

Preface

Land of Mountains and Streams

For the United States and allied nations, North Korea has long been a source of controversy and concern. In the spring and summer of 2018, North Korea again entered the public debate when news reports indicated that the nation had developed offensive nuclear capabilities and was rapidly approaching a state in which it could attack the United States directly. For decades, the United States and allies have attempted to prevent the escalation of North Korea's military, utilizing negotiation, economic sanctions, and even threats of military force, but to little avail. To better understand the North Korean controversy, it is useful to look at the history and bifurcated cultures of the Korean Peninsula, from the kingdoms that united the peninsula to the struggle for global ideological dominance that ultimately tore the nation into warring halves. From the economic importance of South Korea's bustling urban economies, to the constant threat of North Korea's fundamentalist conservatism, to the lives of transplanted Koreans in the United States and elsewhere, Korea's long and storied culture has left a deep impact on the world.

From One to Two

Korea is a land noted for its rugged mountains, with eight separate mountain ranges that include four volcanoes, one of which, Baekdu, remains active and erupted as recently as 1903. Korean society evolved within mountain valleys, and the dividing line of the mountain ranges enabled these communities to evolve in partial isolation, developing unique mythological, political, artistic, and linguistic characteristics.

Life within this unique Korean landscape gave rise to a rich shamanic tradition. Early Koreans produced an extensive body of literature now known as "seolhwa," or "tales," about wildlife, nature, and people, as well as anecdotal lessons that recorded important facets of ancient Korean life and culture. Because of the peninsula's geographic location, jutting out from the Asian mainland between China and Japan, Korean culture has long been influenced by these neighboring cultures. The languages of all three states share certain characteristics and there is likewise overlap in the structure of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean mythology. As Korean society evolved from hunter-gatherer communities to agricultural settlements and eventually to city states, Korea, Japan, and China also shared imported religious beliefs, most notably Indian Buddhism, which was first imported into China before spreading throughout Northeast Asia.¹

The strategic and economically important geographic position of the Korean Peninsula also meant that neighboring Japan and China competed for influence within

its evolving kingdoms. It was Chinese military assistance, in fact, that enabled one of Korea's early kingdoms to unify the peninsula under a single dynasty. China and Japan continued to compete for control of the peninsula into the twentieth century, and a Japanese invasion in 1910 ended Korea's centuries-old dynastic leadership. For decades, Koreans were oppressed under a brutal military dictatorship until, in World War II, the nation was liberated by Russia and the United States. Russia and the United States, however, had their own goals in Northeastern Asia, with both powers seeking to create a renewed Korea sensitive and responsive to their economic and military needs. The result was that the nation was split in two, with Russia cultivating a communist military dictatorship in the north, while the United States tried, unsuccessfully, to foster a democratic society in the south. The Korean War devastated both sides of the divided nation, leaving millions dead, hundreds of years of infrastructure and architecture decimated, and the remaining population forcibly divided, with many families ripped apart and prevented from unification in what became a nearly 70-year military impasse.²

From the Korean War (begun in the 1950s) to the present, Korea's two sides evolved in different ways. Though the South endured decades of military dictatorship, internal revolt in the 1980s brought about democratic and industrial reform. Coupled with South Korea's military and economic partnership with the United States and Europe, South Korea's reform period led to the development of a robust economy with essential ties not only to allied nations in Northeast Asia, but to the rest of the world as well. Meanwhile, North Korea's fundamentalist conservatism led to the evolution of an insular military state controlled by a single family since the World War II split. North Korea, burdened by limited economic opportunities and resources and plagued by poverty, evolved into what is essentially a military cult, in which nearly one fourth of all resources are dedicated to the military and every member of society is expected to donate their lives, if necessary, to ensure the continuation of the dictatorial regime.³

The Kims of the World

With over 50 million living in South Korea, over 25 million in North Korea, and more than 10 million individuals of Korean descent living around the world, the Korean people are a diverse group that have spread to and influenced many societies. Though Koreans are as diverse as any other population, their names belie this. Until the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), only wealthy aristocratic families in Korea used surnames (also known as family or "last names"). When the practice of adopting surnames was first implemented, individuals registering with the government could choose their own family names, and it became common for individuals to purchase forged documents to grant their family a surname from a wealthy clan or noble house, thus increasing their stature. As a result, the surnames Kim, Lee, and Park—all derived from royalty—became nearly ubiquitous in Korean culture. In South Korea, nearly half of all citizens are named Kim, Park, or Lee; the surname Kim alone accounts for nearly 20 percent of the 50 million South Koreans.⁴

