

## A History of Korea

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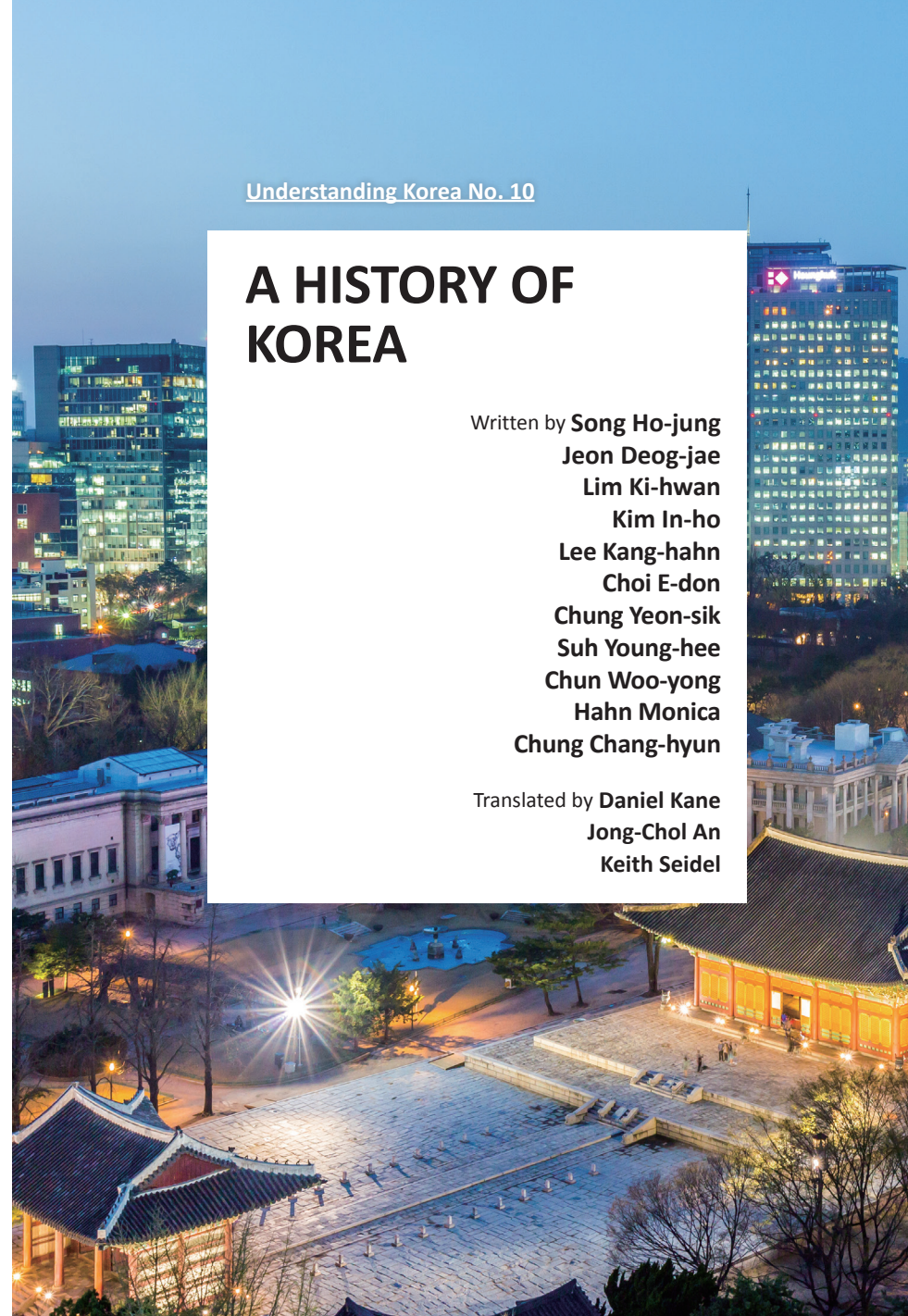
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# **A HISTORY OF KOREA**

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# Contents

- 8 Foreword
- 10 Introduction

## **Chapter 1 . Prehistoric Culture and the Formation of Centralized Polities**

- 16 Prehistoric Society and Culture
- 22 The Establishment and Development of Gojoseon
- 30 Ancient Korean Society and the Lelang Commandery

## **Chapter 2 . The Foundation and Development of the Three Kingdoms**

- 38 Establishment and Expansion of the Three Kingdoms
- 48 Administrative Systems and Social Makeup of the Three Kingdoms
- 54 Culture and Religion of the Three Kingdoms

## **Chapter 3 . The Wars of Korean Unification and the Era of Northern and Southern States**

- 66 Goguryeo's Wars with Sui and Tang China
- 71 The Silla Wars of Unification
- 77 The Flourishing of Unified Silla
- 82 Founding and Development of Balhae

## **Chapter 4 . Goryeo and East Asia**

- 90 Emergence of the Later Three Kingdoms
- 94 Goryeo Reunification and the Nature of Goryeo Society
- 103 The Goryeo Dynasty and the States of East Asia

## **Chapter 5 . Goryeo and the Mongol Empire**

- 112 Goryeo's Resistance to the Mongol Invasion (1231-1259)
- 116 Diplomacy with the Mongols, and Management of Domestic Affairs (1260-1307)
- 125 A New Era for Goryeo: Mixed-blood Monarchy (14th Century)
- 137 Changes in the Goryeo-Yuan Relationship (1350s and '60s)
- 141 Shifting Northeast Asian Order: Goryeo, Northern Yuan and Ming (1370s, '80s and '90s)

## **Chapter 6 . The Founding of Joseon and the Formulation of its State System**

- 146 Founding of Joseon
- 151 Political Structure and Conditions of the Commoners
- 158 Economic Structure and Status of the Common People
- 163 Structure of and Changes in the Status System

## **Chapter 7 . Changes of the Late Joseon**

- 170 The Japanese and Manchu Invasions: Trial and Resurgence
- 178 A New Society
- 185 A New Crisis

## **Chapter 8 . The Modern World and the Korean Empire (Daehan jeguk)**

- 194 Opening of Ports and the Enlightenment Policy
- 199 The Empire of Korea and Movement to Establish a Modern State
- 209 Diplomacy of the Korean Empire and the Road to Colonization

## **Chapter 9 . Japanese Colonial Rule and the Korean Independence Movement**

- 218 Japanese Aggression in Korea and the Korean National Movement after the Russo-Japanese War
- 220 Japanese Annexation of Korea and the March First Movement
- 226 Japanese Colonial Rule and the Korean Independence Movement in the 1920s
- 233 Japanese Invasion of Mainland China and the Korean Independence Movement

## **Chapter 10 . National Division and the Korean War**

- 242 Liberation and Division
- 256 The Korean War and Permanent Division

## **Chapter 11 . Today's Korea**

- 266 The Spread of Industrialization and Popular Culture
- 274 The Expansion of the Democratization Movement and Establishment of a Democratic System
- 278 Policies for the Unification of North and South Korea and Striving Towards Unification

## **284 About the Authors**

## **286 Translators**

## FOREWORD

The Academy of Korean Studies(AKS) has made contribution to the studies of history and culture of Korea internationally for the past four decades. The Center for International Affairs (CEFIA) at AKS has committed to the Understanding Korea Project since 2003. It aims to promote the better understanding of Korea by various methods including the development of sources on Korean history and culture and investigation of Korea-related articles in the international textbooks. With this objective in mind, CEFIA has published the Understanding Korea Series. This series offers in-depth knowledge to international community who wants to understand Korea. As the series covers a variety of Korea-related topics, we hope it would be available to many readers.

*A History of Korea* is the tenth volume in the Understanding Korea Series. It explains the history of Korea from prehistoric times to the present. This book, divided by periods, helps readers to understand the main events and overall characteristics of Korean history. It covers each era's political systems, culture, society, and foreign relations.

As a concise introduction to Korean history, this book would be suitable for international Koreanists and students, textbook authors, and the general readers.

Many people have assisted us to make this publication possible. We appreciate authors of chapters such as Professor Song Ho-jung, Professor Jeon Deog-jae, Professor Lim Ki-hwan, Professor Kim In-ho, Professor Lee Kang-hahn, Professor Choi E-don, Professor Chung Yeon-sik, Professor Suh Young-hee, Professor Chun Woo-yong, Professor Hahn Monica and Director Chung Chang-hyun. We also

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It is our hope that this book will contribute to a better understanding of Korean history and to raising the interest of the international community in the history of Korea.

