

My Calling
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The First Korean-American Mayor
of the City of Cerritos, CA

Everyone experiences turning points at various phases of their lives. I am no exception. In addition to this universal truth, the world that my generation lived in was upheaval itself. Born in the last years of the Japanese colonial period, life always felt like waves crashing against a rock, in the midst of epoch-making events of history, such as Korea's Independence (1945), the Korean War (1950), the Student Revolution (1960), the Military Coup (1961), the Kwangju Massacre (1980), and the June Democratization Rallies (1987). During this time, I also had the additional turmoil of immigrating to the United States with my wife, Lucy.

I feel that I have come this far in life by industriously navigating through my past, which now grows faint in my memory. Although I was born into an era torn by war and severe poverty, I have many more beautiful memories than miserable ones. My wife always says that I "now have nothing left to do but to give thanks." As she says, I have truly been blessed. Through the Lord's special grace and the help of many good people, I am where I am today.

From Janitor to the First "Global Korean"

I was born in 1943 in Kyushu, Japan as the first son of Korean laborers. I have no memories at all of this period in Japan. This is because my parents hurriedly brought me and my older sister to a poor rural area in Korea in 1944, the year the U.S. began in earnest its military offensive against the main islands of Japan. After graduating from Andong Normal School, a high school that trains elementary school teachers, I managed to get accepted into Seoul National

University, eventually earning a B.A. In 1968, I was commissioned as an officer in the Republic of Korea (ROK) Air Force. In 1972, I began a three-year teaching stint at Bosong High School, shortly before the beginning of the Yushin Period.

In February 1973, Lucy gave birth to our first child, Andy, at her parent's home in Kimchon. Andy, who was the first grandchild in Lucy's family and the first to carry on the family name in my family, was much loved by everyone. However, upon receiving my acceptance letter from the University of Wisconsin, we made the difficult decision to leave Andy with Lucy's mother in Korea. On July 5, 1974, Lucy and I left Korea from Kimpo Airport for Los Angeles, California and in a way, it felt as though we were running away.

At first, I intended to go to the University of Wisconsin, Madison to pursue a master's degree in economics. However, I never reached Wisconsin and ended up settling in Los Angeles. I realized that with or without a master's degree, a return to Korea would necessitate my working for the advancement of Yushin, a reality with which I could not live. Thus, I decided to change course and started looking locally for a job in the computer industry. While conducting this job search, I began working as a janitor and gas station attendant. My Korean education and work experience were not recognized. Finally, after six months of driving all over Los Angeles and Orange Counties and going to over sixty interviews, I was hired on January 7, 1975 as a computer operator at the Los Angeles County Data Processing Department in the City of Downey.

I had not been working at the department for long when the computer system was changed to UNIVAC. None of the senior operators volunteered to receive training on the new system, so I took three newly-hired operators with me to the temporary UNIVAC training center in downtown Los Angeles. After we completed three months of training, the head of the

UNIVAC consulting company asked the department if I could stay on with them. Thus, I stayed at the training center to assist with training other county employees for a year and a half.

When the consulting team packed up and left, I became the most valuable human asset in the UNIVAC data processing room at the county data processing department. I was the only person at the department who knew how the entire system worked. The department eventually created a position for me, Production Controller, at the level of assistant managing programmer. I managed to be promoted from computer operator to assistant manager in only three years when it normally took more than ten. The employees predicted that I, who had been promoted at full speed, would be the first Korean to become Manager. However, I realized that it was a “glass ceiling” that I would never be able to rise above. Thus, when I was offered the opportunity to become the first Korean manager in August 1978, I turned it down and left the Los Angeles County Data Processing Department with no regrets.

In April 1975, our second son, Tony, was born. My wife quit her job as a keypunch operator at Bank of America and we brought Andy, who was by then two year old, to live with us in California. In April 1975, we moved to Bellflower and my daughter, Jia, was born in September 1976. At the time, I was working at Los Angeles County while also enrolled as a graduate student at California State University Northridge. But with a family of five to support, I decided to drop out of the university and got a second job as a computer operator at Audio Magnetic. This enabled me to save enough money over the span of several months to purchase our first home in October 1976. It was a small, single-story detached house in Cerritos, but for us, who had moved to the United States not three years prior, it felt like a palace. At the time, there were only a few Koreans in Cerritos and only a handful of Korean real estate agents in the Los Angeles area. I pondered the prospect of selling real estate on weekends and it compared

favorably to my then-present situation of working two full-time jobs, five days a week, from dawn to midnight.

