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**Robinson/Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey**

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KOREA'S TURBULENT  
TWENTIETH CENTURY

머릿말

THE PEOPLE OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA, now divided into northern and southern nation-states, have had a turbulent twentieth century. In relation to the size of its population and breadth of its territory, Korea has also played a disproportionately important role in the last hundred years of world history. There is considerable irony in this statement because as late as 1876 Korea existed on the margins of the world system, recognizing only one primary interstate relationship—with China—and maintaining only infrequent and highly circumscribed contacts with Japan. Of the West and the expanding capitalist world system Korea knew very little. In the late nineteenth century the Chosŏn dynasty had ruled the people of the peninsula for the astonishingly lengthy tenure of 500 years. Chosŏn's isolation had obscured from the view of the rest of the world a people who possessed a historical lineage of great antiquity and who had made considerable contributions to East Asian civilization. Written history traces the early states on the peninsula to the fourth century B.C. and since the late seventh century large portions of Korea's present territory have been ruled by unified state systems: the Unified Silla state (668–918), the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), and finally the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910).

In spite of its ancient lineage and long history of autonomy in East Asia, Korea is often thought of as a mere appendage to the great Chinese empire on its north-east border. Korea is no larger than a middle-sized province of China, and it was always in peril of Chinese military aggression. At several times in its history the peninsula or portions thereof have been directly subjugated by Chinese power. But relatively speaking, Korea maintained its political and cultural integrity in the face of its colossal neighbor. It did so through careful attention to power relations along its northern border. And from 1392 until the late nineteenth century, the Chosŏn dynasty maintained a peaceful relationship with the Celestial Empire that was marred only by the disruptions attending the replacement of the Ming by the Qing dynasty during the 1630s and 1640s.

Western observers have often mistakenly interpreted this long relationship as one of vassalage. Indeed, this perception was furthered by the ritual subordination that characterized Korea's formal relationship with China. Korea was, however, an independent state; its society, politics, and culture had evolved separately for over a millennium. While the trappings and administrative structure of the Chosŏn



Korea. Source: Made at the University of Indiana Libraries with data from Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) and the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency.

dynastic system seemed to mirror those of the Ming (1368–1644), these surface features obscured an intricate assimilation of Chinese ideas and institutions with indigenous Korean patterns that had a far more ancient provenance. Korea had absorbed influences from China from the time its first state structures emerged; it used Classical Chinese as the official writing system of government and elite intercourse. But it is more important to recognize what was expressed in this admittedly foreign writing system. Korean state structures may have mirrored those of the Chinese, but their operation reflected earlier Korean patterns of aristocratic hierarchy and stratification. Not until the Chosŏn period did Neo-Confucianism become established as state orthodoxy, and even then its values and language were melded into the indigenous political culture of Korea. Given the commonalities, however, it is not surprising that many still view Korea as an offshoot of Chinese civilization. It was indeed a part of the East Asian civilization defined in many ways by Chinese cultural norms. But Chinese influences account for only a portion of Korea's own unique civilization.

This book seeks to explore Korea's historical experience over the last hundred years. It is an experience shaped by foreign intrusion, occupation, war, and often violent social and economic upheaval. If such experience were a journey, it would be an odyssey in the true sense of the metaphor. In order to make sense of its twists and turns, we must sort misconceptions from realities. This is all the more important because of the significant role Korea has played in the evolution of modern East Asia. From the beginning of the process that forced Korea into the world system in the late nineteenth century, outsiders were perplexed by Korea's responses to the threats and opportunities it faced. Their bafflement was, perhaps, in direct proportion to their ignorance of Korean culture and society. Surprisingly, outsiders today exhibit the same kind of ignorance when news of Korea hits the front pages of Western newspapers or is flashed around the Internet. This book is designed to provide a short analytical narrative of Korea's twentieth century that will provide a better understanding of the experiences and forces that have shaped politics and society on the peninsula and a clearer understanding of the behaviors and interests that drive the two Korean states in the complex regional politics of East Asia today.