**Center for International Affairs  
Academy of Korean Studies**

## INTRODUCTION

Korea has an ancient, rich, and dynamic history. These experiences have shaped the identity of the Korean people and created their unique culture, characteristic mindset, and ideological values. Outside of Korea, Korean history is typically viewed from a Chinese or Japanese perspective or in the context of East Asian history. This has resulted in a general lack of understanding and an abundance of misconceptions regarding Korea's history. We live in a time of increasing informatization and globalization. Understanding each country's history and culture is needed more than ever, and that understanding must be from a worldwide and comparative point of view. To this end, this book was designed to help readers outside of Korea easily understand the main events in the development of Korean history

The eleven chapters in this book cover the totality of Korean history, from the peninsula's ancient civilizations to present-day Korea. Chapter 1, "Prehistoric Culture and the Formation of Centralized Politics," details the ancient civilizations and the development of Gojoseon, the first nation on the Korean Peninsula. Chapter 2, "The Foundation and Development of the Three Kingdoms," describes the establishment and development of the early Korean kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. Chapter 3, "The Wars of Korean Unification and the Era of Northern and Southern States," explains the political and diplomatic dynamics between the Three Kingdoms and the process of their eventual unification into one nation. It goes on to detail the formation and development of the state of Balhae, which existed in what is today northern area of the Korean Peninsula and northeast China. Chapter 4, "Goryeo and East Asia," deals with the establishment and characteristics of Goryeo, which unified the

peninsula anew, and describes Goryeo's relationship with other East Asian states. Chapter 5, "Goryeo and the Mongol Empire," deals with the Mongol invasion, Goryeo's resistance, and the unique form of co-existence that emerged between Goryeo and Mongol Yuan dynasty in China. This chapter helps readers understand how Goryeo was able to maintain its national sovereignty and identity even as other countries were swallowed up by Mongol Yuan Empire. Chapter 6, "The Founding of Joseon and Formulation of its State System," recalls the disorder of the late-Goryeo period and describes the political, social, and economic characteristics of the new dynasty that appeared in its wake, the Joseon dynasty. Chapter 7, "Changes of the Late Joseon," describes Joseon's tax reforms and efforts to improve agricultural productivity following its struggles with both Japan and the Manchus. This chapter also explains the social changes and external threats that Joseon experienced during the subsequent eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chapter 8, "The Modern World and the Korean Empire," delineates Joseon's efforts to enact modernization policies and establish a modern nation called the "Korean Empire" (Daehan jeguk) in order to combat both external and internal threats. This chapter examines the Korean people's hopes and efforts to maintain an independent nation even as the international powers around them sought to seize control of the peninsula. Chapter 9, "Japanese Colonial Rule and the Korean Independence Movement," covers the Japanese seizure of Korea, Japan's colonial rule of its new colony, and the independence movement that emerged amongst the Korean people. Chapter 10, "National Division and the Korean War," describes Korean efforts to establish an independent, unified nation against the backdrop of the global Cold

War following World War II. This chapter goes on to examine the establishment of opposing governments in North and South Korea, the outbreak of the Korean War, and the hardening of national division. Chapter 11, “Today’s Korea,” describes how Korea went on to industrialize after the destruction of the Korean War and the subsequent blossoming of democratization after decades of military dictatorship. It also covers efforts to build a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

The scholars who authored these chapters are the foremost experts in their respective periods of Korean history, and they have imparted to these chapters their wealth of knowledge and insights. Despite space limitations, this book also includes visual aids and maps to help readers understand the contents more clearly. It is our hope that this book will increase understanding of and interest in Korean history and convey Korea’s historical experiences to a larger audience.

## BCE 500<sup>th</sup> millenium~BCE 108

BCE 500<sup>th</sup> millenium  
Paleolithic Age begins

BCE 10,000  
Neolithic Age begins

BCE 2333  
Dangun Wanggeom founds Gojoseon  
(*Dongguk tonggam*)

BCE 2000~1500  
Bronze Age begins

BCE 400  
Iron Age begins

BCE 4th century  
Jin is founded in the southern region of the Korean  
Peninsula

BCE 3rd century  
Buyeo is founded in Manchuria

BCE 194  
Wiman becomes king of Gojoseon after ousting King  
Jun

BCE 108  
Gojoseon falls after Han China's invasion

## Chapter 1

# PREHISTORIC CULTURE AND THE FORMATION OF CENTRALIZED POLITIES

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Song Ho-jung

translated by Daniel Kane



## Prehistoric Society and Culture

### Life and society of the Paleolithic period

The Paleolithic Age, during which humanity lived in closest connection with nature, refers to the period from about 2.5 million years ago to 10,000 years ago. During this time, humans survived through hunting and gathering, using various tools fashioned of chipped stone.

Paleolithic remnants in Manchuria and on the Korean Peninsula date back to about fifty thousand years ago. On the Korean Peninsula, an increasing number of bone remains confirmed as belonging to Paleolithic humans have been found, beginning with the first discovery in 1962 at Gulpo-ri in Unggi, North Hamgyeong-do prov-



Fist axe from Jeongok-ri, Yeoncheon | National Museum of Korea

Fist axes were originally thought to have been used only in Africa and Europe. This fist axe gained worldwide attention following its discovery in 1977 amongst Early Stone Age artifacts in Jeongok-ri, Yeoncheon.

ince (in present-day North Korea), and following this at Seokjang-ri in Gongju and in the caves of Mt. Seungni in Deokcheon. Among these discoveries, the mandible bones and molars excavated from the caves of Mt. Seungni in Deokcheon have become important evidence pointing to human habitation of the Korean Peninsula dating back to the Paleolithic period.

On the Korean Peninsula as throughout the world, Paleolithic peoples dwelled in caves or rocky outcroppings and acquired food resources through hunting and foraging. The remains found at Jeongok-ri in Yeoncheon and at Suyanggaegae in Danyang were situated in an expansive river basin, well-placed for finding cave shelters and access to water.

For the purposes of foraging, they fashioned thrushes, fist axes, and stone cleavers to suit their purposes. They also made small, sharp objects such as various scrapers and picks, and fashioned tools from animal bones and horns. Notably, they used fire to cook their food.

Because the primary concern in the Paleolithic period was subsistence through hunting and gathering, the number of people required for this decided the size of a given social group, with the standard size seeming to be about twenty-five people. As no socioeconomic gaps differentiated rich from poor, the hunting duties would have been distributed equally within the group.

### Life and society of the Neolithic period

The Paleolithic came to an end approximately ten thousand years before the present era as the climate warmed and the world entered

the postglacial age. During this period conditions were warm and humid and with the rise in sea levels flora and fauna also changed. The retreating glaciers also shaped the landscape of the Korean Peninsula into what it is today. With warming temperatures plant life increased and forests grew denser and smaller animals such as deer, wild boar, and rabbits began to supplant the larger mammals that inhabited the ice age landscape. In this transformed environment humans first began to produce their food through primitive agricultural practices and animal husbandry.

With such changes in the natural environment, humans began to fashion the polished stone tools required of their new livelihoods. The bow was developed as were various stone implements like knives, axes, adzes, and whetstones. Developed as well were various other tools for fishing as well as agricultural implements such as semicircular blades and mortar and pestles. During the Neolithic period the primary means of livelihood consisted of hunting, fishing, and the foraging of wild plants. In the early period, subsistence was aided through the fashioning of spears and fishing hooks from such things as deer antlers, while those living on the sea coasts or along rivers were also able to gather and eat things like shellfish. The late Neolithic saw the emergence of primitive agriculture in some regions.

During the Neolithic, those inhabiting the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria largely cultivated minor cereals such as millet or sesame. With the adoption of agriculture, the field became the locus of daily life. People of the Neolithic commonly dwelt along rivers and on low hills. The floors of dwellings were burned with fire and made hard, with pillars and rafters then built to support a roof. Their in-

teriors might contain simply a hearth and cooking pot. Dwellings were typically of a size to accommodate a household of 4 to 5 people while about 15 to 20 such dwellings would comprise a collective settlement.

With settled life, people began to build dwellings on the plains, and these dwellings began to include places for the storage of seed and food. Production of pottery for the cooking or eating of food increased. People engaged in fishing, hunting, and foraging while carrying out communal life in groups made up of scores of clans.

Neolithic peoples fashioned hempen garments using spindles and needles made of bone, a work done largely by women. Neolithic peoples also made objects representative of fertility, such as figures of pregnant women and goddesses, as a way of praying for abundance.

In a context where agriculture was so completely dependent on natural conditions, nature and its forces held a compelling interest to the peoples of the Neolithic. During this period, people had animist notions, wherein not only humans but all natural objects possessed souls, including the sun, water, and mountains, and they maintained a totemic belief system that saw the worship of certain animals. Further, there was the belief that the soul lived on after death, and thus emerged worship of the soul and of ancestors, and shamanism also appeared with its soothsayers and the attendant belief in the power of magic.

The people of the Neolithic lived together based on clan affiliation. In this period, because children came to know intimately only their mother's side, groups naturally formed around the mother's lineage group. And because harvests were not only impossible to

store for long periods, but were the result of collective labor, they were distributed equitably among group members. Therefore, society from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic period is termed primitive communal society.

### From Bronze Age to Iron Age culture

About a thousand years before the Common Era, the use of bronze tools emerged on the Korean Peninsula. With the advent of this Bronze Age, the former egalitarian relationships vanished and social classes emerged among the populace while discord and confrontations frequently led to war.

During this period, tribal chiefs possessed the power of priesthood, and they made display of their dignified status through symbols of religious authority, such as bronze swords and bronze mirrors. In addition, the development of various wooden tools led to significant advances in farming and animal husbandry.