I quit my position at the county data processing department to focus on the real estate business. Setting aside my plans to return to Korea with a degree in computer science, I focused entirely on making money. The commissions were such that selling even just one house a month, I was able to make more money than at a regular full-time job. After working as a broker for three years, I purchased several houses in Cerritos and a 20-unit apartment building in Los Angeles. My external assets ballooned to over \$1 million. After I attained this financial success, the Korea Broadcasting Service (KBS) chose me as the first subject of their program “Global Koreans.” In April 1980, a broadcasting team from KBS came to produce my story. But on May 18, 1980, while they were in New York filming the second installment of “Global Koreans,” the Kwangju Massacre broke out and the program was cancelled.

Kwangju Massacre Changes the Course of my Life

Politics came to me as if by accident and my life took an unexpected turn in May 1980 as a result of the Kwangju Massacre, in which the South Korean army, under the leadership of the military dictator, Chun Doo-hwan, crushed a popular uprising and killed as many as 2,000 civilians in the southern city of Kwangju. I wanted to distance myself from Korean politics so that one day I could return to live in my homeland. But the massacre made me give up this dream. On August 1, 1980, I swore my allegiance to the Stars and Stripes and became a U.S. citizen. Shortly afterward, my family went on our first visit back to Korea celebrate my mother’s sixtieth birthday.

The Seoul that I returned to in August of 1980 seemed even more suppressed than the Seoul I had left during the Yushin period six years earlier. My hometown also looked very alien. Nevertheless, my hometown felt as warm as my mother's embrace. My mother kept running back and forth, to and from the kitchen, bringing things for my children to eat. My father looked at the children, who played and talked loudly in English with each another, with an expression of pity; nevertheless, my father looked very pleased. The night before we were to leave, my mother said, "I think it is a good thing that you went to America. Wherever you live, I am happy as long as you raise your children right and are able to live well." She had forgiven the unfilial son, who had now returned as a father of three children. However, she probably had no idea that this would be the last time she would ever see her oldest son. One day, she fell from the bridge where she used to wait for me to return home and was never able to see me again.

Soon after our first trip back to Korea in 1980, I was sucked into the thick of the anti-dictatorship pro-democracy movement. On February 2, 1981, I published the first issue of the *Weekly Ad*, later renamed as the *Korean Street Journal*, which became a leading voice in the Korean Democracy Movement for ten years. The *Korean Street Journal* was popular with readers for its unrestricted and faithful reporting on issues that were taboo in the Korean press, including the Korean political scene, peace movements, and the nuclear problem on the Korean peninsula. In response, the Korean government attacked the newspaper and accused me of being a communist. The Korean Consulate General of the Greater Los Angeles did its best to devastate me financially and to alienate the Korean community at large from the newspaper by urging Korean-owned businesses not to advertise with us.

On June 11, 1984, I published *Rasung Daily*, the first Korean-language daily newspaper in the Los Angeles area owned by a Korean American, as a sister publication of the *Korean*

Street Journal. It was popular for its reliable reporting, accurate information, and the wide variety of topics covered. Through various channels, I received a request from the Korean government to meet. I refused the offer. Because of this, the Korean Consulate General and the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) pressured our advertisers, impacting our advertising revenue. On December 21, 1984, I printed the 137th and last issue of *Rasung Daily*. I had invested the massive sum of \$500,000 on the publication and had accumulated what became insurmountable debts. I discussed the possibility of declaring bankruptcy with an attorney, but ended up not doing so because I could not afford to pay the bankruptcy filing fee. In retrospect, during the four years that my wife and I devoted to *Weekly Ad/the Korean Street Journal* and *Rasung Daily*, we gained the invaluable skills of journalists and experience in the publishing world, but these came at a large sacrifice: we lost all of the assets that we had accumulated while working in real estate, not to mention precious quality time with our children.

My activities against military dictatorship in Korea in Los Angeles also gave me trouble in visiting Korea. The Korean government refused to allow me to return to Korea when my mother was seriously ill before 1987. When my mother passed away on November 28, 1987, the Korean consulate rejected my request for a visa to visit Korea. With no other option, I went to Korea for my mother's funeral services anyway, without a proper visa. However, when I arrived at Kimpo International Airport, I was taken to a separate room by KCIA agents and presented a declaration stating that I would not engage in any political activity during my stay in Korea. After signing the declaration, a KCIA agent and a police officer followed me everywhere from the moment I left the airport until I left Korea.