It is one of Korea's many Kims who is arguably the most famous Korean in the world: Kim Jong-Un, the much-maligned dictator currently leading the North Korean state. North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK, has, in fact, been led *only* by three generations of the Kim family, beginning with Kim Il-Sung, then passing to his son Kim Jong-Il, and finally, in 2010, to North Korea's most recent chairman, Kim Jong-Un. From the end of the Korean War, the North Korean military has sought to develop nuclear weapons. The United States has been North Korea's most dangerous enemy since North Korea fought US and allied soldiers in the Korean War. As the United States used atomic weapons against Japan at the end of World War II, the DPRK regime feared that they might eventually opt for a similar strategy in their goal to exert US control within Northeast Asia. Meanwhile, the United States and the international community have been using economic sanctions since the end of the Korean War as a way to prevent the DPRK from gaining military strength. These sanctions have, over decades, limited the growth of the DPRK and are part of the reason that North Korea in 2019 has achieved only a fraction of the economic growth and global significance as its southern counterpart.⁵

Russia, allied with North Korea during the Korean War, helped the nation start its nuclear program in the 1950s. In the decades since, nearly every presidential administration in the United States has taken some action toward addressing the threat of nuclear proliferation in Asia. Frequently, these efforts take the form of additional trade or economic sanctions intended to either limit North Korea's ability to obtain materials or to limit the growth of the economy. In general, all efforts to stop North Korea from developing nuclear weapons have failed because none of the negotiating nations were prepared to use military force or invasion to eliminate the nation's weapons-development programs. The DPRK leadership, in turn, has been unwilling to end their weapons program in return for economic agreements alone. As the United States and allies have nuclear capabilities and stronger militaries, since the first Kim dynasty in North Korea the DPRK position has been that its nuclear weapons program is the only military development initiative with the potential to protect the nation from invasion.⁶

Summitting It Up

By 2018, North Korea's controversial weapons tests had proved that the nation had successfully developed nuclear weapons, though the extent of its arsenal remained unclear. Pronouncements from the DPRK's official propaganda department elicited a response from the Trump administration, alternating between insults and diplomatic overtures. This resulted in the first meeting between a US president and a North Korean chairman since the Carter administration, but it did not result in a substantive peace agreement or specific plans for disarmament. The Trump administration thus faces the same situation faced by past US leaders, an intransigent regime that refuses to disarm unless the United States removes military threats from Northeast Asia and significantly eases sanctions against North Korea.

In the months since Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un began trading threats and insults, journalists, political analysts, and politicians have either been critical of the Trump administration's hostile strategy, or expressed hope that the Trump government might take a harder line with the DPRK than past presidents have been willing to. Up for debate as well has been the nature of the North Korean threat. While some view Kim Jong-Un as capable and perhaps willing to use nuclear weapons offensively, some national security experts believe that such measures would be taken only if another foreign power attempts an invasion or a takeover of the North Korean government. Outside of the threat of direct military confrontation, some worry that North Korea's weapons program could lead to the Kim government dealing nuclear weapons or technology to rogue states or terrorist groups. Others have expressed concern that North Korea's cyber warfare capabilities have reached a stage at which the nation poses a significant threat to the US economy and potentially to US military technology as well.

Entering 2019, it remains unclear what role the United States will play in North Korea's continuing evolution.

However, 2018 brought about a series of unexpected changes between North and South Korea that some hope signifies a new beginning for the long-opposed nations. After meetings between Kim Jong-Un and South Korean president Moon Jae-in, the two nations released statements describing a series of joint ventures that included demilitarizing the border between the two nations and creating stronger economic agreements. In December, it was announced that work had begun on a rail line to unite the two sides of the peninsula. After years of tense relations, announcements from both the North and South indicate a willingness to discuss the long-awaited and perennially controversial issue of reunification.⁷

As with future meetings between the United States and North Korea, it is unclear what these renewed negotiations between the North and South will accomplish. What is clear, is that both North and South Korea are changing, and both nations are seeking deeper and stronger connections with the world around them. If the momentum achieved in 2018 can be maintained moving forward, it is possible that Korea could begin working toward a reunited society, if not under a single government or leader, than at least close enough that Koreans on both sides could reclaim some facet of what their ancestors experienced when their nation was whole.