The use of bronze implements allowed for the production of sharper and more precise tools. Although farming implements such as hoes, scythes, and plowshares continued to be fashioned of stone and wood as before, their quality improved. Bronze was a very valuable commodity in itself, and thus difficult for ordinary people to possess. Rulers alone used bronze to augment the prestige and authority that befitted their status.

In this period, the people primarily cultivated varieties of millet, such as Foxtail millet, proso millet, and sorghum. During the Bronze Age, water began to be diverted into low-lying ground for the devel-

opment of rice paddies. Although we can find traces of rice farming in the previous Neolithic era, rice cultivation began in earnest during the Bronze Age. With the development of settled agriculture, people came to inhabit the banks of rivers, the lower slopes of mountains, or the bases of hills. Farming and animal husbandry now became much more important than hunting and gathering.

The Bronze Age saw the collapse of primitive communal societies. Gradually, the various tribal groups established economic ties with one another, and rivalry between the tribes regarding the right to use major resources intensified, leading to both domination and subordination among them. In the villages, moats and wooden barricades were erected for defensive purposes, Geomdan-ri in Ulsan and Songguk-ri in Buyeo being examples of this. Over time, these wooden barricades gave way to earthen walls. This trend is similar to the emergence of walled city-states in the West. These walled



Dolmen located in Bugeun-ri, Ganghwa-gun | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
Dolmen are thought to be the graves of important persons from the Bronze Age. In 2000, areas in Korea with many dolmen were registered as World Heritage Sites, including Gochang, Hwasun, and Ganghwa.

fortress towns became political and religious centers controlling the various villages of their given area.

Powerful rulers (chieftain) possessing power and wealth came to establish control over larger populations, and then established laws to protect authority and property. They set up administrative apparatuses and formed armies to enforce the law and punish transgressors. From such a process states or polities were born. In Korea, Gojoseon emerged as the first centralized state.

## The Establishment and Development of Gojoseon

### The Dangun myth and Gojoseon

Every country in the world has its foundation myth. For Korea, the *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms; 1281) relates the foundation myth of the first Korean state, Gojoseon. This is the oldest extant record of Dangun, and subsequent Korean historical records refer to Dangun as the first ruler and progenitor of the Korean nation.

The Dangun myth reflects the Korean Peninsula's historical experience of state-founding. The story of Dangun communicates how a political power based in Bronze Age culture consolidated several tribes to establish Gojoseon. Further, the myth also seeks to demonstrate the justness and legitimacy of the establishment of this rule. Embellished as it may be with mythological elements, the story of Dangun relates in an implicit manner the historical facts of the



*Samguk yusa* | Kyujanggak Institute For Korean Studies / Seoul National University Library  
*Samguk yusa*'s chapter on Gojoseon containing the Dangun legend about the founding of Gojoseon.

period of Gojoseon's founding. Dangun Wanggeom (or Dangun) is said to have ruled for 1500 years, though such a figure is just a way of expressing how Dangun Joseon (or Gojoseon) existed a very long time.

This ancient society seems to have been a communal farming society because mugwort and garlic appear prominently in the Dangun myth. This period bears similarities to Liaoning bronze dagger culture that emerged in what is today northeastern China (1000 BCE-300 CE).

### Founding and development of Gojoseon

The word "Joseon" originally denoted a region and the name of a tribe of peoples. When this area called Joseon grew and became a state, the name of the region was adopted as the name of the state.

Spatially, the Joseon people inhabited an area centered on what is today Liaodong in southern Manchuria and the northwestern Korean Peninsula. The area saw the very early development of agriculture, and its population consisted mainly of members of the Ye and Maek tribes. At first, this region saw the emergence of a small number of political groupings, which were then subdued and consolidated by the dominant among them.

In the “Treatise on the Xiongnu” (Xiongnu liezhuan) chapter of the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) of Sima Qian it is recorded that to the west of Joseon were found such tribes as the Sanyung (Ch. Shanrong) and Dongho (Ch. Donghu) and that “none can unite these one hundred or so barbarian tribes into one.” The situation with the “Rongdi” (a pejorative Chinese term for non-Han tribes living in the area) on Gojoseon’s right (or eastern) flank would have been very similar. Thus, in this period, as in the case of the barbarians to the west, Gojoseon was unable to establish administrative control, with the chiefs of each political grouping seeming to come together to form a loose alliance.

The name “Joseon” makes its earliest appearance in the *Guanzi*, where it is recorded that around the 7th century BCE Joseon sent as tribute items to the state of Qi, located in what is today China’s Shandong Peninsula, specialty products such as tiger pelts at the request of that state’s Duke Huan. This record notes that the state of Joseon was some 8000 *ri* distant from Qi, a hyperbolic expression that meant simply it was a great distance away.

At first, Gojoseon maintained only loose control over various ethnic groups, but over the course of the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE,

its power increased to rival the Chinese state of Yan. The Chinese people were dismissive of the people of Gojoseon, calling them barbarians. They referred to the populace of Gojoseon as the Yemaek, to mean people inhabiting dirty and wild lands, and described them as “haughty and violent.”

The representative culture left by the Yemaek and Gojoseon people who lived in the region of Liaodong and the northwestern Korean Peninsula is the mandolin-shaped (i.e., Liaoning style) bronze dagger culture. Besides the eponymous mandolin-shaped bronze dagger, other representative features of the mandolin-shaped bronze dagger culture of southern Manchuria include dolmen (*jiseokmyo*), Misongni-type pottery, and Paengihyeong-type (or sharp-bottomed-type) pottery. The fact that the table-style (or northern-style) dolmen is found spread from Liaodong to the northwest of the Korean Peninsula speaks to the wide-ranging influence Gojoseon life and cultural patterns exerted during the Bronze Age.

From the 5th to 4th centuries BCE, the diffusion of the more advanced culture of China along with movement of peoples led to a cultural change in the region of Liaodong and on the Korean Peninsula, to include the emergence of iron culture and so-called pit burial (*ummudeom*). Gradually, Gojoseon came to be perceived as a political entity or state by polities in China and by surrounding ethnic groups.

The “Weilüe” (Brief History of Wei) found in the *Sanguozhi* (Record of the Three Kingdoms), records that in the 4th century BCE, the “Joseon feudality” (*huguk*) adopted the title of kingdom and launched an attack on the Chinese state of Yan of the Warring

States period. At that time, the king of this “Joseon feudality” served as the chief of a confederation of regional ethnic groups and possessed a rudimentary bureaucratic system with such offices as *baksa* (an academician of sorts) and *daebu* (minister). Gojoseon already displayed at this date the characteristics of an ancient state.

### Wiman Joseon

In the course of the 3rd century BCE, the Iron Age culture of Warring States China spread into southern Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula. With this, the former mandolin-shaped dagger culture was supplanted by a slender-shaped dagger culture centered on an area south of the Cheongcheon River in the peninsula’s northwest.

From the 4th to the 3rd centuries BCE migrant forces began to

emerge out of China and move into the northwestern part of the Korean Peninsula. Based on these historical movements, at the start of the second century BCE an independent political power developed in this region: Wiman Joseon established by Wiman (Ch. Weiman).

According to the “Record of Joseon” (Joseon yeoljeon) in the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian), Wiman was a subject of the Yan state and a deputy commander under Lu Wan, whom the Han emperor had set up as the king of Yan. At the time of Empress Lü of Han, when Lu Wan fled to the Xiongnu, Wiman chose to strike off on his own, traversing the Qianshan (K. Cheonsan) Mountains and arriving in the area of the Cheongcheon River. At the end of the second century BCE, Wiman came to settle in this area and there established so-called “Wiman Joseon.”

With Pyeongyang (present-day Pyeongyang in North Korea) as their base, Wiman and his descendants extended their authority not only throughout the northwestern part of the Korean Peninsula but also to the south and east, subjugating Jinbeon and Imdun, and also conquering the Eastern Okjeo located to its north. In this way, after conquering and establishing its administrative control over neighboring territories, Wiman Joseon was able to prevent the many tribes and lesser polities under its control from offering tribute to or trading with Chinese commanderies and settlements in neighboring Liaodong.

Although such an assertive posture by Wiman Joseon was certainly made possible by its own native strength, it also seems to have benefited from a close relationship with the empire of the Xiongnu, which was a powerful political power in north Asia at the time.



Ironware excavated in Yongyeon-dong, Wiwon-gun, Pyeonganbuk-do province, North Korea  
| National Museum of Korea

These ironware relics are representative of the iron culture in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula.

Wiman Joseon saw the emergence of wooden chamber tombs from pit-burial tombs, while the slender-shaped (or Korean-style) dagger culture distinct to Gojoseon was further developed. This slender-shaped dagger culture is distinguished by the slender bronze daggers, wagon accessories, and ironware that have been found in its wooden tombs.

When King Jun of Gojoseon lost his throne to Wiman he fled south down the Han River with some of his people and loyal retainers. He settled there and adopted the title of king of the Han. In Korean history, the Han dynasty commences with this King Jun.

The administrative system of Wiman Joseon is characterized by such features as all of its civilian offices carrying the name of *sang*, and military offices carrying the name general (*janggun*). Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Wiman Joseon government of office system was its incorporation of indigenously based patriarchal forces into its central bureaucracy.