In the Eye of the Storm: the Korean Democratization Movement

Fresh off the heels of the Kwangju Massacre, I found myself at the center of the democratization movement in the Korean-American community. The *Korean Street Journal* and *Rasung Daily* took on the summons of a generation and acted as catalysts to light the fire of democratization in people's hearts. In January 1985, along with the *Young Korean United*, the *Korean Street Journal* began collecting donations for the construction of a tower to commemorate the 5·18 Democratization Movement in Kwangju; after ten weeks of fundraising, we accumulated over \$25,000. We collected blankets to send to long-term Korean prisoners of conscience. In December 1985, I initiated a campaign in the U.S. for direct presidential elections in Korea, presenting 15,000 signatures to the New Democratic Party in May 1986.

The *Korean Street Journal*, going beyond the role of mouthpiece of the Korean democratization movement, encouraged leaders in the Korean-American community to join the movement. In 1986, as the president of the Southern California Korean American Journalist Association, I approached each of these personages individually and presented my case discreetly so that the Korean Consulate in Los Angeles would not catch wind of my actions. On April 19, 1986, I assembled fifty leaders of thirty different Korean-American associations in Southern California at the "Million Korean American Declaration of Conscience." *The Los Angeles Times* took a part of my speech and reported that "on the surface, we support the constitutional amendment, but in reality we are requesting the end of military dictatorship." On June 21, 1987, I organized the Peace Rally for Democratic Constitution. California Lieutenant Governor Leo McCarthy asked to participate in the opening ceremony and give a speech, and his involvement increased the event's visibility. Approximately 7,000 participants came with Korean and American flags and banners to Ardmore Seoul International Park in the Koreatown

neighborhood of Los Angeles. There were a dozen television camera crews at the ceremony, which lasted five hours, with footage from the rally appearing on the air for a week afterwards.

In effect, the *Korean Street Journal* was more than just a domestic Korean-American publication. Leaflets from Korea on the democratization movement would be sent to the *Korean Street Journal* through various channels. After our activities were reported on by the newspaper, copies of the articles would be sent back to Korea, where they would be secretly passed around, then used for questioning the Korea National Assembly. With the situation rapidly degenerating for the Korean government, the Korean Consulate General of Greater Los Angeles and the KCIA took various measures to stamp out the newspaper. This eventually attracted the attention of the American presses. The *San Francisco Chronicle* printed a special-edition series on Korea from June 23 to 25, 1986, reporting that “*Korean Street Journal*, the largest Korean newspaper in the U.S., published 20,000 copies. However, as reported in a hearing session of the Congress regarding the KCIA, the Korean government is putting pressure on advertisers not to put ads in the *Korean Street Journal*. Because of this, it is unable to print ads of large companies.” The *Los Angeles Times*, *Sacramento Bee*, *National Guardian* and other newspapers also reported on the Korean government’s persecution of the *Korean Street Journal*. In August 1986, a bullet broke through a window and came flying into our office. A U.S. Congressional aide visited our office to investigate the matter ahead of a related Senate committee hearing, but the Korean government’s 6-29 Declaration for a direct presidential election in November 1987 eliminated the need for such a hearing.

Despite our successes, our newspaper encountered chronic financial problems, exacerbated by the series of court battles we had against the Koreatown Development Association, beginning in January 1987. The Association had assembled a group to protest in

front of our offices and at Ardmore Seoul International Park, brandishing placards reading “Commie Cho and *Korean Street Journal*, retreat!” The Association also printed an eight-page newspaper entitled *The Koreatown*, which accused me and the *Korean Street Journal* of being Communist. My courtroom battles for slander lasted for over two years and cost a fortune. In June 1989, Judge Bonnie L. Martin of the Los Angeles Superior Court ordered that the Koreatown Development Association publish an apology for its false accusations in three local Korean daily newspapers. This ruling was a victory not only for me personally and for the *Korean Street Journal*, but also for the freedom of the press.

End of My Calling as the Mouthpiece of the Democratization Movement

On July 7, 1988, Korean president Roh Tae Woo announced that “Koreans in the U.S. may visit North Korea (DPRK),” also known as the 7·7 Declaration. The psychological barrier against visiting the DPRK having been removed, within a few years, several thousand Korean Americans visited North Korea in search of their long lost families. I also applied to visit North Korea in time for the North Korea People’s General Election in April 1990. I had to fly to Berlin to obtain my visa from the North Korean embassy located there. I visited the destroyed Berlin Wall at Brandenburg Gate and felt envious of Germany, which had achieved reunification. I also felt immensely sad that it was so difficult to travel to North Korea. Vice Chairman Park Kwangmyung of the North Korean Committee for Peace and Reunification of the Motherland treated me very well during my entire visit to North Korea. I suggested to him that North Korea open a dialogue with the United States. I also visited the Jangchung Cathedral. I participated in the morning service and later spoke at length with Chang Jaechol, who was Central Committee Chairman of the Choson Catholic Church, as well as with other leaders of the church. They

recounted to me the difficulties of the North Korean Catholic Church, and the impossibility of conducting Catholic rituals without a priest.