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A Tale of Two Koreas



By National Palace Museum, via Wikimedia

Seventh-century Tang dynasty painting of the envoys from the Three Kingdoms of Korea: (left to right) Baekjae, Goguryeo, and Silla. The three kingdoms were unified when China's Tang Dynasty helped the Silla kingdom conquer its rivals around 668 CE.

Hanguk and Choson

The name Korea, sometimes poetically translated as the “Land of High Mountains and Sparkling Streams,” refers to two separate nations, born of the same cultural roots but subject to diverging political and economic forces. United until the Japanese invaded the peninsula during World War II, the history of Korea has since been dominated by the political aims of the global superpowers. While South Korea evolved into one of the most affluent nations in Asia, North Korea developed into a totalitarian regime marginalized by decades-long poverty and limited personal or political freedom.

For the Korean people, the ongoing division within Korea remains a source of frustration and sadness. Families forced apart during the Korean War have remained divided due to the ongoing political rivalry between the two states. Over the years since the split, the cultures of the two nations have diverged to the point that South Koreans and North Koreans now use different terms when referring to their shared peninsula. South Koreans frequently use Hanguk, roughly translating to “great country,” while North Koreans use the term Choson, a reference to one of the ancient dynasties of the nation’s past.

According to the Asia Society, Koreans use a proverb—“When whales fight, the shrimp’s back is broken”—to refer to the history of their country, reflecting how the Korean people have been repeatedly victimized by the struggles of more powerful countries.¹

Land of Ancient Kingdoms

The Korean Peninsula is a large landmass extending 1,100 kilometers (683 miles) south along the eastern edge of the Asian mainland. In South Korea, it has become popular to describe the continent as shaped like a tiger, which is both an ancient symbol of good fortune in Korean culture and also conjures images of the fierce and powerful economy the nation wishes to create. Before the division of the Koreas, it was more common to describe the peninsula as having the shape of a rabbit, which symbolizes both wisdom and tradition.

Surrounded on three sides by water, the Korean Peninsula has 8,458 kilometers of coastline (5,255 m) and comes into contact with five separate bodies of water, the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea, the Korea Strait, the Cheju Strat, and the Korea Bay. Nearly 70 percent of the peninsula is mountainous, interspersed with arable plains between mountain ranges, and so agriculture has been confined to only a small portion of the peninsula. Mountains and streams are such an iconic part of the peninsula’s geography that these features have become ubiquitous in Korean art.

In terms of natural resources, both the North and South are blessed with vast mineral wealth, a benefit of living within a rocky, mountainous terrain. Although

governmental mismanagement and a lack of infrastructure has largely prevented North Korea's regimes from taking advantage, it has been estimated that the North Korean landscape harbors trillions in mineral resources, including gold, iron, zinc, copper, limestone, molybdenum, and graphite, which are only some of the 200 minerals and rare earth metals present in the nation's landscape.² Outside of mineral wealth, both nations have extensive coastal territories sitting alongside once resource-rich waters, and seafood has played a major role in the evolution of Korean society.

The highest mountains lie in the northern part of the peninsula, the largest being the volcano known as Baekdu Mountain, which extends some 2,744 meters (9,000 ft) above sea level and sits on the border of North Korea and China. Baekdu last erupted in 1903 but remains active. In the south, the peninsula extends into a series of more than 3,500 islands stretching into the surrounding seas, some of which are occupied but most of which are relatively barren and windswept bastions for sea birds and other migrants.

The Korean climate varies widely between north, south, east, and west. In the south, warmer temperatures prevail because of a warm air current, whereas the northern part of the country receives wind passing over the tundra of Siberia. The entire peninsula is within a monsoon zone, with monsoon rains and violent storms common in the summer.³ Once hosting a diverse assemblage of plants and animals, over-development and warfare decimated animal populations across the country and have left vast portions of the peninsula environmentally degraded. In modern Korea, a number of threatened animals disappearing from the settled regions of the countries have taken shelter in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a 155-mile strip dividing North and South Korea that has been forbidden to human traffic since the unofficial end of the Korean War (in 1953) and so has provided an unintended refuge for wildlife like the white-naped and red-crowned cranes, both of which are endangered but also treasured symbols of Korea's imperial legacy.⁴