The centralized monarchy of Wiman Joseon basically exercised its dominance over local society through the Daegesu or Geosu, while the position of *Sang* (chief minister) was granted to those powerful figures at the local level who were drawn into the service of the centralized monarchy. At the end of Wiman Joseon, King Ugeo (grandson of Wiman) came into conflict with a high official (*Joseonsang*) called Yeokhyeong, who then took some 2,000 families and migrated with them south to the state of Jin. At this period, such a massive migration of peoples would have been all but impossible were there were no bonds of kinship between the Yeokhyeong and the migrants.

That the ruling system of Wiman Joseon was based on the local community can be confirmed also by its strict censure of any infringement upon private property and aspects of retributive justice, as reflected in that state's "Eight Prohibitions" (*beopgeum paljo*). The extant three articles of the "Eight Prohibitions" hint at the emerging power and economic disparities in Wiman Joseon society and that slavery and the system of punishments developed with the emergence of private ownership.

If out of penury a person stole and was caught, the thief became a slave to the victim of the theft. To avoid this fate by payment of a fine, that amount was 500,000 coin (*jeon*). In the case of injuries to others, this was compensated with grain. In the end, it can be seen that the Eight Prohibitions were formulated to protect the lives and property of the Gojoseon rulers and to give these rulers arbitrary authority over the general population.

Leveraging its geographical position, Wiman Joseon was able to prevent direct trade or intercourse between the Ye to its east and the Jin to its south and Han China, and so monopolized the benefits of middleman. Naturally, based on these economic and military developments, Gojoseon came into conflict with the Han dynasty in China. An angry Emperor Wudi of Han first launched an invasion by land and sea, coming at Wiman Joseon from two sides. In the first round of fighting Gojoseon was victorious, tenaciously holding off the Han army for about a year. However, the prolonged war created internal divisions among the Wiman Joseon leadership, and the state's capital of Wanggeomseong ultimately fell in 108 BCE and with it Gojoseon was destroyed.

## Ancient Korean Society and the Lelang Commandery

### Structure and historical character of the Lelang (Nangnang) Commandery

After its destruction of Gojoseon, the Han Empire took administrative control over the former Gojoseon territory. There it established a total of four commanderies, what came to be known as the “Four Han Commanderies,” though two of these—the Zhenfan (K. Jinbeon) and Lintun (K. Imdun)—were soon abolished. The Xuantu (K. Hyeondo) Commandery fell to the rising state of Goguryeo when that latter polity expanded into the Liao River basin area. The Lelang (K. Nangnang) Commandery survived until 313, but it too was eventually absorbed by Goguryeo.

The Lelang Commandery proved a conduit for the advanced culture of China into the Korean Peninsula and it had a defining impact on the formation and development of both the Three Han confederacies and the Three Kingdoms. To the south of the Daedong River that runs through Pyeongyang, at the center of what was the Lelang Commandery, have been discovered around three thousand tomb sites. In addition, many relics from this period can be found in the Pyeongan-do and Hwanghae-do areas.

The Lelang Commandery was divided into 25 prefectures and supported a population of about 406,748, a number that gradually decreased over time. According to a *hogubu* (household registry) dating to the fourth year of the Chuyuan era of Han (45 BCE) and discovered in tomb no. 364 in Jeongbaek-dong in Pyeongyang, the

population of Nangnang at that time was approximately 280,000, divided into about 45,000 households. Among these households, 86 percent were native peoples of Gojoseon. In the region around Pyeongyang that was the heart of the Lelang Commandery, there were many native forces that had been inhabiting the area since the Gojoseon period. The Han China established the Lelang Commandery, dividing it up into administrative units of *gun* and *hyeon*, while still recognizing the local indigenous communities.

Among the residents of the Han China system in Korea, there were the “Han Chinese,” who arrived after the establishment of the Lelang Commandery, and then the “native Chinese ethnics,” who had settled in the area during the time of Gojoseon prior to the establishment of the Lelang Commandery. Those migrants arriving in the Lelang Commandery from Han China played a key role in settling the peripheral northwestern region of the Korean Peninsula, and spreading there the advanced material culture of the central plains (that is, the Yellow River Valley of China). With the prolonged dominance of the Chinese administration of the region, a fusion was gradually affected between the indigenous tribal peoples of Gojoseon and the Han China interlopers.

By the late second century CE, the strength of the Lelang Commandery had weakened considerably. At this time, the Gongsun clan began to grow in power in the region of Liaodong. During the period of upheaval that characterized the end of the Later Han China (around the year 204), Gongsun Kang in Liaodong conquered the territories of the former Zhenfang (K. Jinbeon) Commandery south of Tunyou (K. Dunyu) prefecture (what is





Gold buckle excavated at Seogam-ri, Pyeongyang | National Museum of Korea  
 This is the oldest object of metalwork discovered to date on the Korean Peninsula. This artifact shows that various cultures were represented in the traditions and tastes of the indigenous people before the establishment of the Lelang Commandery.

today Hwangju in North Korea's Hwanghaebuk-do province) in the Lelang Commandery, and renamed this region the Daifang (K. Daebang) Commandery, and established it as his power base. Even as a growing Gongsun clan was styming the expansion of the Han polities of the peninsula, commanderies and districts were being established beyond the Lelang Commandery—the traditional arm of influence of the dynasties of the central Yellow River plains. These new polities would gradually increase in power. This had the effect of squeezing the Lelang Commandery from the south.

Though the Han period of dominance over this region was brief, it did manage to subjugate and control the native forces, though its control never went beyond that. The officials of the Lelang Commandery were always limited to the indirect control of the local population through the mediation of indigenous Gojoseon

ruling forces. It is thought that the primary function of the Lelang Commandery was in coordinating the dispatch of specialty products, such as tiger pelts, from the Gojoseon region to the Han China.

During the period of its existence, the Lelang Commandery, rather than being a “Chinese colony,” served more as a Chinese base for relaying trade between the territory of Gojoseon and the Chinese mainland. Therefore, the Lelang Commandery, though once the locus of Chinese power, must also be understood as a part of Korean history.

### The formation of early Korean states

After the fall of the first Korean state of Gojoseon to Han China, a strong political entity did not appear on the Korean Peninsula or Manchuria for some time. In this period (around the third century CE), according to the description of historical conditions on the Korean Peninsula as described in the “Record of the Eastern Barbarians” (“Dongyi zhuan”) of the “Book of Wei” (“Weishu”) in the *Sanguozhi* (Chinese Record of the Three Kingdoms), the primary Korean political groupings were the Buyeo, Goguryeo, the Eastern Okjeo, the Ye, and the Han.

According to the aforementioned “Record of the Eastern Barbarians” of the *Sanguozhi* (Chinese Record of the Three Kingdoms), the state of Buyeo arose in the region of Manchuria at an early date, and the state of Goguryeo then emerged from the collapse of Buyeo. Further, it records that in the later stages of Gojoseon, the Okjeo and Dongye (or Eastern Ye) polities emerged in the eastern coastal regions of

the peninsula. In middle and high school Korean history textbooks and general histories of Korea, this period is often referred to as the “early confederated kingdoms period” or “proto-state period.” Among these many early polities, Gojoseon was the first. Following this came the emergence of the Buyeo-Goguryeo state. Notable in the southern region of the peninsula, among the lesser chieftains that emerged from out of the Three Han (Samhan), Baekje and Saro would develop into the kingdoms of Baekje and Silla, respectively.

These early states enlarged their territories through campaigns of conquest, establishing political structures to govern their enlarged holdings. In these early states as well, power came to be centralized in a monarchy and administrative systems were set up. Though these early polities began as largely classless confederated chieftains, as their territories expanded, kingly power increased and administration became more systemized.

The governmental systems and state functions of the early ancient states of the peninsula seem to have been largely similar among the three early states of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. However, between the earliest society of Gojoseon and the social character of the Three Kingdoms there was a large gap. As for Buyeo, though this state belongs among the early states, its history stretched back more than 700 years so it is problematic to describe as one of the proto-Three Kingdoms.

Until its destruction at the hands of King Gwanggaeto of Goguryeo, the Buyeo state preserved its administrative system and functioned as an ancient state to the north of the Three Kingdoms. Considering the Chinese history *Weilüe* (Brief History of Wei; ca. 250 CE) described Buyeo as “a wealthy state that has never once

seen destruction since its founding,” one can surmise that as late as the late 2nd-early 3rd century it remained a formidable power. But by the end of the 4th century, Buyeo territories had fallen to the conquest of King Gwanggaeto and were under the control of Goguryeo. Following this, the power of the Buyeo monarchy rapidly weakened, and though it maintained its power until the end of the 5th century, ultimately in 494 the Buyeo king and royal family were exiled to Goguryeo, and the final vestiges of Buyeo power were destroyed. One should mention that in the case of Buyeo, which existed for such an extended period of time alongside the Three Kingdoms, there were significant social differences between it and the early states of the peninsula.