Regretful at the brevity of my first visit to North Korea, I visited Pyongyang for the second time in August 1990 to cover the first Pan Korean National Conference. For the duration of the conference, I did my best to record the reality of life in North Korea. Without a guide, I visited the Pyongyang subway and various other places in downtown Pyongyang. At Panmunjom, the border crossing in the DMZ, I broke away from my group so that I could take a picture of them, and inadvertently stepped onto the DMZ line. Suddenly, high tension arose between the guards of the two sides. From behind me, a Korean soldier in the American army said, "It's OK. You can come over." At this, the North Korean soldiers gave me an angry look. It seemed as if something would happen any second. The dividing line was only about one foot wide and made of concrete. Standing on top of it, I became lost in emotion and stayed there for awhile. I thought for a moment, "Should I just go over the line?" However, I decided that such a rash action would be foolish. I went back to the North Korean side. The North Korean security guide, speechless from shock and stress, for a time held onto my arm. Having seen and felt a great deal, I returned to the U.S. and began a serialized column in both the *Korean Street Journal* and the *Korean Saenuri Sinmun (New World News)* in Korea entitled "Is North Korea Changing?" The reader response was enthusiastic. Most people believed that it was a fairly accurate portrayal of North Korea, but some said that the reporting "was too cautious." In November 1990, President Song Konho of *Hankyoreh* newspaper introduced me to Sammin Publishing, and with his recommendation, they published a book written by me titled "Is North Korea Changing?" Political science professors at various universities in South Korea recommended my book to their students.

After Roh Tae Woo's presidency began, the Korean press was still not completely free yet, but compared to the Chun Doo Hwan period, it enjoyed unprecedented freedom. Many newspapers, including *Hankyoreh*, were formed, and reporters wrote hundreds of articles with attention-grabbing headlines, such as "Blue House Secret Stories" (the Blue House is the South Korean equivalent of the White House). No one was interested any longer in articles written in a back alley in Los Angeles by three staff editors. The *Korean Street Journal* disappointed readers looking for sensational news. After winning our slander lawsuit, my wife and I began to seriously consider the future of the newspaper. Despite my desperate efforts to keep it alive, the *Korean Street Journal* closed down on February 28, 1991, after publishing its 517th issue. Wiping away tears, I said to my wife, Lucy, "the *Korean Street Journal* has fulfilled its calling," and tried my best to control my disappointment at its closure. Today, it is the only Korean newspaper that the USC library has in its archives. The library carries all 517 issues, which are accessible to the public as a reference source. On October 28, 2013, I donated all 517 copies of the *Korean Street Journal* to the 5.18 Memorial Foundation, which will be added to the UNESCO World Heritage Historical Records.

Leaving the Scene of the Democratization and Reunification Movements

My interest in the nuclear problem on the Korean peninsula began in 1983, when the *Korean Street Journal* printed an abstract of Professor Peter Hayes' publication on this issue. The fact that the U.S. army stationed in Korea had over 1,000 nuclear weapons came to me as a shock. When I realized that another war on the Korean peninsula would completely destroy the land and its people, I began to actively take part in anti-nuclear and peace movements. In September 1983, Mr. Song Konho, a respected veteran journalist who had been the managing

editor of *Dong-a Daily* and later became president of *Hankyoreh Daily* in 1988, visited the *Korean Street Journal* offices. After looking through our archives for an hour or two, Mr. Song said to me, “I would like to give you my sincere apologies and thanks. Because of my preconceptions about weekly periodicals, I did not realize what a wonderful publication this is and for this, I apologize. Thank you so much for doing abroad what we cannot do in Korea.” He then firmly shook my hand and stated that the *Korean Street Journal* was the only Korean-language newspaper he had ever seen that covered the nuclear problem on the Korean peninsula.