Archaeologists have found evidence of agricultural settlements from as early as 5,500 years ago, when Korean farmers were already cultivating millet, soy, and beans. Records indicate that these settlements had a complex written language and indicate also a rich mythology. The mytho-poetic history of the peninsula, as a political entity, can be traced back to the legendary figure Dangun Wanggeom, sometimes known as Tangun, who is credited in popular myth as the founder of the Gojoseon kingdom, or "Ancient Joseon" period. Though historians doubt the existence of an actual Dangun, generations of Korean rulers have claimed to have descended from Dangun's lineage as a way to claim spiritual predetermination for their leadership. Dangun is often depicted as a shaman-king, and some historians speculate that the personage of Dangun was invented to symbolize the transition from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. Over the centuries, the Dangun legend continued to influence Korean politics and society in numerous ways. The location of the modern North Korean capital of Pyongyang, for instance, was chosen because it was the legendary site of the first city of Dangun's unified peninsula.⁵

Unification of the Three Kingdoms

The earliest clan communities that occupied the peninsula formed small towns and communities consisting of multiple towns, which then evolved into tribal leagues, and eventually into kingdoms. The earliest kingdom identified by archaeologists and historians was Goguryeo, which evolved from a loose confederation of tribes around 37 BCE and formed a powerful riparian kingdom along the Yalu River. At the height of this kingdom's power, it controlled most of the modern Korean Peninsula as well as portions of what is now southern China and a small portion of Russia. The southern portion of the peninsula was, at that time, split between two other kingdoms, known as the Baekjae (or Paekche) and the Silla. Historians therefore commonly refer to this part of Korean history as the Three Kingdoms period.

Competition between the three kingdoms ended when China's Tang Dynasty backed the Silla Kingdom, which then conquered its rivals in the north and south to unify the peninsula around 668 CE. The Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), a government-funded research institution, concluded that the Goguryeo kingdom had not been an independent kingdom but rather a satellite state of the Chinese Empire, thus suggesting that the earliest Korean kingdom was of Chinese making and not a product of ethnic Korean invention. The South Korean press coverage of the CASS studies soured South Korean attitudes toward the Chinese, with Korean politicians and academics claiming that China was attempting to erase the nation's unique cultural identity through an act of historical appropriation. In the 2000s, this led to a spate of historical dramas on South Korean television and in theatres depicting fictionalized versions of the Three Kingdoms period in which the Korean identity of the Goguryeo kingdom is retained. Though the extent of the reaction in North Korea is unknown to the US press, both South and North Koreans are known to have incorporated Goguryeo cultural artifacts and history into their national identities.⁶

Despite China's attempts to appropriate Korean history, there is little doubt that China, Japan, and Korea have had tremendous influence on one another since before the Goguryeo period dawned. The Korean written language has absorbed elements of Chinese and Japanese and all three nations share religious traditions as well. For much of Korea's dynastic history, the state cult was Buddhism, which was originally invented in India but was later imported into China, where it flourished and gave rise to a number of unique Chinese versions of the philosophy. From there, Buddhism was imported to Korea, where it further evolved before it was eventually exported to Japan. The relationship between the East Asian powers has therefore long been one of both competition and cultural exchange.

The Silla Kingdom that rose to first unify Korea began to deteriorate due to internal strife, and a former Silla general, Wang Geon, formed his own kingdom in the south. In 935, the king of the Silla Kingdom surrendered his throne, enabling the Goryeo to take control of the entire peninsula. Wang Geon chose his own hometown, Songak (now known as Gaeseong), as the capital of his new kingdom and set about fostering modernizations that made the Goryeo Dynasty among the most sophisticated in all of Asia. A wealth of art and architecture and Buddhist literature

speak of the complex intellectual side of the Goryeo, which also supported an impressive scientific tradition. It was Goryeo inventors who created movable metal type printing in 1234, nearly two centuries before Germany's Gutenberg made the same discovery. Among the lasting artifacts of the kingdom is a series of more than 80,000 wooden blocks carved with the entire Buddhist canon, now stored in the Haeinsa Temple in South Korea.

It was also during the Goryeo Dynasty period that Korea first had contact with Muslim traders traveling the Silk Road. These traders carried stories and artifacts from the Goryeo into India and the Middle East and eventually to Europe. It was the Goryeo Dynasty that gave the peninsula its modern English and European name as the name of the dynasty was transliterated to become Korea.

