

# Volunteering: The Asian Experience

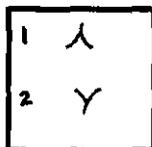
Excerpts from speech of Dr. Kang-Hwan Lee, IAVE Board Member and Regional Coordinator, at the International Seminar and Training Program in Taipei, Taiwan, January 16-20, 1999.



I recall my first volunteering was at the age of 8 when I helped a man who was pulling a two-wheeled wagon. Although we were not asked, a couple of my friends and I spontaneously helped the man because he was barely pushing the wagon uphill. We helped him to reach the top of the hill. But from there we were allowed to ride on the wagon. It was fun. We thanked each other. At that time that kind of helping each other was very common. I didn't know it was volunteering. I was just raised to do so.

As the wagons disappeared because of automobiles, so did the volunteer spirit as our community disintegrated. When I came back to my country from America 11 years ago, all I could see was individualism, self-interest and distrust among people but not much of sharing and caring, which inevitably led the society into a state of moral hazard.

After 3 years of teaching at a medical school I became a serious volunteer. From that time, the questions like "What is volunteering", "Why I am doing this" or "Who are volunteers" never left my mind. At a plenary session in Edmonton, Canada during the 15th World Conference of IAVE, based on my present understanding of the nature of volunteering, I explained the meaning of the Chinese character<sup>1</sup> for people: it is the shape of two people depending on each other. Japanese developed a concept of co-existence from this symbol for people which is also well known as a principle of management in the cor-



porate world. But in Korea, the concept of people has developed into the norm of interdependency and helping each other. Then I told the audience that people in the opposite side of east Asia must see it upside down<sup>2</sup> to understand the meaning, which becomes V in the English alphabet, the 1st letter of volunteer, often symbolized as a heart shape.

I think that the driving forces of volunteering or motivation varies individually. But there is a common thread for each of them, 'the Value'. Among many different values, most people value 'Life' and 'Virtue' (or Love for Christians) as the highest. So I believe that volunteering is preserving or enriching 'life & virtue'.

*"...volunteering is preserving or enriching life and virtue."*

Although the habits of heart are still preserved in some rural parts of Korea, urbanization and industrialization have led to disintegration of families and communities which are the very foundations of people's lives and have resulted in the weakening of family ties. This weakening of traditional spirit and values has created many social problems such as high rates of crime and divorce, severe pollution of air and water, delinquency and suicide among youths, isolation of the aged and the handicapped and the corruption of the public sector. Most of these serious social problems, which cannot be solved by governments alone, require the involvement of the voluntary sector and volunteering, often in an organized fashion.

Now, let me talk about KKottong-nae, meaning 'flower village'. This is the love story of beautiful Korean people who gently melt frozen hearts and enable them to overflow with joy and happiness. The flower villages, located in two rural places were started by Rev. Father Woong Jin Oh in 1976 but inspired by an old beggar, the Grandfather KwiDong Choi, are home for 4,000 residents of mentally and physically handicapped and poor old people without offspring. It is maintained and served by more than 800 thousand volunteers.

People ordinarily think that in order to help others one must have a surplus of resources. They say "Doesn't one have to be healthy and without physical handicap to be able to work to support others? Doesn't one have to have all the necessities of life and also some funds left over to be able to give financial help to others?" But contrary to common belief, the birth of the Flower Village came about when an old beggar named KwiDong Choi, who had nothing apart from the strength to beg on behalf of others, for those who were the poorest and most helpless and who didn't even have the strength to beg for themselves, offered himself up completely for such people and became their brother and father, forming with them a new family. Even today KwiDong Choi's life of love at the Flower Village teaches to all the simple truth that anyone who has life can give and receive love. I believe this value of volunteer spirit or community spirit is one of the essential elements of the controversial, so-called Asian Values,

which are composed of community spirit, optimism, strong educational desire, hard work and the governmental leadership.

When Asia experienced an economic crisis that started from Bangkok in 1997 and spread to Indonesia, the Philippines, Korea and other parts of the world, she was challenged and ridiculed with expressions like "Where are the Asian Values?" and the "Falling of four dragon countries". We also heard about the collision theory of civilization from a very influential and respected scholar as a warning to western people against the emergence of Asia. But I can say to the aforementioned people that Asia is still ethically healthy and is emerging as a global force, not only in political and economic aspects, but also in voluntary or civil aspects of our international volunteer community.

At this economic crisis, Korea suffers from extremely high unemployment rate of 7.5%, almost 4-fold of the previous year. The average household income has been reduced by 30% during the last year. Many economists predicted that we may have riots or sabotages by the unemployed and by the disgruntled employees when the unemployment rate reached 7%. Although there were outcries for help, there were no such riots or sabotages.

Instead we formed a special committee consisting of representatives from labor unions, corporations and the government. While they made an agreement on major economic issues, many new coalitions of voluntary organizations sprang up to take care of the homeless people (the number soared from about one hundred to more than three thousand since the economic crisis began), school children who

skip their lunches, and families of the unemployed. Last year we raised more than one hundred million U.S. dollars for those people.

Now many countries, including America, visit the special committee, which handled the most difficult problems, to see how they succeeded. But I'll bet that they will never find the truth unless they examine the voluntary sector and how they helped in stabilizing the stirred, unemployed people.

The following song by Dick Kee, Singapore's popular singer, expresses what we value.

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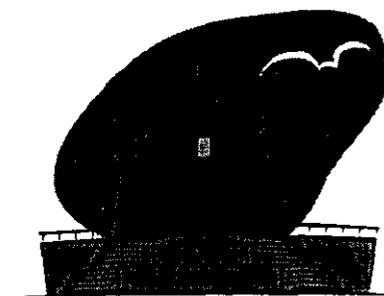
Modern Asia isn't what it used to be  
Modern Asia has a different side  
you'll see

Though the cities all have changed,  
a spirit deep inside remains  
And all the faces aren't so strange  
In this new world, aren't so strange  
In this new world, we are all the same.

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I have seen this pride in Hong Kong last December where they achieved the goal of providing 1 million hours of volunteer service hours well in advance of the time schedule. Korea has successfully drawn more than 1 million volunteers to donate their time for needy people during the October "Make A Difference Day" campaign in the last year as well as in the year before that. It took only 3 years to reach that goal since the campaign started, while it took 5 years in America. I am sure Taiwan, the Republic of China, exercises the same pride and the rich tradition of volunteerism, like Mr. Ho.

In conclusion, Koreans are doing their part, not only to keep the volunteer spirit alive, an essential component of the Asian Values, but also to propagate throughout the world for the benefit of all human beings.



## You Who Hold Up the Sky

Written by Kang-Hyun Lee  
Translated by Suh Ji-moon

Who are you  
Who spreads warmth all around  
Like the warm ray of the autumn sun?

Who are you  
Who clears away the fog of anxiety, doubt and trouble  
And breathes hope and courage  
Into hearts full of pain and despair  
And lets us see the value and beauty of living?

Who are you  
Who soothes hunger and cold  
And befriends the sad and lonely?

Who are you  
Who prevents diseases and accidents  
And relieves disasters and crises?

Who are you  
Who listens to tales of woe  
And lifts the yoke of oppression

Who are you  
Who breathes love into every leaf and stone  
And thus restores life to drying earth?

Who are you  
Who is holding up the crumbling sky?

All of us  
Now offer thanks to you  
Whose name is Volunteer