In 1993, when the North Korean nuclear problem threatened to drag the entire peninsula into war, I came to the forefront of the anti-nuclear peace movement. I made presentations at 13 different seminars. I also published writings about the nuclear problem in several newspapers. In June 1994, when tension over the nuclear problem in Korea was at its peak, I formed an Ad Hoc Committee for Korean Peninsula Crisis with American human rights activists, including Reverend James Lawson and Reverend David Haley. On June 14th, 1994, we held a press conference for the American media at both the Los Angeles and Washington press clubs. Amidst the ominous threat of nuclear war, which was at its highest since the Korean War, President Jimmy Carter visited North Korea and met with Kim Il Sung. As a result, an agreement between the U.S. and North Korea was formed, and on October 21, 1994, the Agreed Framework between the USA and the DPRK was signed in Geneva, eliminating the immediate threat of nuclear war, at least for the moment. I also compiled several newspaper articles I had written on the subject and published a book titled *The Nuclear Problem and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula* with Sammin Publishing in June 1994. The book was reviewed by *Changjakkwa Bipyong*, a reputable literary journal, in the winter 1994 edition and evaluated as the most comprehensive and systematic coverage of the nuclear issue in Korea.

On October 28-29, 1994, the National Association of Korean Americans (NAKA) was formed in New York. Pastor Syeugman Rhee, who had served as president of the National Council of Churches USA, was elected as its first president with me as vice president. In October 1996, I was expected to be the next president of NAKA at the Los Angeles general meeting. However, I stepped down from my position as vice president due to the conflict regarding the Korean American National Coordinating Council (KANCC). I also organized the Korea Reunification Forum in December 1994 and became its vice president. However, insufficient financial backing forced the Forum to cease publishing periodicals after its eleventh issue. I also began hosting an op-ed program on Radio Korea. Beginning with current events, I discussed the future of the nationalism movement as well as the matter of reunification. The radio scripts that I compiled for three and a half years were published in June 1998 as a book titled *The Road to Reunification is Changing* by Oreum publishing.

After much thought, I decided in December 1997 to quit all my social activism, including the Korean democracy movement. Thus, I concluded my 17 colorful and hard years in the Korean democracy movement. I promised my wife that for the next three years I would focus only on our commercial printing business, KS Printing Company, which was a business we created after closing *Korean Street Journal*. My wife and I worked very hard, taking almost no vacation for three years. Fortunately, we succeeded, with our sales volume quadrupling during those three years. In March 2002, we sold the printing business on profitable terms.

Challenges in American Mainstream Politics

Everyone was shocked when I ran for Cerritos City Council in March 2003, after I had given up the prime years of my life to the Korean democratization and reunification movements

in the 1980s and 1990s. Nobody, including my own family, predicted that I would jump headfirst into mainstream American politics. With my imperfect English, even I did not think that I would be able to make it.

One day, I was at home watching the city council meeting on cable television, and was surprised to hear one city councilman say, “The Korean community is the biggest minority community in Cerritos.” I knew that there were many Koreans living in Cerritos, but had no idea that it was the largest minority population. I thought it was embarrassing that there were almost no Koreans who participated in city activities, let alone the city council, and concluded that the attitude of Korean Americans needed to change. So, when it was announced that Cerritos would be participating in the Pasadena Rose Parade for the first time in January 2002, I worked as a volunteer, decorating the Cerritos float with flowers, for three months. Because I put in so many hours, I became an “expert” on float decoration. I truly enjoyed spending time with my fellow Cerritos residents. In working with age groups from children to senior citizens and men and women of all walks of life, I saw for the first time how multicultural and diverse Cerritos truly was. One day, a native-English-speaking city councilmember came to work as a volunteer, but the councilmember did not associate with us and only worked and spoke with a few other fluent English-speaking volunteers in a corner. I witnessed that many immigrants who were not fluent in English communicated better amongst themselves as well as with English-speaking Americans. I began to think for the first time that I could be a good city councilmember.

Two articles published in the *Los Angeles Times* in the early 2000s highlighted the demographic changes in the racial composition of the U.S. population caused by the influx of Latino and Asian immigrants and the new opportunity for the development of electoral politics among Latinos and Asian Americans. Reading these articles cemented my thoughts about

running for the city council seat. I believed that if the Korean community worked together, we could elect politicians in places like Cerritos and nearby communities with large Korean populations, such as La Palma, Buena Park, and Fullerton. What the Korean community should learn from its Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts is that an election campaign needs to have three components: money, a strong candidate, and votes. We should also learn that the community's continuous support is essential to increasing our political power.