From the first century BCE the three kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla, from their position on the periphery of Gojoseon society, resisted the direct and indirect domination of the Chinese Commanderies, while at the same time being influenced by the advanced Chinese culture they offered. It is also necessary to understand the period of the Three Kingdoms as an extension of Buyeo-Three Han society. For instance, in the case of Goguryeo, the forces represented by Jumong (later King Dongmyeong, the founding monarch of Goguryeo) broke away after a power struggle among the ruling groups of Buyeo to establish a new state. In the case of Silla and Baekje, in the petty states represented by Baekje and Saro, power became centralized and they then absorbed other polities migrating from the periphery to form the states of Baekje and Silla, respectively.

## BCE 57~562

- BCE 57  
Silla is founded
- BCE 37  
Goguryeo is founded
- BCE 18  
Baekje is founded
- 42  
Gaya is founded
- 313  
Goguryeo destroys Lelang commandery
- 427  
Goguryeo transfers its capital from Gungnaeseong to Pyeongyang
- 433  
Alliance is formed between Silla and Baekje
- 475  
Goguryeo succeeds in capturing Hanseong, the capital of Baekje, and Baekje transfers its capital to Ungjin
- 494  
Buyeo is absorbed by Goguryeo
- 538  
Baekje transfers its capital to Sabi
- 552  
Baekje disseminates Buddhism to Japan
- 553  
Silla captures the region around the Han River
- 562  
Silla conqueres Gaya

## Chapter 2

# THE FOUNDATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

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Jeon Deog-jae

translated by Daniel Kane

## Establishment and Expansion of the Three Kingdoms

### Foundation and growth of Goguryeo

In the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, there appeared along the middle reaches of the Hun River in Huanren and Amnok(Ch. Yalu) River, Liaoning province, China, small political groupings called “Na”. Around 75 BCE, Goguryeo people, following their successful attacks on the Chinese Xuantu (K. Hyeondo) Commandery, formed a coalition state they named Goguryeo, which was centered on the Sono (Biryuna) polity group.

Sometime after this, Jumong, an emigrant from the state of Buyeo, established his power base at Jolbon (corresponding to Huanren in what is today Liaoning, China), centered on the Gyeru polity group. Then around 37 BCE Jumong vanquished the Sono polity group and established the kingdom of Goguryeo. It is the *Samguk sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms; 1145) that records Jumong established the kingdom of Goguryeo at this date of 37 BCE.

Around the first century CE, King Taejo of Goguryeo conquered the Okjeo polity along the peninsula’s eastern coast and subjugated the surrounding petty states. In addition, having proved himself victorious in his attacks on both the Chinese Liaodong and Xuantu Commanderies, he then seems to have moved his capital to Gungnaeseong in what is today Ji’an, Jilin province, China. As a result of this policy of foreign conquest during the era of King Taejo, and the resulting acquisition of prisoners of war and looted materials as well as increase in tribute given by local subordinates, the

power of Goguryeo grew greatly.

In the 3rd century, during the reign of Goguryeo’s King Sansang, the monarchy was changed from a fraternal system of succession to that of father-to-son, and the kingdom was further strengthened. By about the 4th century, Goguryeo had developed into an ancient state, the central power in a federated kingdom of five polity groups, or 5 *bu*, to include Gyerubu and Biryunabu.

In the 240s, Goguryeo went through a period of crisis when it was attacked by General Guanqiu Jian of the Wei kingdom, but quickly regained its strength. In the 4th century, when China’s Western Jin dynasty became preoccupied by internal struggles for succession as well as invasions by the five barbarian tribes (the Xiongnu, Xianbei, Jie, Di, and Qiang), King Micheon of Goguryeo in 313 seized the opportunity to annex the Lelang Commandery around modern Pyeongyang, and the following year did the same to the Daifang Commandery located in present-day Hwanghae-do. Goguryeo then made plans to advance into Liaodong.

### Establishment and growth of Baekje, Silla, and Gaya

By the mid-3rd century CE, the “Three Han” confederated states of Mahan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan comprised more than 70 lesser polities that together spanned the middle and southern regions of the Korean Peninsula. In this situation, King Jin of the polity of Mokji (located in the area of today’s Chungcheongnam-do province), which led the Mahan confederation, seems to have communicated with the Chinese kingdoms on behalf of the Three Han confedera-

tions. Around the beginning of the Common Era, descent groups of Baekje and Goguryeo came to settle in the Han River basin and there founded Baekje. For a period Baekje was under the control of Mokji before expanding its own power considerably during the reign of its King Goi in the mid-to-late 3rd century.

King Goi was able to annex the polity of Mokji and to occupy the central region of the peninsula, making Baekje the representative power of the Mahan confederation. And when Wei's General Guanqiu Jian attacked Goguryeo in concert with the governors of the Lelang and Daifang Commanderies, King Goi seized the opportunity and had his Commanding General Jin Chung attack and absorb some of the peripheral regions of the Lelang Commandery. The result of such an active policy of conquest by King Goi was the expansion of Baekje territory northward to the Pae River (today's Yeseong River in North Korea), south as far as the Ung River (today's Anseong River in Gyeonggi-do, South Korea), west to the Yellow Sea and east to Juyang (today's Chuncheon city in Gangwon-do, South Korea). In order to effectively govern such an enlarged domain and its populace, King Goi established a system of official ranks centered on that of "minister" (*jawapyeong*), with an attendant color scheme for official dress based on one's rank.

After the fall of Gojoseon, refugees from that state had settled in the area of present-day Gyeongju and around the dawn of the Common Era established the polity of Saro (later Silla). In its early period, the power of the Silla king was weak, with the Bak, Seok, and Kim clans occupying the throne on a rotational basis. Though these clans intermarried, they sometimes competed for the kingship. In

the second half of the third century, the Silla king, representing the Jinhan confederacy, managed relations with the Chinese Western Jin dynasty, indicative of the fact that Silla authority had grown sufficiently by this time to make it representative of the Jinhan.

It was in the late 4th century, during the reign of its King Namul, that Silla grew into a centralized state. It was during this time that Silla monarchs adopted the title of "king" from the former *maripgan* (meaning essentially "great chieftain"), and the Kim clan came to monopolize the throne. Externally, with the assistance of Goguryeo, Silla dispatched an emissary to the Former Qin in China informing that state of its existence, and then with the assistance of some fifty-thousand troops dispatched from Goguryeo's King Gwanggaeto, Silla was able to fend off an invasion by troops from Wa (Japan).

For a period, Silla fell under the powerful influence of neighboring Goguryeo, but in the process it acquired the products of a more advanced civilization leading to a breakthrough in its own development and its emergence as a centralized kingdom by the early 6th century.

Around the time Baekje and Silla were established, the polity of Gaya, around what is today Gimhae in the Nakdong River basin, emerged as the representative power of the Gaya confederation. Gaya (also known as Geumgwan) led the Gaya confederation for some time, going into eclipse following an invasion by Goguryeo forces in 400. In the 5th century, Daegaya, centered around what is Goryeong, emerged to take the place of Geumgwan (or Geumgwan Gaya) as leader of the Gaya confederation, which was ultimately incorporated by Silla in 562.

## Expansion of Baekje and Goguryeo

Amidst the turmoil and confusion that characterized the region in the 4th century, Goguryeo was able to annex the Lelang and Daifang Commanderies, but its plans to advance into Liaodong were stymied by the Former Yan, a Xianbei state established by the Murong clan. With this check, Goguryeo turned its sights south and sought to advance toward Baekje. Meanwhile Baekje's King Geunchogo (r. 346–375) actively established diplomatic relations with Gaya, the Wa of Japan, Silla, and the Eastern Jin in southern China, and prepared for the Goguryeo onslaught. When Goguryeo attacked Chiyang Fortress (in today's Bacheon, Hwanghaenam-do, North Korea) in 369, Baekje fended it off and in its turn attacked Goguryeo's Pyeongyang in 371, winning a great victory. In the aftermath of the battle of Pyeongyang, Goguryeo curtailed its outward expansion, instead concentrating on putting its own house in order through such things as accepting the religion of Buddhism from the state of Former Qin and proclaiming a code of administrative law.

It was during the reign of its King Gwanggaeto (r. 391–413) that Goguryeo once more took up an active policy of foreign conquest. After assuming the throne King Gwanggaeto launched numerous attacks against Baekje, and after putting extreme pressure on the Baekje capital of Hanseong (modern Seoul), in 396 he obtained the submission of Baekje's King Asin along with some 700 villages and 58 fortresses north of the Han River.

After King Gwanggaeto ascended the throne of Goguryeo, Silla's King Namul personally acknowledged Silla to be a client state of Goguryeo, and sent Silseong, son of the *ichan* (a high-ranking offi-



Map of the development of the Three Kingdoms  
Growth of Baekje in the 4<sup>th</sup> century

cial title of Silla) Kim Daeseoji to Goguryeo as a hostage. And when in the year 399, Wa from Japan launched raids against Silla's coast, Silla called upon Goguryeo for assistance. In response, the next year, King Gwanggaeto dispatched 50,000 troops to Silla, defeating the Wa forces and advancing all the way to Gimhae in the state of Geumgwan (or Geumgwan Gaya).

