communist ideologue leading his fanatical followers on an invasion from the north was constantly put forward by the government in the south as an excuse for secrecy and repression. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that a book could have been published then in which the U.S. government, and espe-

cially its largest intelligence agency, are the villains. In contrast, the present Korean government can hardly "censor" the growing resentment against what many Koreans see as heavy-handed and manipulative policies of the U.S. government. As for the issue of military secrecy, publishing information about a government's efforts (successful or unsuccessful) to develop nuclear weapons would ordinarily be highly problematic at any time in any country. Yet in late March of 1994 the South Korean government officially acknowledged what millions of Koreans, including the many readers of Kim Jin-Myong's novel, suspected already—that such efforts had been underway in South Korea as late as 1991.

But perhaps an even more interesting question is, why did a three-volume "triple-decker" mystery with numerous characters, copious detail, and complicated side-plots become a best-seller? One reason, that should hardly come as a shock to Americans, is that the novel reflects widely held South Korean views of the three-way military situation currently prevailing among the two Koreas and the United States. What might surprise many Americans, however, is that its popularity also reflects widespread opinion in South Korea that it is not only necessary, but urgent, for Koreans to develop and control their own nuclear arsenal for the security of the Korean peninsula; as in the novel, this must be accomplished jointly with the north in the context of reunification which remains a deeply cherished goal of South Koreans.

Desire for the bomb as a measure of a nation's prestige and independence, as well as its power, is nothing new, and can be seen in the reported efforts of such countries as Brazil, with no easily identifiable "security" rationale, to acquire nuclear weapons. By incorporating Korea's national flower into the code-

Opinion in South
Korea [encour-
ages] Koreans to
develop and con-
trol their own
nuclear arsenal
for the security
of the Korean
peninsula

United States
military pres-
ence is viewed
today as stifling
of Korean inde-
pendence.

phrase announcing successful develop-
ment of an atomic bomb, the author sug-
gests just how closely nuclear weapons
can be associated with a nation's power
and status. But, unlike Brazilian military
needs, the need perceived among Koreans
for an atomic arsenal arises from acute
feelings of vulnerability. The novel strikes
a responsive chord because it expresses the
popular sentiment that South Korea has
become excessively dependent on the

American military, which has made the country susceptible to U.S. government manipulation. In this sense, the United States military presence is viewed today as stifling of Korean independence, which can be better secured by Korea building and controlling its own nuclear arsenal. Recalling the years of Japan's brutal colonial rule in Korea between 1910 and 1945, it is perhaps not surprising that Japan is also seen today as potentially threatening to Korean independence and security. Koreans were especially sensitive to speculation that Japan's recent buildup of plutonium could lead to the development of nuclear weapons in response to the program undertaken by North Korea. Like the U.S., Japan is viewed as a country desiring to maintain powerful influence in Korea—it is thought that a Korean nuclear arsenal would strengthen and maintain independence from both countries as well as from other outside forces. U.S. and Japanese concerns over a nuclear program in the north are viewed in part as a manifestation of the two countries' desire to continue wielding a degree of control over the Korean peninsula.

Of course, all this does not take into account the persisting state of high hostility between the two Koreas, or of their failure to go beyond the most preliminary and tenuous of contacts, let alone negotiations for a joint military force and reunification. It also ignores what would seem to be legitimate concerns in Japan about North Korea's recent test flight of a nuclear-

capable missile over the ocean near the Japanese main island of Honshu. Yet the capacity for such a work as *The Rose of Sharon has Bloomed* to capture the popular imagination, despite containing obvious elements of fantasy and wishful thinking, is further evidence of the power of its narrative. It is, in fact, one of several historical novels on the theme of Korean nationalism that have become best-sellers in the 1990s.

Though set for the most part in much earlier periods of Korean history, these works share with Kim's novel expressions of: (1) outrage at Korea's victimization and manipulation by outside forces, and (2) longings for unification even amidst severe internal and external hostilities. They also center on the portrayal of heroes who are combinations of real and imagined personages from Korea's past. Perhaps the most prominent among them is *Cherishing Eastern Medicine* (*Dong Yi Bo Gam*) by Lee Eun-Sung (Seoul: Changjak kwa Bipyong Publishers, 1990). Also a three-volume historical novel, Lee's work recounts the exploits of Huh Joon, another Korean doctor (this time of medicine) who dedicated his life to the advancement of Korean medical science at the end of the sixteenth century during the Yi Dynasty. Like *The Rose of Sharon has Bloomed*, Lee's novel unfolds amidst international violence and intrigue, this time resulting from the devastating invasion of Korea in 1592 by Japanese soldiers under the command of Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

Whether set in modern or ancient times, the appeal of such stories also reflects the resentment expressed in Korea today towards manipulation and victimization from the outside, along with the desire for eventual reunification. Historical conceptions of Korea's recent past usually begin after the mid-19th century, when China, Russia, and Japan, as well as the U.S. and European countries, competed for influence with little regard for Korean sovereignty. Within the first decade of the 20th century, Korea rapidly came under the control, occupation, and colonization of Japan as the "spoils of victory" in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. Yet even the defeat of imperial

Japan at the end of WWII four decades later, far from bringing peace and unified independence to Korea, led instead to its division, imposed by other countries, into two halves, each of which became a staging area and flash point for Cold War hostilities among the formerly “Allied” powers. And now, despite the end of the Cold War, statements by American policymakers that the U.S. must “draw the line” on nuclear weapons in Korea—even at the risk of a “hot war” there—to discourage other nations from acquiring them, has again made Koreans feel they are being manipulated, this time as a nuclear “have-not” country by the nuclear “haves.” Such feelings can explain in part why people in Korea today—north and south—see a need to acquire these weapons, and why *The Rose of Sharon has Bloomed* became a best-seller. ●

Notes

* Following her visit to South Korea (21, December, 1993 to 18 January, 1994).