I began having discussions with Korean friends about who would be a suitable candidate for the Cerritos City Council election in March 2003. Everyone agreed that we needed a Korean-American candidate, but no one was willing to take the task. If nobody else was willing, I began to think that I would have to take the plunge myself. I asked my family what they thought, and they immediately opposed it. My children were aghast, saying, "Dad, your English is too poor to be a city councilman," and "You've never even been to City Hall. How did you even come up with this idea?" Listening to my family's advice, I decided to wait to run for office, and instead, I joined the camp of a Congressional candidate, Linda Sanchez. From the beginning, in September of 2002, I worked as a volunteer at the Linda Sanchez campaign office every weekend, which I greatly enjoyed. On November 4, 2002, after the general election, Linda Sanchez, who was successfully elected, gave me her campaign office furniture and the promise of her assistance and support for my own campaign. This began my arduous campaign for the Cerritos City Council.

In the March 2003 election, I had no idea how to campaign other than mailing Korean citizens voter registration forms. Bob Baldwin, a board member of the ABC Unified School District, let me use his home to hold a tea party for approximately 20 people. This small gathering was the extent of my campaign outside the Korean community. Making use of my

experience with campaigning for Linda Sanchez, I did a precinct walk, visiting voters door-to-door. As my campaign gradually lost steam, mainstream society lost interest in me. But the Korean community was greatly excited, due to a return of the communism controversy. Some of my critics took sentences from my book, *Is North Korea Changing?*, out of context to paint me as a communist and made absurd allegations, such as “A picture of Kim Il Sung hangs in Cho’s house” and “Joseph Cho visited North Korea 40 times.” These unfounded claims had serious repercussions for my campaign. I lost my desire to continue my campaign, but I did not give up. However, I still felt extremely deflated when I lost.

In the next election in March 2005, I felt uneasy about running with another Korean-American candidate also in the race, which could split the Korean vote. But once I announced my plan to run again, groups from various sectors of the community unexpectedly expressed their enthusiastic support. Leaders in the Chinese, Filipino, and Indian communities, as well as the Hubert H. Humphrey Democratic Club and many elected officials, signed on to support me. Thus, the campaign was full of energy from the very beginning. As I emerged as a top tier candidate, arrows of condemnation, including renewed accusations that I was a communist, were shot at me. However, most of the Korean community did not pay heed to the false claims this time. Nonetheless, the Korean community was divided with two candidates, and I lost again, this time by only 200 votes.

Achieving the American Dream in my 60s

In 1991, I received a letter from Professor Kim Guchoon of the History Department of Yanbian University in China, saying that he had enjoyed reading *Is North Korea Changing?* After that, we exchanged letters once or twice a year, exchanging opinions about the history of

our people and the political reality of the Korean peninsula. In 2002, I went to China and met him in Yenji, where we had many interesting discussions over the course of a week. After being defeated in the 2003 election, I received a letter from Professor Kim Sungho of Yanbian University, who informed me that Professor Kim Guchoon had left a will to the former President of Yanbian University, Park Munil, stating that “Mr. Cho should be accepted into the Ph.D. program.” The professors of Yanbian University summarized the content of my three books into Mandarin and submitted it to the Jilin Province Department of Education. Thanks to their efforts, my work was recognized as the equivalent of a master’s degree and I was admitted to the Yanbian University Ph.D. program in September 2003. Every September and March, I would stay in Yanbian for one month, taking classes each morning and afternoon. I would be assigned a paper, which I would write after returning to the U.S., and I would mail it back to the university.

After my defeat in the 2005 election, I had only the dissertation remaining, having had completed the required coursework over the preceding two years. I wished to take a semester’s leave, but Professor Kim Sungho dissuaded me, stating that once I went on leave, it would be even more difficult to start again. He suggested that as my book, *The Nuclear Problem and Reunification on the Korean Peninsula* was strong content-wise, I could update it with the current situation and turn the final product into a dissertation. At the time, North Korea’s declaration that it possessed nuclear weapons and the launching of the six-party talks made for a tense situation in Korea. I believed it to be my duty to present a proper perspective with which to view this issue. After intense work for one year, I completed my doctoral dissertation titled “The Nuclear Problem on the Korean Peninsula” and passed the dissertation defense. I converted the dissertation into a more journalistic editorial style for a general audience and re-published it with Hanul Publishing under the title “The North Korean Nuclear Threat and the Road to Peace on the

Korean Peninsula” in May 2006. In June of that year, I went to Yanbian University with my wife for the graduation ceremony.

