



Hines Ward and Korean Identity

By Timothy C. Lim

The issue of "mixed-race" children _ brought to the forefront by the recent success of Hines Ward, the "Korean-American" athlete voted MVP in Super Bowl XL _ has provoked a lot of soul searching among Koreans. It has even inspired one Korean legislator, Kim Choong-whan of the Grand National Party, to introduce a bill designed to promote the welfare of "half-Koreans" (Korea Times, "Mixed-Race Korean Welfare Drive States," April 1, 2006).

Such a bill is long overdue and if successful, a welcome step toward mitigating the damaging effects of decades of debilitating social and institutional discrimination and bigotry. No single piece of legislation, however, can come close to resolving the problems of "mixed-race" children in Korea, where the concept of ethnicity is inseparably tied to the purity of "Korean blood." This is partly reflected in the term "half-Korean" (used in a matter-of-fact way in the Korea Times article), which is premised on the unstated, but taken for granted belief that an individual with only one Korean parent cannot be "Korean."

Why should this be? Consider those "mixed-race" children (Hines Ward excluded) who were raised in Korea. They grew up learning Korean as their native language and were immersed in Korean culture, norms, and practices. Many do not speak any other language and have never been to their other parent's homeland. Socially, culturally, linguistically, and in almost every way imaginable these children are Korean. Yet, apparently, none of that matters. They are, at best, "half-Korean," but, in reality, they are not even that in the eyes of much of Korean society.

Contrast this perception with my own experience. Both my parents have "100 percent Korean blood," but I was born and raised in the United States, as were my parents. My Korean language skills _ despite my best efforts _ are woeful. Culturally and socially, I am as "American" as any white male born and raised in America's heartland. Despite all this, I am more easily accepted as Korean than many _ if not all _ of the children of "mixed-race" parents born and raised in Korea. (Admittedly, the issue is more complex than this; even many "pure Korean" children are discriminated against if they live abroad too long. I too, would be subject to discrimination if I chose to stay in Korea on a permanent basis.)

The basic point, however, is that ethnicity and even race are social constructions. They are products of a shared national myth _ a grand narrative designed to serve the social, economic and political needs of a society at a given period. Over time, these myths can take on a life and meaning of their own. That is, they become a central and

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completely naturalized aspect of one's identity. This is certainly the case amongst most Koreans, where as I noted above, the connection between blood and Korean identity has become virtually inseparable.

It is largely for this reason that Rep. Kim Choong-whan's legislative bill _ even if it is enthusiastically embraced by other legislators _ can only make a very small difference in the lives of children and adults with one Korean parent.

It is far more important that concerned Koreans, such as Rep. Kim, begin a national debate and even more, a broad-based social movement on the question of Korean identity and ethnicity. As a social construction, Korean ethnicity is not fixed. It can _ and must be _ made more inclusive. A redefining of what it means to be Korean is, ultimately, the only way to significantly and permanently eliminate the evils of discrimination and bigotry. The need to do this will only grow; the recent surge in international marriages between Korean men and women from South and Southeast Asia, and the continuing arrival of tens of thousands of foreign workers from throughout the world, are slowly turning Korea into a different, more heterogeneous society.

Although Korean society faces a monumental task, it is not an impossible one. The accomplishment of Hines Ward _ a single individual _ provides an opportunity to galvanize profound societal change. To bring this change to fruition, however, will require immense effort and the embracing of a new consciousness within Korea.

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