After 396, when the Later Yan fell into turmoil due to succession struggles, King Gwanggaeto attacked that state and occupied the Liaodong region. He then went on to subjugate in succession

the Khitan to the northwest, the Sushen that occupied the entire Maritime region of Siberia, and Eastern Buyeo in the Tumen River basin. During his reign King Gwanggaeto pushed the borders of Goguryeo outward, greatly expanding the territory of that state. Thus did the people of Goguryeo give him the name of Gwanggaeto, meaning “expander and opener of lands.”

### Goguryeo’s southward push and the Baekje-Silla response

In the 5th century, the Northern Wei established by the Xianbei tribe unified North China in 439, while the Song destroyed the Eastern Jin and occupied South China in 420. In South China, the Song was succeeded by the Qi, Liang, and Chen dynasties. Until the Sui unified China in 589, this period of confrontation between the Northern Wei in the north of China and by turns the Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen in the south is called the “Northern and Southern dynasties period.”

In the Northern and Southern dynasties period the Northern Wei was dominant. However, the Rouran Khaganate founded by northern nomadic people and the state of Tuyuhun established by the Xianbei on the Tibetan Plateau together were able to keep the Northern Wei in check and prevent its southward expansion. With the division of China during this period, Goguryeo also obtained a preponderant position on the international stage. During the Northern and Southern dynasties period, the Rouran, Tuyuhun, and Goguryeo all maintained a vigorous and formal exchange in tribute and investiture with the Chinese dynasties. As a result, the

advanced culture of China diffused widely among peripheral states, and a common East Asian cultural sphere became more definitively established.

With the growth in power of the Northern Wei dynasty in northern China, in 427 Goguryeo’s King Jangsu decided to transfer his capital from Gungnaeseong to Pyeongyang, which was more easily defensible in the event of a Northern Wei attack. Following this, Goguryeo began its southern push in earnest, and in response Baekje and Silla cemented an alliance against Goguryeo in 433. After the Baekje capital of Hanseong fell to Goguryeo’s attack, Baekje’s King Munju moved his capital to Ungjin (today’s Gongju in Chungcheongnam-do) in 475. Following this, Goguryeo continued its southern advance, eventually seizing more than two thirds of the Korean Peninsula. By 494, Goguryeo had completed its annexation of the Buyeo state and attained the apex of its power.

### Silla’s advance to the Han River basin

In the mid-6th century, in contrast to the relative calm that characterized the international situation, on the peninsula momentous change was afoot. In 544, as Goguryeo’s King Anwon ailed, a dispute erupted over the succession to the throne. Though this was resolved, from this point onward internal conflict among the ruling elite of that state would be a chronic condition.

In 551, Silla and Baekje attacked Goguryeo, which was then wracked by internal dissensions, and occupied both the upper and lower reaches of the Han River. At this time, when the Tujue

(Turks) broke the truce and menaced Goguryeo from the northwest, Goguryeo allied with Silla and saw to its internal affairs in an attempt to avert existential crisis.

In 553, Silla's King Jinheung, now with the support of Goguryeo, seized territories of its Baekje along the lower reaches of the Han River. Against this backdrop, in 554, Baekje's King Seong made



Map of the development of the Three Kingdoms  
Growth of Silla in the 6<sup>th</sup> century



Chungju Goguryeo Stele from the 5<sup>th</sup> century(Left) | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
Monument on Bukhansan Mountain commemorating the border inspection by King Jinheung of Silla from the 6<sup>th</sup> century(Right) | National Museum of Korea

As they expanded, the Three Kingdoms erected monuments to claim territory.

common cause with Daegaya and the Wa (of Japan) and attacked Gwansan Fortress (today's Okcheon in Chungcheongbuk-do), but met with a great defeat at the hands of Silla forces, losing his life in the process. Thus was frustrated Baekje's dream of national resurgence that had been launched in 538 with the establishment of its new capital at Sabi (today's Buyeo in Chungcheongnam-do).

Following its victory at the battle of Gwansan Fortress, Silla was able to leverage its new foothold in the Han River basin to establish direct relations with China in preparation for its effort to unify the Three Kingdoms. In 562, Silla conquered Daegaya, annexing all of the Gaya territory, and advanced into the Hamgyeong region. Through the active conquests by its King Jinheung (r. 540–576),



Silla managed to triple its territory. In the 7th century, when a Goguryeo-Baekje alliance began to press upon Silla, Silla responded by reaching out first to the Sui and then Tang dynasty of China.

## Administrative Systems and Social Makeup of the Three Kingdoms

### Administrative systems of the early Three Kingdoms

Like Gojoseon and Buyeo, Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla have their origins as members of political confederations that included numerous other polities. Goguryeo and Baekje were each part of a confederated state made up of five *bu*, while Silla formed part of a confederated state of six *bu*. In the early Three Kingdoms period, it was the leader of the most powerful *bu* in each of these confederations that emerged as king. In addition, the rulers of each member *bu* had some authority over the king while maintaining sovereignty over their own territory and subjects. Because this system of *bu*—be it five or six—played such a critical role in state operations during the early Three Kingdom period, this administrative system is referred to as the “*bu* administrative system” (*bucheje*).

In the early days of the Three Kingdoms, the weakness of kingly authority was such that the monarch could not rule all five or six *bu* directly. Rather, the important work of the kingdom was dealt with in deliberative bodies made up of the king and nobility representing the various *bu*. As a result, the conference system developed in the early Three Kingdoms period. The early Goguryeo council system

was called the Jega Council. These early councils of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla later evolved into such institutions as the Daero Council, Jeongsaam Council, and Hwabaek Council.

### Maintenance of centralized governance

In Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla this so-called *bu* administrative system was succeeded by a centralized state apparatus in the 4th, late 5th, and early 6th century, respectively. In establishing this centralized authority, all of the Three Kingdoms had to absorb the various *bu* rulers to make possible this new form of government. In Goguryeo and Baekje a new system of official ranks was established, centered on such offices as the *saja* and *hyeong* in Goguryeo and *sol* and *deok* in Baekje. Silla, meanwhile, established a system of 17 ranks, beginning with *ibeolchan* and *ichan*, for the ruling elites of the six districts of the royal capital, while granting separate ranks, such as *sulgan* and *gogan*, to the ruling class outside the capital.

In Goguryeo, five officials, led by the *Daedaero*, were appointed to sit in on the *Daero* Council to deal with important affairs of state. The *Daedaero* had a term of three years, during which time he led the *Daero* Council and managed the overall state administration. In Baekje, by the Sabi period (that is, after the mid-6th century when Baekje transferred its capital to Sabi), central administrative tasks were divided among 6 *jawpyeong* (ministries) and 22 *bu* (departments). In the first half of the 6th century, during the reign of its King Beopheung, Silla established the office of *sangdaedeung* to manage affairs of state. Then, in the mid-7th century, during

the reign of King Jindeok, the *jipsabu*, along with numerous other government offices, were established to manage the administrative affairs of a growing Silla state.

All of the Three Kingdoms worked to formalize and improve regional administrative functions as they strengthened central authority. In the late 3rd century, Goguryeo dispatched officials such as the *susa* or *jae* to manage regional administration, but from the 6th century, these responsibilities were assigned to offices such as the *yoksal* and *cheoryeo geunji*. For administrative purposes, Baekje initially divided its territory into 22 districts called *damno*, but by the Sabi period, the kingdom was divided administratively into 5 *bang*, with each of these subdivided into counties (*gun*) and walled towns (*seong*). These units were administered by such offices as the *bangnyeong* (governor of a *bang*) and county chief (*gunjang*). As for Silla, it divided its territory administratively into provinces (*ju*), followed by counties (*gun*), and then villages (*chon*) or walled towns (*seong*), which were administered by such offices as the *gunju*, *dangju*, and *dosa*, dispatched by the central government.

### Law codes and systems of social stratification

All of the Three Kingdoms had centralized ruling regimes, and to maintain administrative order and structure for such rule they instituted administrative codes of law. Goguryeo established its law code in 373, during the reign of King Sosurim, while Baekje seems to have established and promulgated its code of law sometime between the late 4th and late 5th century. Silla established its code of law in 520,

during the reign of King Beopheung, and later established the left and right *ibangbu* (akin to a ministry of justice) as the administrative offices responsible for the law code's implementation.

A law code consists of laws prescribing punishments as well as the ordinances and regulations necessary for the administrative functioning of the state. Chinese historiographical works detail the strict law code of Goguryeo, wherein traitors or those who attempted to foment revolt were put to death and their surviving family members made slaves. It is further described how the enemies of Goguryeo who surrendered or were captured in battle were also put to death, and those who stole had to pay back an amount ten times the value of the stolen property. Baekje and Silla enacted laws similar to those of Goguryeo.

Major statutes of these law codes included regulations on the attire of officials. In Silla, the official robes of those with rank *daeachan* to *taedae gakkan* were purple, while ranks *geupchan* to *achan* wore scarlet, *daenama* and *nama* wore blue, and those of rank *daesa* or below wore yellow. Baekje and Goguryeo also regulated official attire and headgear according to rank.