Many believed that I would not fail to win my second attempt at city council in March 2005. I found it difficult to believe myself, having been in the lead throughout the night until the final vote count. Ruminating the morning after the election in the campaign office, I worried that my wife would not be able to start over another political campaign again. After an hour or so, my wife showed up and completely surprised me by saying that we had better go around and gather the lawn signs to use for the next campaign. In this way, we began to prepare for my third campaign as soon as the second one had ended. In March 2007, with no other Korean-American candidate, my prospects for the election were very strong. I was considered one of the favorites to win the election, not only by the Korean-American community, but also by mainstream society. The third campaign went much more smoothly than the previous ones. In March 2007, I was elected as a member of the Cerritos City Council. That was the end of my six years of campaigning. At over sixty years old, I had run a successful printing business, earned my doctorate degree, and was elected as a city councilmember. I had truly achieved the American Dream.

My election to the Cerritos City Council was the beginning of a new life for me. Having immigrated to the U.S. in 1974, I had lived in the U.S. for over 30 years by the time I took office. With the exception of the less than four years I had spent at the Los Angeles County data processing department, I predominantly spoke in Korean every day. During all of that time, I never had to make a speech in English. I actually began to learn English in earnest through the campaigning process. My campaign manager said to me, “You are probably the first candidate who learned English by campaigning. I have never seen anyone as crazy as you.” I tried to

participate in all city activities and attended the events of not only the Korean but also the Chinese, Filipino, Indian, and other communities. I became a full-time councilmember. I had almost no free weekends. It got to the point that my wife complained, “I live with a city councilmember, not a husband.” I soon came to be appreciated for my efforts as city councilmember. In March 2008, I received an Appreciation Award from the Asian American Drug Abuse Program, and in June, I received the Achievement Award from the Korean American Coalition Orange County Chapter.

Inauguration Ceremony of President Obama

Entering my late sixties, I debated whether I would be capable of running for re-election in 2011. The fact that it was impossible to find another Korean candidate to run in the 2012 State Assembly election grew increasingly clear. I began worrying about my own political future and whether I should run for State Assembly. The election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency in November 2008 allowed me to regain hope in American politics. I believed that we all needed to take part in such a historical moment, which opened up an era of hope in which anyone regardless of race, sex, or creed could succeed. I asked my children whether they would be interested in attending the presidential inauguration and despite their busy careers, they all enthusiastically attended. I saw in the Capitol, filled with two million people from all over the country, the reality of American democracy and the strength that allows the U.S. to lead the world. I felt proud, as an American citizen, to be witnessing an incredible moment of historical significance. I felt my perspective broaden. If I were to continue politics at this critical moment, I felt that I would be able to contribute not only to Cerritos and the Korean community in

California but also to my two motherlands, the U.S. and Korea. I was imbued with a new feeling of hope and courage.

My election to the Cerritos City Council in 2007 blew a breath of fresh hope into the Korean community's political aspirations. Since my election, more Korean Americans throughout Southern California were elected to local offices. The elected included: four Korean mayors and six Korean council members (in both instances, I was included), three Korean school board members, and two Korean board members of the College Board of Trustees. On March 10, 2010, my fellow city council members elected me to be Mayor of the City of Cerritos, and with over a hundred Korean and non-Korean supporters present, I was sworn in to the position as the first Korean-American Mayor of Cerritos. Compared to that of other ethnic groups, Korean political influence had been lagging far behind. My election as mayor amidst these dismal circumstances was breaking news, not only in the Korean community in the U.S. but also in the media in South Korea.

When I became mayor, the U.S. was in the midst of the worst financial crisis since World War II. Therefore, I decided that my most important task as mayor was to reduce spending to keep our deficit as low as possible. The fact that Cerritos could be in deficit was unthinkable only a few years before. However, the global financial crisis that began in 2008 had a severe impact on the City of Cerritos. On top of this, the State of California, which suffered from chronic deficit, decided to take over the redevelopment agency fund of all municipal governments to fill its own budget gap. During my tenure as mayor, I did my best to prevent the state government from encroaching on the funds of local governments. I actively participated in collecting signatures to initiate Proposition 22 in cooperation with the League of California Cities. Although the entire nation was undergoing an economic downturn, Cerritos recovered

economically much faster than most other cities during my tenure as mayor. Because of Cerritos' quick financial recovery, I had the honor of receiving the "Most Business Friendly City Award" on behalf of the City of Cerritos at the prestigious Eddy Award ceremony held at the Beverly Hills Hilton.