The Goryeo Dynasty began to crumble in the 1200s due to a combination of internal power struggles and external pressure. This left the kingdom vulnerable to Mongolian invasions, which began in the early 1200s and turned the Goryeo into a vassal state under long-distance Mongolian dominance. In 1392, another military coup toppled the Goryeo and installed a new dynasty, known as the Joseon, under the leadership of former general Yi Seong-gye. Embracing Chinese Confucianism, the Joseon state was guided by a class and caste system based on civil service and stressing the importance of education, and the Joseon became a powerful and culturally innovative kingdom. The reign of King Sejong the Great, from 1418 to 1450, produced an artistic and scientific renaissance that left behind an invaluable wealth of textiles, sculpture, and scientific artifacts.

Foreign Influence

For centuries, a military alliance between Korea and China, in return for exports from Korea, protected the nation from more powerful neighbors, though this protection was, at times, insufficient. Japanese forces invaded Korea in the sixteenth century and the Manchurian armies also invaded in the seventeenth century, after invading China as well. These repeated invasions made the Korean kingdom increasingly insular, so much so that nineteenth-century scholars called Korea a "Hermit Kingdom." Korea first opened the nation to diplomatic relations only in 1876, under increasing pressure from Japan, and Japan, China, and Russia were the chief competitors seeking to use a strong alliance with Korea to strengthen their military and trade position in Northeastern Asia. After fighting both China and Russia between 1895 and 1905, Japan became the preeminent power in East Asia. In 1910, Japan annexed Korea and ruled the nation for 35 years under a military regime, attempting to force Koreans to abandon their language and cultural identity. In 1939, the Japanese took this forced assimilation further when they instituted a system that forced Koreans to adopt Japanese names.⁷

The Japanese colonial period was transformative, introducing many modern industries such as steel, cement, and chemical manufacturing to Korea during the 1920s and 1930s. Though the occupational government was brutal and exploitative, it left Korea as the second-most technologically advanced nation in Asia, behind only Japan itself. The fate of the Koreas shifted with the end of World War II and

the surrender of Japan to the allies. As it was the United States and the Soviet Union that jointly accepted the Japanese surrender of Korea, both nations agreed to occupy roughly half of the country, with the Soviet Union occupying the territory north of the 38th parallel and the United States occupying the southern half.

The initial agreement between the United States and Russia was that the occupation would last only long enough for a unified government to be established and a new constitution implemented, but rising tensions between the United States and Russian leaders exacerbated ambitions among regional leaders in the two sides of Korea. In the summer of 1948, this breakdown in negotiations resulted in the establishment of two governments, one in Seoul, backed by the United States, which became the Republic of Korea (ROK), and another in Pyongyang, supported by the Soviet regime, which became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). With both governments claiming to be the legitimate representative of the entire peninsula, the political stalemate worsened until, in 1950, the DPRK, backed by Soviet forces, invaded the south with the aim of forced unification. The United States and United Nations forces intervened to support South Korean independence, resulting in a devastating three-year war.

The Korean War was one of the greatest tragedies of the twentieth century, resulting in millions of lost lives and dozens of cities, towns, and entire communities destroyed. By 1953, the opposing forces had reached a stalemate, resulting in a ceasefire and the establishment of the DMZ, which is still in place in 2019. In fact, though the ceasefire has held since it was established, no official end to the war was ever declared. In the decades since, South Korea evolved into a technologically and socially advanced state, flourishing through its trade and cultural connections to the broader international community. North Korea, on the other hand, remained a nation deeply dominated by their military and its authoritarian power. In the twenty-first century, roughly one quarter of North Korea's budget is spent on military development, the highest proportion of any world nation. For some South and North Koreans, the question of reunification still looms, especially for those with long-estranged families across the heavily militarized border, but the long political impasse between the two nations has made this a remote possibility.

For many Americans living in the twenty-first century, America's fraught relationship with North Korea may be perceived as little more than the troubling process of attempting to curb the potentially dangerous aspirations of a dictatorial state, but this perspective ignores America's role in creating both North and South Korea. The fate of all those nations impacted or shaped by America's Cold War conflict is also part of America's legacy. How the United States handles its relations with North and South Korea is therefore more than simply a reflection of global politics.

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