

## South Korea: Cultural Expressions of Anti-Japanese Sentiment

The recent surge in popularity of Ahn Jung-geun is a significant indicator of anti-Japanese feeling in South Korea.

Steven Denney

On December 7, 1970 German Chancellor Willy Brandt made one of the most important – if not *the* most important -- apologies in recent history, and he did it without saying a word. After laying a wreath at the memorial of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, Poland, Brandt fell to his knees. The act restored Germany's dignity as a nation and helped the European continent move beyond the rifts caused by two world wars and the Holocaust.

East Asia has yet to have a Brandt moment. No Japanese head of state has performed an equally symbolic act of penitence; the various apologies proffered over the years have been construed as disingenuous. The tensions borne out of Japan's troubled history with its neighbors are continuously reproduced through various means, two of which are nationalism and the cultural reproduction of national "heroes." This can be most clearly seen in South Korea.

South Korean national identity, much like the North Korean variant, is largely defined by an ethnic Korean nationalism that has its origins in the colonial period. Ethnic Korean nationalism was a reaction to Japanese imperialism, specifically the colonization of Korea (1910-1945) and (disingenuous) efforts to assimilate Koreans into the greater Japanese nation. Political scientist Shin Gi-wook's work on the origins of Korean nationalism does well in proving this point. In Shin's portrayal of the period, the Japanese imperial policy of *naissen ittai* – an assimilation policy built on the idea that Koreans could become Japanese – backfired; in fact, most scholars of the period argue that Japanese policymakers never actually thought Koreans could "become Japanese."

In any case, attempts at imperial assimilation had the effect of generating an ethnic concept of self among Koreans. Ironically, the racial politics of imperial Japan generated a racial understanding of the national self in Korea. Modern Korean national identity was founded as a reaction to Japanese imperial expansion; it was, in other words, anti-Japanese sentiment was in many ways instrumental in the formation of a modern Korean nationalism. The anti-Japanese element of Korean national identity persists to this day and can be detected by who is elevated to the status of national hero in popular discourse. This is why the recent surge in popularity of Ahn Jung-geun is significant.

Referred to commonly as "patriot" or "patriotic martyr," Ahn Jung-geun is a key historical figure in South Korean nationalism, national history, and popular discourse. While officials in Germany may praise the actions of Willy Brandt, public figures in South Korea continually emphasize the virtue of Ahn Jung-geun, especially the "great patriotic deed at Harbin," as it is sometimes called. On October 26, 1909 Ahn shot and killed Hirobumi Ito, the first Resident-General of (colonial) Korea and the first prime minister of Japan, on a train platform in Harbin, a major city in Manchuria and capital of modern day Heilongjiang Province, China. Anti-Japanese resistance was central to the greater Korean narrative then, and continues to be now. Anti-Japanese sentiment and Korean nationalism are two mutually reinforcing forces. The rise of Shinzo Abe to the position of prime minister (for a second

time) has resulted in a rise in anti-Japanese sentiment. This can be seen in the more recent cultural reproductions of Ahn Jung-geun.

It was reported in the South Korean media last December that a new movie about Ahn Jung-geun, *Hero Ahn Jung-geun*, would be produced by director Chu Kyong-jung. The film will focus on the week leading up to the assassination and the time Ahn spent in a Lushun jail after the assassination (where he did most of his writing that he is well known for today). In an interview with the *Busan Daily* on December 17, Chu emphasized that with the rise of Abe and right-wing extremism in Japan, Ahn's deed is something that "must be remembered." Chu claims that he will properly show the reason(s) Ahn shot Ito. Notably, Chu refused overtures from Chinese and Japanese production companies to collaborate in the making of the film.

Another example is the play "I Am You," playing in Seoul during the month of January. It is a performance centered on Ahn Jung-geun's son, Ahn Jun-saeng, and his struggle to overcome the anger he felt towards his father for leaving him. (Ahn Jung-geun was executed for his deed at Harbin.) The play tells a tale of anger giving way to understanding – an understanding of the reason Ahn sacrificed his life: to preserve the nation. Yoon Seok-hwa, a representative from the production company putting on the play, noted in an interview at *OhMyNews.com* on January 6, that Ahn Jung-geun's sacrifice "was for us. And, depending on how each one of us thinks [about Ahn's fateful action], we, too, can be Ahn Jung-geun." The interviewee and Yoon both acknowledge that, with Abe coming to power and right-wing extremism (as they understand it) on the rise, the timing of the play's production is particularly appropriate.

Given the multiple levels at which anti-Japanese sentiment permeates South Korean society, it is hard to imagine it subsiding anytime soon. Indeed, anti-Japanese sentiment is embedded in South Korean nationalism and in many ways defines it. Since Abe won't be symbolically falling to his knees *a la* Willy Brant anytime soon, we should expect Ahn to remain firmly planted in South Korean national consciousness, for better or worse.

*Steven Denney writes for The Diplomat's Korea section.*