

To live and die in America — the urban trenches

As the holiday seasons roll in merrily, I come down with the melancholy bug. I can't help it. It heralds the arrival of another open season on tens of thousands of our kyopo whose mom-and-pop stores dot the bleak urbanscapes across this land of opportunity and freedom.

Week in, week out, it's the same old story of Korean immigrants being murdered, crippled, mugged or terrorized by armies of sociopaths and dopeheads, with guns and knives.

It doesn't take Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl F. Gates, Sheriff Sherman Block or *Los Angeles Times* to convince us that criminals are ruling the streets.

We know it. We have lived it every ticking hour the past 20 years.

We know these criminals even get away with murders. Few have been caught or brought to justice. Robberies, burglaries and rapes are virtually ignored by the overloaded criminal justice system.

This story of murder and mayhem will continue. It's no cliché that our Korean American History is literally written in blood, sweat and tears.

Amid the din of jingle bells and Yuletide music, I hear the distant wailings of hundreds of ghosts whose restless spirits roam this vast continent in this season of Hahn. I try to shake them off my ears. I fail.

I hear the voice of Rosemead liquor store owner Hong Sik Shin, 44-year-old father of two teen-agers, who was gunned down by two thugs just a couple weeks ago.

He had told his younger son, Simon, 13, over and over again:

"I'm not telling you to study hard for my benefit but for your benefit so you won't end up like me."

Shin was working alone that night when the gunmen entered his store to rob. Police said Shin resisted their demands for money. In moments, he lay on the floor mortally wounded.

Our American Passage



K.W. Lee

Amid the din of jingle bells and Yuletide music, I hear the distant wailings of hundreds of ghosts whose restless spirits roam this vast continent in this season of Hahn. I try to shake them off my ears. I fail.

His widow, though inconsolable, would take charge of the family's future. She told friends she intends to reopen the store and run it herself. No doubt, Simon and his older brother, Frank, 16, would be right by her side.

In the last few weeks alone, Shin and two other Korean grocers fell to the gunfire of predatory subhumans.

I still wonder what has happened to Christine Choe who a few years back told a local daily reporter that she had returned to work after burying her older brother only to find that her family hamburger stand had been burglarized again.

Tae-hwan Choe was robbed and killed a few weeks earlier in the family's hamburger stand in south-central L.A.

"People don't care," she told the reporter. "They think we got money from God or something," she spat out her

angry words. "My mom worked so hard for this."

Within a span of a month, her brother and three other Korean grocers in the Los Angeles area were killed during robberies. Only two weeks earlier, another Koreatown shopkeeper killed the same gunman who had robbed him six times in just 12 days.

As every true Korean daughter would, Christine only thought of her mother—"the poor Korean lady who lost her only son, her first son, the one who is supposed to grow up to take care of mom someday."

Come what may, the Choe sisters were going to take care of mom.

Drying her tears, as she excused herself from the reporter's interview to return to her stand, Christine said, "We are going to make it. I know that."

I know that too.

The survivors, like Christine and Simon, have given life and substance to that elusive thing called the Korean spirit which seems to endure even in defeat or death.

In their darkest hours they have shown us that shining quality—an undying legacy from the Land of Morning Calm.

As we silently grieve for our fallen fellow immigrants, we die a little and carry on with our daily life stoically.

But it's time for us kyopo to protect our lives and fortune and not rely on politicians and bureaucrats. The governments we finance through our noses are out of touch with the stark reality in which we live.

We must stop this murderous assault on our urban warriors.

We must refuse to become part of the grim criminal statistics.

In these hours of sorrow, we must start working on two immediate projects toward:

- Establishing a permanent resting place on the remote Pacific shore for all our fallen heroes who have been killed in action in pursuit of the American Dream.

- Building a national network of support groups to help rebuild the shattered lives of these survivors.

This is not just for the victims but for the very dignity of our own existence.