Chapter One deals with traditional Korea, the Korea encountered by Western and Japanese diplomats and traders in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It gives a concise account of the political culture, economy, and international relations of Chosŏn Korea. Many have decried Chosŏn's reluctance to accept the new world order as it was emerging in the nineteenth century in East Asia, but much of this criticism ignores the sources of this resistance. In terms of its stability, durability, and cultural accomplishments, Chosŏn Korea was a successful system. It had already lasted almost 500 years, so it stands to reason that its leaders would not easily discard policies that had worked so well for so long. The chapter discusses the difficult path taken by the Chosŏn dynasty as it attempted to maintain

its autonomy and identity in the face of imperialism. Ultimately, the traditional Korean state was unable to defend itself, the Japanese annexed Korea as their formal colony, and the dynasty ended in 1910. But this did not happen until after the intrusion of capitalist market forces and new ideas from the West and Japan had begun a transformation of Korean society. It was in these last decades of Chosŏn that both the Korean nationalist movement and the economic and cultural modernization of Korea began. Indeed, this book takes the explicit stance that the origins of Korea's modernity should be traced to the late nineteenth century, not the era following World War II, as the vast bulk of literature on Korean development so ahistorically insists. Already in the decline and ultimate failure of Korea's ancient regime we can find the seeds of its modern transformation.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four recount the turbulent history of Korea's colonial experience under Japanese rule. This is a difficult history to write because the memory of this period still generates passionate feelings in both countries. Moreover, the colonial legacy figured heavily in the ideological warfare between North and South Korea after the division of the peninsula. The complexity and nuance of these critical decades is often lost in the polemical wars between the two Koreas, and concepts are frozen within highly politicized, state-sponsored historical narratives in each country.

Chapter Two outlines the structures of the Japanese colonial state and the institutions that framed Korea's social, cultural, and economic transformation from 1910 to 1945. Understanding how such structures affected Korea's early modernity does not imply that the evolution of modernity in Korea was strictly a Japanese affair. The colonial period set a Japanese agenda, and the colonial state's policies skewed development toward the broader interests of the empire, but even so, Korean agency was still evident, most apparently in the emergence of Korea's national independence movement after the Japanese takeover. While this narrative recognizes how brutal, discriminatory colonial policies made life miserable for the Korean people, it also attempts to present a nuanced view of how Koreans were implicated in and became part of the colonial system. Understanding the colonial period consists neither in cataloguing Japanese abuses and exploitation, nor in focusing solely on heroic Korean resistance. Its goal is to understand how the entire colonial experience produced the contradictions that in combination with the unique circumstances of its demise contributed to the complex evolution of two Korean nation-states on the peninsula.

Chapter Three analyzes the intellectual underpinnings of a conservative reform-based cultural nationalism that emerged in the 1920s and how it was challenged by radical nationalists influenced by the growing popularity of social revolutionary thought. Ultimately these two poles of thought, cultural reformism and socialist radicalism, became the vortices upon which Korean nationalist movement divided itself. This ideological division festered during the colonial period and then emerged quite openly in the post-Liberation era, when it was further

complicated by the conflict between exiled nationalist and socialist leaders who had returned. At the end of World War II in the Pacific, the joint Soviet and US occupation created polarizing forces that intensified this original schism, leaving little space for the evolution of a middle ground in postwar nationalist politics. The tragedy of Korea's subsequent division, therefore, claims a portion of its genesis in the colonial period.

Chapter Four recounts the burgeoning modernity that emerged during the thirty-five years of Japanese rule. It is important to note how colonialism structured the early modernity of Korea because it established patterns that informed later developments in post-colonial Korea. Many antecedents of contemporary Korean life were directly or indirectly shaped by forms that evolved within what I refer to as Korea's colonial modernity. After a colonial experience, nations are driven by the desire to excise the remnants of colonialism and to resurrect agency and self-respect for their formerly subjugated people. But as post-colonial studies have shown, one of the most insidious legacies of colonialism is how it colonizes the consciousness of the subjugated political and social elites. Similarly, the form and operation of modern institutions developed within a colonial setting are often the antecedents for later modernization. In Korea, the structure and functioning of state bureaucracies, modern companies, public infrastructures (transport, sanitation, media, etc.) first emerged in the last decades of Chosŏn rule, and they continued to evolve in the colonial setting. Much from this beginning carried over in the post-colonial setting out of sheer convenience. But even more difficult to excise was the habitus of modernity. It is no accident, then, that modern forms of organization in Korea often continue to resemble, at least on the exterior, Japanese forms, even though their function was quickly adapted to Korean control and leadership. Finally, because modernity evolved in a colonial setting, the relationship of the Korean people to modernity was skewed by Japanese political and economic power. Therefore understanding Korea's colonial modernity is crucial to appreciating the point from which subsequent Korean social and economic development began.