In the process of establishing a centralized ruling apparatus, all of the Three Kingdoms created a stratified ruling class. The representative example of such a system of stratification is Silla's so-called bone-rank system (*golpumje*). The bone-rank system comprised the *seonggol* (or sacred bone) at the top, followed by the *jingol* (or true bone), and then the head-ranks six, five, and four. The Silla royal family belonged to either the *seonggol* or *jingol* class, while the ruling class of the capital's six districts were of head-rank six or below. By

the mid-7th century, the size of one's house and carriage, as well as one's clothing and even the utensils one was permitted to use, were determined by one's "bone status." In Goguryeo and Baekje, as well, limitations were placed on one's potential for official advancement based on lineage, reflecting the existence in those states of status systems analogous to the bone-rank system of Silla.

### Life of the nobility and peasantry

Members of the ruling aristocracy of the Three Kingdoms period were granted rank and office according to their social status and received their official emolument from the state. For Silla specifically, aristocratic officials were paid in the form of a stipend village (*nogeup*), that is, a piece of land granted to an official while he was in office that came with the right to tax the produce of that land in lieu of an official emolument. Members of the royal family and high nobility, or in some case those who had performed a notably meritorious service, could also be granted so-called salary land (*si-geup*) or landed estates (*jeonjang*)—which unlike *nogeup* could be held in perpetuity—or slaves. In addition, nobles often possessed large-scale landed estates and slave households inherited from their ancestors, and thus were able to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. In the capital cities of the Three Kingdoms, markets were established where the nobility could also procure goods.

A large proportion of the commoner class was composed of peasant farmers. A great many of these peasants owned the small plots that they tilled, and they were subject to taxation and corvee

and military duties imposed by the state. In Goguryeo, a tax of five rolls of cloth (*be*) and five *seok* of grain was uniformly imposed on each household, while a differential rate of grain tax (*jo*) was also imposed based on a household's relative wealth. This grain was then used as a source for relief loans (*jindaes*). Silla and Baekje implemented taxation systems similar to that of Goguryeo. In addition, in the Three Kingdoms, contributions of tribute goods (*gongbu*) were imposed on each village or administrative unit, and men aged 15 or older were liable for corvee duty to construct such things as fortresses or reservoirs as well as to perform three years of military duty.

At the bottom of the social ladder, slaves (*nobi*) in this period were subjected to toilsome labor, either as private or government property. In the early Three Kingdoms period, slaves derived largely from either prisoners of war or convicted criminals, but as the societies of the Three Kingdoms grew in complexity, an increasing number of people were pushed into slavery due to economic hardship.

In order to reduce the proliferation of slavery, when farmers suffered from flood or drought, the state distributed or lent grain to the most impoverished. Notable in this respect is the relief loan law (*jindaebeop*) of Goguryeo, instituted under King Gogukcheon in the latter half of the 2nd century. In addition, not only were farmers supplied with iron farming implements and encouraged to use ox-driven plows, the state also promoted the cultivation of wasteland and the expansion of arable land, as well as the construction and maintenance of reservoirs in order to alleviate the damages of flood and drought.

## Culture and Religion of the Three Kingdoms

### Tombs of the Three Kingdoms

In its early period Goguryeo constructed stone-mound tombs, gradually shifting toward the practice of stone-chamber tombs. Over 12,000 examples of stone-mound tombs—made as the name implies by the piling of stones—can still be found in Ji’an county of China’s Jilin province, including the renowned Tomb of the General, Tomb of a Thousand Years, and Tomb of the Great King. The stone-chamber tomb with tunneled entrance is constructed by piling cut stone to create a burial chamber and then covering it entirely with packed dirt to form a tomb mound. The burial chamber’s interior walls and ceiling are painted with murals depicting scenes from the daily lives of the Goguryeo people as well as of the afterlife.



Seoul Seokchon-dong stone-mound tombs | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
This is a stone-mound tomb from the early Baekje period, bearing similarities to those of Goguryeo.

Baekje, like early Goguryeo, created stone-mound tombs, the partial remains of which can still be found in the Seokchon-dong neighborhood of Seoul. This lends support to the account that Baekje’s founders originated from Goguryeo.

Following the Baekje transfer of the capital to Ungjin (modern Gongju) in the late 5th century, the construction of shaft chamber tombs using bricks became popular. The brick tomb of King Muryeong (r. 501–523), whose form was influenced by the styles of the Liang kingdom of China, has been discovered in complete form. After the transfer of the Baekje capital to Sabi (modern Buyeo) in 538, stone-chamber tombs once more came into wide prominence, while there was also an increase in cremation following Buddhist rituals. In the shaft stone-chamber royal tombs of Baekje found in Gongju’s Songsan-ri and Buyeo’s Neungsan-ri have been discovered mural paintings depicting the symbolic creatures of the four directions (*sasindo*).

Burial practices in Silla and Gaya before the middle of the 4th century were characterized by the use of chamber tombs or wooden chamber tombs. From the latter 4th century, wooden chamber tombs with stone mounds and shaft stone chamber tombs made their appearance, however, the wooden chamber tomb with stone mound is found only in the area of Gyeongju, the Silla capital. In this type of tomb construction, large stones would be piled over the coffin chamber and then earth packed on top of this, a process that ensured grave robbing would be difficult and contributed to the preservation of such tombs in their original state. In such tombs have been unearthed gold and silver ornaments, to include golden



The brick tomb of King Muryeong of Baekje | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
The tomb of King Muryeong was built with bricks after the Chinese style. It is located in Gongju-si, Chungcheongnam-do.

crowns.

For burials in the Silla and Gaya territories beyond Gyeongju, a large pit was dug at the foot of a mountain, and a stone-lined chamber tomb built within. The large-scale shaft stone chamber tombs scattered about the Jisandong tomb site in Goryeong, comprising the tombs of members of the Daegaya ruling class and dating from after the 5th century, are the largest of all the known Gaya tombs, and from them have been excavated some of the finest tomb relics of Korea, to include a gilded bronze crown.

## Reception of Buddhism and Daoism

Prior to the acceptance of Buddhism, shamanism held great sway over ancient peoples of the peninsula. Much faith was placed in the magic powers of the shaman, who mediated between gods and humans. What is more, the royal lineages of all Three Kingdoms claimed descent from heaven, that is, the Heavenly Spirit (*cheonsin*), and held heaven-worshipping rituals to both augment royal authority and unify the subjects of their respective states.

In Goguryeo, every year in the tenth month the heaven-worshipping rite called Dongmaeng was held, during which the myth of Jumong (the legendary founder of Goguryeo) was reenacted, serving to both augment the authority of the Goguryeo king and



Gilt-bronze standing Buddha with the inscription, "Yeonga Seven year"  
| National Museum of Korea  
This statue was cast in Goguryeo in 539 CE.

strengthen ties of kinship between the state's five *bu*. In Baekje and Silla as well, through sacrificial rites performed for the *sijo* (state founder or original ancestor)—who was believed to be descended from heavenly beings—the integration of the five or six *bu*, respectively, was forged.

As the Three Kingdoms developed into centralized states a new ideology was needed to spiritually unite the general populace. Further, as the local village social structure fell apart and as the communal order collapsed to be replaced by more individual-centered modes of life, a new advanced religion was sought. It was in the context of such social imperatives that Buddhism was accepted.

Goguryeo accepted Buddhism in 372, during the reign of its King Sosurim, via the Former Qin, while Baekje accepted it in 384, in the reign of King Chimryu, from a Buddhist monk named Malananda of the Eastern Jin. In both cases, Buddhism was accepted without great social or political friction, aided by the active support of the royal families of both states. In the 5th century, the monk Mukhoja of Goguryeo conveyed Buddhism to Silla during the reign of Silla's King Nulji, but it was met by the active hostility of that state's aristocratic classes and was at first rejected. It was only in the 14th year of Silla's King Beopheung (528), that Buddhism was finally recognized after the martyrdom of Ichadon.

In Goguryeo, from its reception Buddhism was closely tied to the royal family, and therefore state Buddhism became prominent. This tendency towards a state Buddhism was even more pronounced in Silla. King Jinheung considered himself a so-called Wheel-Turning Sage King (*jeollyun seongwang*, or a *cakravarti* king) who would

unify and govern the entire world under the dharma, or Buddhist Law. King Jinpyeong posited that “the king is Buddha,” thus emphasizing the sacred nature of kingly power in Silla.

On the other hand, in the period of the Three Kingdoms, the belief in reincarnation and karma, which emphasize notions of “merit and fate” and “encouraging virtue and punishing evil” became prevalent. Such beliefs contributed to the cultivation of individual values and ethics in the process of shifting people's driving concern from the communal to the pursuit of selfhood.

In the tomb murals of Goguryeo, painted scenes in burial chambers of Daoist immortals (*sinseon*) and the symbolic creatures of the four directions—blue dragon, white tiger, black tortoise, and vermillion phoenix—indicate that Daoist beliefs had been introduced to that state from an early date. In the waning years of Goguryeo, the strongman-turned-ruler Yeon Gaesomun promoted a policy of



Great Gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje and musician | Buyeo National Museum  
The musician atop the gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje holds a type of lute, giving us insight into the types of instruments played during the Three Kingdoms period.

suppressing Buddhism and promoting Daoism. In Baekje as well, Daoist ideas based on the idea of “eternal youth and long life” (*bullo jangsaeng*) were prevalent, and the gilt bronze incense burner excavated at a former temple site in Buyeo (the former Baekje capital of Sabi), which is replete with Daoist symbolism, reveals how Daoist ideas were accepted alongside Buddhism. Daoism of the Three Kingdoms period was a fusion of notions on the worship of rivers and mountains and Daoist immortals and found widest acceptance among the ruling class.

