

Mass media, agitators fan violence against KA merchants

By **Sophia Kyung Kim**
Korea Times

The rippling effect of the March 16 shooting of Latasha Harlins in South Los Angeles—fanned by the race-mongering media and street agitators—is engulfing the lives of innocent Korean American merchants elsewhere:

- Chung Lee—a KA merchant well-known for his good relations with black customers—found himself the target of false rumors. About 25 to 30 people picketed his store, Watts Market, until March 27. They falsely claimed that Chung's wife is the sister of Soon Ja Du, the woman who shot 15-year-old Harlins.

- On March 20, a black customer who read a headline about Harlins' death at a store counter directed racial remarks at Koreans. He then punched the female Korean store owner and left without paying for a candy bar, according to police authorities.

- Three men attempted to rob the KA owner of a stereo shop in Los Angeles March 20. But the black owner of an auto shop next door—armed with a shotgun—

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ve, **Danny Bakewell**, president of Brotherhood Crusade, with arm...
...ha's cousin, addresses media at Empire Liquor Market. Below, A...
...ers hang from the boarded up entrance to the Du's market.

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came to his rescue. The black neighbor engaged the robbers in a gunfight, wounding two of them before they fled.

Korean merchants in the region have been "shocked and angered" by Harlins' death, said Yumi Jhang-Park, executive director of the Korean American Grocers Association of Southern California (KAGRO).

But their sympathy has turned into anger, she said, after seeing how the mainstream media—*Los Angeles Times* in particular—has turned the everyday tragedy in inner cities into a racial incident.

Some merchants went so far as to not sell the March 24 Sunday issue of the paper at their stores, Jhang-Park said.

"They are asking why people are turning this into a racial issue," she said. "They wonder, 'Don't (the media) realize that this is a life-and-death situation for us?'"

"They say Koreans have never turned other incidents into racial issues when Koreans were shot by blacks, so why is the media turning this into a racial incident?"

KA merchants have good reasons to be nervous and on guard.

Since 1975, at least 38 of their fellow merchants have been killed in urban centers across the nation, according to Yang Il Kim, National KAGRO president. It is a conservative estimate that has been based on KAGRO records and beverage industry and media sources.

In 1986, four Korean merchants were shot to death in Los Angeles during a period of one month in April. Last year in Chicago alone, four Korean merchants were killed in pursuit of the American Dream.

Last December two KA merchants in Rosemead and Long Beach were fatally shot 10 days apart from each other.

For Chung Lee, the picketing of his store was particularly ironic in light of his reputation as a model merchant.

For more than a decade, the soft-spoken Watts merchant has developed a good rapport with his customers by contributing to neighborhood causes, giving credit to his customers and hiring local black youths.

But on March 22, about 35 people picketed outside Chung's market, telling customers that Lee's wife was a blood relative of Soon Ja Du.

Lee said he was "deeply saddened" by the false rumors and the fact that some of those picketing were his customers.

According to Lee, the demonstrators told him that they were informed he was related to Du by the black owner of a nearby liquor store.

To quell the rumor, Lee printed 200 flyers setting the facts straight and distributed them in the neighborhood. But that didn't immediately stop the picketing.

With the assistance of his four black employees, Chung met with the demonstrators to stop the protest. "Some believe me, some say bullshit," he said.

One of Chung's black employees who wished to be identified only as "Harris," said what happened to his employer was unfair.

"He has done so much for this

community," Harris said. "He sponsors Little League games and gives hungry people credit—but not everyone in the neighborhood knows about his contributions."

Harris said he believes Chung was targeted just because he is Korean. Some of the protesters didn't care if the rumor was false, he added.

Helping neighbors

On the other side of town at Jack's Bottle Bar and Market at 6217 S. West Blvd. in Southwest L.A., a black customer became angry after seeing a newspaper headline that referred to Harlins' death, according to Officer Frank Weber of the 77th Street Station.

He directed racial slurs at Koreans, punched the female Korean store owner and then left the store without paying for a candy bar, said Weber. The woman was treated at the scene for an injury. There were no arrests, police said.

On that same day, about 50 blocks from Empire Liquor where Harlins was fatally shot, three men walked into the stereo shop on the corner of 49th and Figueroa streets. They asked owner Kwang Seok Choi, 29, to show them an item in a showcase.

When Choi bent over to take it out, one of the men hopped over the counter and put a gun to Choi's side and told him to lie on his stomach on the floor.

Choi heard the glass shatter and the second man started taking merchandise out of the glass counter.

Meanwhile, a third man, also armed with a gun, kept an eye on five men who worked at the same shop.

Little did the suspects know that Wallace Magee, 56, a black owner of an auto shop next door, was partially observing what was happening.

Magee said he knew something was fishy when he saw a man flash a gun at one worker walking into the combined car stereo-auto glass shop.

Seeing some workers lying on the floor, Magee grabbed a shotgun and rushed over to Choi's store. After yelling at the robbers to get out, Magee exchanged shots with the robbers, wounding two of them before they fled.

The three suspects, described

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by police as young black males, have been arrested. They are Jamal Jessie, 19, and Rodrick Taylor, 20. The third suspect is a 17-year-old juvenile.

The police said two of them were caught the same day at a hospital when they went to receive treatment. The third suspect gave himself up the next day.

Choi said it's the first time he has been robbed, since he opened his business six months ago. But he doesn't feel the incident is related to the Harlins incident.

"I don't think it's really related because the Harlins incident was isolated and involved only one person," Choi said.

"Since we've been here, we've gotten along good," said Magee of his relations with Choi. The two often recommend customers to each other.

Magee said he and other shop owners in the area keep an eye out for each other. He said he couldn't have lived with himself if he just stood by.

Cautious but caring

Meanwhile, merchants who haven't yet felt any direct repercussions of the Harlins shooting are remaining reflective and cautious.

"I was concerned at first, but generally there is no change," said Tae Ho Choi, owner of an Arco minimarket in Los Angeles.

Arco's Choi said he has developed a good rapport with his customers. "I make small donations to the Little League baseball games or Boy Scouts. I think that works better than one big donation."

He also tries to be kind to all his customers even though some of them are rude.

So far, in the eight years he's been in business, Choi has not yet been robbed.

Sang Koo Choi, owner of Squire Liquor in Long Beach, said Harlins' death serves as a tragic reminder to merchants that they must be patient with their customers.

"If somebody steals, it's not much money," Choi said.

He also encouraged store owners to have good relations with their customers. "They protect my store, protect my life," Choi said.

Last year, for example, someone broke his store window seven times. A customer who lived across the street told Choi that he witnessed the incident two times and if it happened again, he would try to catch the suspect.

The customer never had to because Choi installed steel bars on his window.

Choi said having a gun for protection can backfire for merchants because they may be tempted to use it. Had Du not had a gun, the tragedy would have never occurred, he noted.

Richard Fruto, Stephen W. Yum, Peter Park and Brenda Paik Sunoo contributed to the story