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Aldemaro Romero Jr.
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Dr. Aldeamaro Romero Jr.
College Talk

“All my life North and South Korea have been a divided country. Almost all young people in South Korea have to serve in the military. I felt that I needed to understand what is going on in the world—not only international relations, but political economy and social relations. I tried to figure it out, and that was the motivation. Another thing was my ignorance of international relations, especially political economy.”

That’s how Dr. Myung-koo Kang explains why he became the political economist he is today. After studying international relations at Seoul National University, he received a master’s and a doctoral degree in political science from the University of California at Berkeley. Today he is an assistant professor of political science in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences of Baruch College/CUNY.

His three-year military experience at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas was quite dramatic for him. “We had to be on alert 24/7, worried about any kind of sudden attack from the North. Ultimately, you develop a psychological defense mechanism. Anytime something happened in the DMZ, my mother called me and asked, ‘Are you okay?’”

Sometimes it’s all about distance and perceptions. “Seoul is only thirty miles away from the DMZ. The security perception of people living in Seoul is very different from that of the soldiers deployed in the DMZ. Likewise, I see a huge perception gap between the ways people in the United States and in South Korea understand the North Korean missile threat. For people in the United States, it’s quite serious, but political economy and social relations. I tried to figure it out, and that was the motivation. Another thing was my ignorance of international relations, especially political economy.”

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U.S., and that created a sense of complacency.”

He believes Chinese policy makers are falling into a similar error and thinks the rise of Chinese debt is alarming. “China is building more debt, but history has shown us that this is not sustainable at all. My biggest concern is that the triggering moment will be when China fully internationalizes its own currency. Because the U.S. dollar is so crucial, they want to catch up to the U.S. dollar or replace U.S. dollar power in the near future. That’s the essence of the Chinese economy’s becoming large: it is mostly through...”

But how about the trade tensions between China and the U.S. that the Trump administration has initiated? Kang is emphatic about it. “I don’t think the current level of the trade conflict between the United States and China...”

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“Part of the problem may be cultural: the Japanese seem to have two different narratives, depending on whether the audience is internal or external. “There is a specific term in Japanese ‘honne,’ which means genuine heart and genuine opinion, while ‘tatemae’ is just a superficial public opinion. In most cases, the Japanese do not reveal their ‘honne,’ their real heart or real intentions or real opinion. In public communications, they just use their ‘tatemae.’ The nuances of the cultural understanding are very complicated because it depends on the context, and it also depends on the interpretation. How to interpret the context differs from one person to another,” says Kang.

Given that the issues of the Korean peninsula and China are today front and center in the news, one wonders how Kang’s students at Baruch College respond to his teachings. “They seem to like the fact that I am from that area, and that I have some specific local knowledge. The students are really inquisitive about my military service. When I’ve taught political economy, I’ve shared my own ignorance when the financial crises happened in 1997. I had absolutely no idea. So, I tried to encourage my students to see that this is fine, that they are still college students, and that you cannot understand the whole world. Don’t let yourself be overwhelmed. In a sense, your ignorance is a foundation and a motivation to study further or harder. They are quite inquisitive, for instance, about why I became interested in the financial area or financial crises. I love that in students— that they want to learn more about me and about all sorts of things.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: https://vimeo.com/267617733
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