Running while Dreaming of Peace in Korea and the World

In March 2011, I was successfully re-elected to the Cerritos City Council with 4,682 votes. Prior to 2011, no candidate in the history of the City Council in Cerritos received that many votes. The financial problems of Cerritos had not been created by city mismanagement, but largely by the deficit of the state government. Likewise, the citizens of Cerritos easily sympathized with my efforts over the previous two years to protect municipal and local finances from the hands of the state government. In June 2011, I started to seriously consider running for State Assembly to serve our local community better. But in August 2011, the California Citizens Redistricting Commission shook up the California political maps and changed the fate of many politicians. Redistricting split the base of supporters that I had built up over the years, and as a result, I had to reconsider my political future. Consequently, I made the final decision to shelve my desire to run for State Assembly in 2012.

My resolve to continue politics on the brink of age 70 was formed largely upon reflection of my father, who passed away in December 2008 at the age of 93 after a long and healthy life. After attending his funeral, I began to think that I too could live into my 90s. To rid myself of the notion that I was an old man, I decided to exercise regularly and build up my strength. I registered as a member of the Easy Runners marathon club in April 2009. For six weeks, I took classes on running and began to run regularly. With constant training, on March 21, 2010, I was

able to complete my first marathon at the Los Angeles Marathon. Like every serious marathon runner, I also wish to take part in the Boston Marathon, the most prestigious of all marathons. After dropping out of the State Assembly race in 2012, I focused my energy on literally running. I ran a total of nine marathons in 2012. On December 2, 2012, I finally qualified for the Boston Marathon by successfully completing the 30th California International Marathon (CIM) in Sacramento. It was cold and soggy as runners ran through consistent and at times driving rains that pelted the Folsom-to-Sacramento course. However, I tried to grind out the final two miles of the race and finally finished the race in 4 hours 24 minutes 53 seconds, a pace that qualified me by seven seconds to run in the 2014 Boston Marathon.

As a Korean American, I am always thankful towards the young American soldiers who fought and in some cases sacrificed their lives some 60 years ago for the cause of protecting the freedom and national security of my native country, the Republic of Korea (ROK). I also greatly appreciate the role that the U.S. government and its citizens have played in helping with the reconstruction, economic development, and national security of the ROK over the past 60 years. However, I cannot endure the fact that the armistice agreement only brought a cessation in fighting, which means that the Korean War never officially ended. My country, the United States, has been in a state of war with North Korea, half of my motherland, for over 60 years. Despite the amazing development of South Korea, another half of my motherland, the Korean peninsula is at risk of war breaking out at any moment. North Korea has consistently stated that in return for its abandonment of nuclear development, it expects peaceful coexistence with the U.S. Similarly, the other nations of the Six Party Talks, namely, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and China, also desire a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue. The U.S. is therefore in a unique

role to initiate a conversion of the 1953 Armistice Agreement of the Korean War into a Peace Agreement, and bring a formal end to the Korean War.

So, on January 1, 2013, I wrote a letter to ask my President, Barack Obama, to work for a Peace Agreement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and bring peace to the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia during his presidency. I believe that a peace agreement with the DPRK would be in line with the U.S. strategic interests on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. I have strong confidence that with a peace agreement, North Korea could become a normal country, which could allow it to improve its people's well-being and become a new partner of the U.S., just like South Korea. This could lead to the development of the economy of Northeast Asia, and a cooperative security framework. Northeast Asia could be the 21st Century gold rush, which would stimulate the economy of the U.S. and the rest of the world, and help us to overcome this serious recession. I compiled articles about the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula and the roadmap for a peaceful Korea and Far East Asia and published a book titled *PEACE FIRST: 60th Anniversary of the Armistice Agreement of Un-ended Korean War* with Hanul Publishing in October 2013.

On February 25, 2013, I also wrote letters to ROK President Park Geun-hye and DPRK Supreme Leader Kim Jung Eun to work for peace on the Korean peninsula and to personally ask their cooperation for my plan to run across the entire Korean Peninsula. I would start at Baekdu Mountain in North Korea and run 20 kilometers per day and arrive at Hanla Mountain in Jeju Island, South Korea after about 50 days. On March 17, 2013, I ran the Dong-A International Marathon in Seoul, South Korea. I also hope to soon run a marathon in North Korea. I dream of a world in which the dark nuclear clouds hovering over the Korean peninsula would roll away and 70 million North and South Koreans and American friends could embrace in friendship. I am still

running while dreaming for peace in Korea and the World, which has become my Calling in my 70s.