Chapter Four concludes with a detailed description of the last decade of colonial rule and the tumultuous aftermath of Liberation in the period from 1945 to 1950, a period that ends with the Korean War. It is important, here, to balance our discussion of colonial modernity with an appreciation of the bleakness of the last years of Japanese rule. The worst Japanese depredations have decisively influenced the memory of colonialism in the present, particularly the Japanese policy of forced assimilation. The attempts to force Japanese cultural practices on Koreans after 1935—Japanized names, family law, Shinto worship, and obligatory Japanese language use—were particularly galling. And these policies were enforced during a period of total war mobilization that wrought enormous hardship on the Korean people.

Chapter Five narrates events of the immediate postwar period. Its purpose

is to sort out the colonial legacy and to determine how it affected the intricate political struggles that emerged during the joint American-Russian occupation of the peninsula. In order to understand the Korean War, it is necessary to detail the circumstances that inhibited Korean attempts to produce a unified political leadership. Indeed, the combination of a legacy of colonial contradictions—class conflict, collaboration issues, population upheaval, etc.—and the presence of two superpowers destined to become the major vortices of the bipolar Cold War world order prevented the emergence of a unified middle ground from which a single nation-state might have evolved. Unfortunately, in the West an understanding of the origins of the war remains captive to a Cold War narrative of the struggle between communism and democracy. The story ends with the outbreak of the Korean War, a civil war compounded by and decisively driven by international intervention. Perhaps the Korean War was inevitable, given the implacable positions of the warring factions within post-Liberation Korean politics. But a more comprehensive narrative must show how the United States and USSR were implicated in the original division and how their policy choices in the early months after August 15, 1945, supported various sides within the Korean political game. This complex narrative closes with the battle lines freezing into a no-man's land tracing the current Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that still divides Korea today.

The emergence of the Republic of Korea (ROK) after 1948 is the subject of Chapter Six. It is a story of the ROK's struggle to evolve a pluralist democracy despite enormous economic and social problems, the threat from North Korea, and Cold War politics. Without question, ROK presidents used the imperatives of national security and economic development to justify authoritarian abuses; the struggle between pluralist forces and authoritarian leadership played out dramatically for nearly forty years. This chapter also details the emergence and fruition of the economic development programs initiated in South Korea in the early 1960s. The nation's astonishingly successful economic development led to social and political changes that undermined all arguments for continuing authoritarian controls. This part of the story culminates with the emergence of a coalition of opposition forces in 1987 that forced democratic reforms and inaugurated a new era of democratization in South Korean politics.

Chapter Seven provides a contrasting picture of nation-building in North Korea, known formally as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The purpose of the chapter, however, is not to highlight the contemporary contrasts between a postmodern and globalized South and the international isolation and economic failure of the North at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Rather, it attempts to describe both the DPRK's unique genesis and its early social and economic strengths—strengths that in the early decades outstripped the lesser achievements of the South. From there, however, it is necessary to uncover the sources of the senescence of the North Korean economy and the unique political formations that have led to the emergence of contemporary North Korea as one

of the most isolated, totalitarian, and enigmatic nation-states in the world today, a nation whose nuclear ambitions threaten the East Asian region as well as the global nonproliferation movement.

We return to South Korea in Chapter Eight, where the narrative highlights the halting course of democratization of South Korea since 1987, its successes as well as failures. While South Korea has democratized in terms of procedural democracy and individual rights, its political system remains captive to elitist and highly personalized political parties. How the system will evolve to include the voice of all major interest groups in society is still a work in progress. Since the late 1980s South Korea has also emerged as an increasingly wealthy consumer society, and this development has generated a host of new problems. The South Koreans have begun to question what was lost in the pell-mell drive to modernize. As South Korea approached the new century, it was consumed by a number of new debates that considered how to reconstitute itself as an affluent consumer society with open global connections to the postmodern world.

Finally, the Epilogue examines some of the contemporary issues now facing the Korean peninsula. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to provide a definitive narrative of more contemporary events. The two Koreas are important actors in a region of the world that has been rocked by recent dramatic changes the ultimate meaning of which can only be assessed in the years to come. The protracted recession in Japan during the 1990s, the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, the meteoric rise of the Chinese economy, the North Korean famine of 1995–1997, and the seemingly endless crisis provoked by the DPRK's nuclear ambitions have all destabilized the fifty-year-long regional political consensus built at the beginning of the now long-gone Cold War. What happens on the Korean peninsula in the next decade will have a decisive effect on how the entire region will realign itself to the realities of the twenty-first century. Thus just as they did at the beginning of the last century, the inhabitants of the Korean peninsula will again bear witness to and affect the future of the region. What more reason is needed for a close reexamination of the historical antecedents of the two states that now divide these people?