

We saw our dreams burned for no reason

By Eul Young Yu

Korean Americans are shocked and dismayed. We are shocked because we did not know that what happened in Los Angeles last week could happen in this country. We came to this country with a dream to build a new and better life: waking up in early morning hours, putting in 14 hours a day, going to bed at midnight, six to seven days a week, without a vacation for years so that we could send our kids to college to fulfill that dream. We built our homes, our businesses and our town with tears and toil. We transformed a rundown section of the center city into the booming Koreatown, full of life, enthusiasm and hope.

Last week, we saw our lifelong dreams ransacked and burned down for no reason. We saw a complete destruction of humanity. Was there no ethic, no morality, no responsibility, no human dignity among those people who looted and burned our property, livelihood and dreams? We saw children, teenagers, men, women and the elderly turn into mobs. Some people said it was class warfare. But these children are too young to be class-conscious. Some others said it was a race war. But we saw all colors among the looters, and the burned-down shops had no color.

Where was our mayor, our police chief, our governor, our President when innocent citizens and shopkeepers were under siege on the TV screen for hours and hours and days and days? Our leaders are out of touch. Get out of your limousines, take the RTD and ride through Koreatown and South-Central. Live with the real people.

It was a total breakdown of humanity, civility, the system. We are all responsible, you and I. It was our system that failed. The system failed to protect us, did not educate our children right, did not provide help when needed. The system left us in anarchy for three horrifying days.

By Wednesday evening (April 29), we knew the mobs would soon reach Koreatown. Desperate calls for help to city authorities were not answered. Koreatown leaders thought they had many friends in city hall as they gave generously to their campaign coffers. At the time of crisis, no one provided us with police protection. We had to stand alone in times of danger. Don't talk about the National Guard being held up because of an ammunition delay. That is ridiculous. Some veteran groups wanted to arm themselves in order to defend the town. Community leaders pleaded not to, that it would not be a right thing to do. Police handcuffed some armed defenders faced down on the ground, while letting looters go.

On TV screens the scenes of armed Koreans defending their property were shown again and again. Some of them were seen aiming at would-be attackers. The attacking mobs were not shown. Why? The defenders were portrayed by the mainstream media, particularly KABC, as gun-toting hoodlums. They just wanted to scare away the mobs. While Koreans were desperately calling for help, hosts and guests on

TV talk shows were framing the black/Korean conflict as the main cause of the riot. Like our leaders, editors and reporters of the mainstream media are out of touch, insensitive and seemingly uncaring. We feel under siege by police, news media and mobs, and have

never felt so betrayed, helpless and lonely.

The three-day madness in Los Angeles has nothing to do with us Korean Americans. It was a violent explosion of anger accumulated over centuries of frustration, helplessness and alienation of the people of color in this country. The Los Angeles experience of the past several days shows that our system, one based on the dominant Eurocentric ideology—one that puts Eurocentric civilization above all others—is not working. From the experience of the 1965 Watts riot, many learned minds predicted a repeat unless the pre-riot conditions improved drastically. The dominant ideology said that there was nothing wrong with the system. The explosion was waiting. The conditions will not improve unless the dominant group opens its mind and treats the people of color and their institutions and culture as equal and decent.

It is unfair for the media and public officials to shift the focus of the current jolt to the black/Korean issue. Many Koreans got hurt because they happened to be near the scene of the explosions. Yes, there are problems between Koreans and blacks, and we need to improve our relationship and learn to live together in peace. But these mobs were not targeting us alone. The media never show the total picture.

We are equally shocked by the verdict on the Rodney King beating and stand in unity with the black community on the issue. Something is very wrong with the judicial system as far as justice for the people of color is concerned. Many of us feel that justice was not served in Soon Ja Du's verdict, either. We understand the anger and frustration expressed by the black community on these events.

But we also want you to know that since Jan. 1, 1990, at least 25 Korean American merchants have been killed by non-Korean gunmen. Most of the merchants had been held up at gunpoint more than once.

We have no apologies to looters and arsonists who have mutilated our property and town. We do not apologize for years of hard work. Violence will not bring the needed change. We must educate our children to grow to be decent and responsible human beings and we must organize ourselves better, or we will not be able to change the status quo.

We have survived extreme oppression ourselves. We have survived the colonial atrocities, World War II and the Korean War. We will not leave Koreatown. We will rise again and rebuild the city. They took away our property but we still have our hopes and dreams. This time we want to rise with all groups, and together make this city a better place to live for all of us.

Eul Young Yu is a sociology professor at Cal State Los Angeles and chair of the Koreatown Emergency Relief Committee. His commentary appeared in the May 5 issue of the *Los Angeles Times*.



Many of us feel that justice was not served in Soon Ja Du's verdict, either... But we also want you to know that since Jan. 1, 1990, at least 25 Korean American merchants have been killed by non-Korean gunmen. Most of the merchants had been held up at gunpoint more than once.