### Acceptance of Confucianism and the compilation of official histories

The Three Kingdoms embraced Confucianism as a governing ideology based on the Chinese written language (*hanja*). In 372 (the second year of King Sosurim), Goguryeo established a National Confucian Academy (Taehak), which taught Confucianism to the sons of the nobility, and also set up private schools (*gyeongdang*) in the provinces where the sons of commoners read the Confucian classics and practiced archery. In Baekje, from early on that state designated erudites of Chinese learning (*hanhak*) as “savants of the Five Classics” (*ogyeong baksa*), and had them instruct the sons of the ruling nobility at that state’s own Confucian Academy. The text of the memorial stele of King Jinheung of Silla (r. 540–576) cites passages from the Book of Documents (*Seogyeong*, or *Shujing* in Chinese) and the Analects of Confucius (*Noneo*, or *Lunyu* in Chinese), while the Oath Stone of the Imsin Year (613) records an

oath among youths to dedicate themselves diligently to the reading and study of the Classics and Confucian ethics, all of which reveals that Confucianism had made significant inroads into Silla society before that state unified the peninsula in the mid-7th century.

Each of the Three States undertook the compilation of official histories based on Confucian governing principles. Goguryeo compiled the *Yugi* in the late 4th century during the reign of its King Sosurim, while in the year 600 (11th year of King Yeongyang) Yi Munjin published a condensed version of this as the *Sinjip* in five volumes. In Baekje, the scholar Goheung compiled a work titled *Seogi* during the reign of King Geunchogo in the late 4th century. And in Silla during the reign of King Jinheung, Geochilbu gathered a team of literary scholars to compile the *Guksa* (National History) in 545.

Isabu, a 6th-century general and politician of Silla, is said to have commented, “A country’s history is a record of the good and evil deeds of its king and his ministers for the benefit of later generations through the ages,” demonstrating that history-writing in the Three Kingdoms period was based on a ruling ideology of Confucianism. All of these historical works apparently sought to both augment the authority of the given state’s royal family and boast of that state’s preeminence. However, no histories compiled during the Three Kingdoms period have come down to us.

### Active cultural exchange

The culture of the Three Kingdoms developed through active exchanges with China and other foreign countries. On Goguryeo tomb murals can be found many gods and animals deriving from Chinese mythology, revealing Goguryeo's early embrace of Chinese culture. Around the early Baekje royal capital of Pungnap-toseong (in today's Seoul), have been found large quantities of earthenware from the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties of China, and the brick tombs found in Baekje after the transfer of the capital to Ungjin (modern Gongju) owe much to the influence of the Liang state of China's Southern Dynasties.

Besides just elements of Chinese culture, following the introduction of Buddhism to the peninsula other cultural elements from what was called the "Western Regions" (*seoyeok*)—what we would refer to today as Xinjiang province in China or Central Asia—also became widely disseminated in the Three Kingdoms. The song and dance native to these Western Regions became popular in Goguryeo, and musical instruments from that region, such as the mandolin and pipe, came to be part of the musical repertoire of the Three Kingdoms. Goguryeo in particular accepted musical elements of both China and the Western Regions and created a unique Goguryeo-style music that it then passed back to China and on to Japan. In Sui and Tang China, various so-called "arts of Goryeo" (*Gaoli ji*) were performed. And in Japan, the music of Goguryeo, called "*Kōrai gaku*", or Goryeo music, became a mainstay of ancient music alongside Chinese-style music, termed "*Tōgaku*", or Tang music.



Glass cup from Cheonmachong burial site in Gyeongju | Gyeongju National Museum  
This glass cup was found in Cheonmachong, a Silla burial site dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century. It shows that Silla traded with countries to the west.

Such items as glass bowls found in Silla wooden chamber tombs of the 5th and 6th centuries reveal that kingdom's active exchanges with the Western Regions. Further, among the 12 extant songs for the *gayageum* (a Korean musical instrument like a zither) composed by Ureuk (a man of Gaya and inventor of the *gayageum*), is the "Lion Dance" (*sajagi*), which seems to be a lion dance originating from the aforementioned Western Regions.



612~756

- 612  
Goguryeo repulses Sui China's invasion
- 645  
Goguryeo repulses Tang China's invasion
- 648  
Alliance is formed between Silla and Tang China
- 660  
Baekje is toppled by the Silla-Tang allied forces
- 668  
Goguryeo is toppled by the Silla-Tang allied forces
- 676  
Silla unifies the Three Kingdoms and wins the war against Tang China
- 698  
Balhae is founded by Dae Joyeong, a former general of Goguryeo
- 732  
Balhae attacks Dengzhou in Tang China
- 755  
Balhae transfers its capital to Sanggyeong

### Chapter 3

# THE WARS OF KOREAN UNIFICATION AND THE ERA OF NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN STATES

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Lim Ki-hwan

translated by Daniel Kane

## Goguryeo's Wars with Sui and Tang China

From the 5th century, a balance of power was maintained between the Northern Wei, the Southern Dynasties of China, the nomadic Rouran Khagante in the north, and Goguryeo in Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula. As a result, during this time the international order of East Asia remained relatively stable without any major geopolitical shifts.

However, at the beginning of the 6th century, internal turmoil in the Northern Wei fractured that state into the Eastern Wei and Western Wei, which became in turn the Northern Zhou and Northern Qi. The Northern Zhou went on to unify all of the northern dynasties before being overthrown by the newly established Sui dynasty. In 589, the Sui emperor Wendi conquered the state of Chen of the Southern Dynasties to reunify China. Thus, the balance of power in East Asia, so long maintained by the strongest among the Chinese states, divided into Northern and Southern Dynasties, began to shift as the Sui unified the Chinese



Mountain fortress of Goguryeo | © Northeast Asian History Foundation

Goguryeo effectively withstood invasions from the Sui and Tang Dynasties by building mountain fortresses. This picture shows the Seokdaeja Mountain Fortress in Simyang (Ch. Shenyang).

mainland. This change became especially clear when Sui adopted an expansionist foreign policy by first overthrowing the northern Göktürks.

Since the fifth century, Goguryeo had maintained diplomatic relations with the Northern Wei and Southern Dynasties of China as well as the Rouran Khaganate in the north, and in so doing both maintained the regional balance of power and preserved its own sovereignty in Northeast Asia. However, the Sui dynasty, the unifying force on the Chinese mainland, now endeavored to establish a new international order centered on China. In 590, Sui's Emperor Wendi sent diplomatic missives to Goguryeo demanding the king of Goguryeo submit as a vassal, but Goguryeo refused to yield.

Tensions between Goguryeo and the Sui then increased. In 598, King Yeongyang of Goguryeo, at the head of some ten thousand Mohe (K. Malgal) troops, attacked China's Liaoxi region in an effort to keep the Sui in check by seizing the initiative over the Khitan and Mohe inhabitants of the Liao River (Liaohe) area. An incensed Sui Wendi responded by mobilizing some 300,000 troops to conquer Goguryeo, but the imperial force was hit hard by floods and storms, and returned to China in defeat.

Soon upon his ascension in 604, the Sui emperor Yangdi made an external display of his power by defeating the Eastern Göktürks in the north and exerting control over the Tuyuhun of the Western Regions. Sui Yangdi commenced the invasion of Goguryeo in the first month of 612. The mobilization of more than one million Chinese troops for the conquest of Goguryeo was unprecedented in history.

In the face of Goguryeo resistance, the immense Sui army

crossed the Liao River and laid siege to Liaodong (K. Yodong) Fortress, the lynchpin of Goguryeo rule in Liaodong, but it took three months before it capitulated. Meanwhile, Sui naval forces launched a unilateral attack on Pyeongyang Fortress only to meet with resounding defeat. An anxious Yangdi gave his commander Yu Zhongwen a detachment of 305,000 men with orders to launch a direct attack on Pyeongyang Fortress, but the force allowed itself to be lured deeper into Goguryeo territory through the inducements of the Goguryeo general Eulji Mundeok. When the Sui army attempted to retreat from Pyeongyang Fortress it was routed by the Goguryeo army at the Salsu River (today's Cheongcheon River). Sui Yangdi had mobilized over one million soldiers for this campaign against Goguryeo, but returned to China without success.

Sui Yangdi refused to abandon his mission of chastising Goguryeo and launched two more invasions against it, but all failed. During its existence, the Sui dynasty instituted large-scale civil engineering projects, such as the digging of canals, along with forcing mobilizations for foreign conquests that involved hundreds of thousands of people. The people found their livelihoods threatened due to the collapse of their bases of production, which led to popular uprisings across the country. In response to this state of affairs, many powerful families and elites also began to abandon the Sui cause. The authority of the Sui dynasty deteriorated rapidly, and in 617 Sui Yangdi was killed in a military coup. After having healed the division of the Northern and Southern Dynasties and reunified China, the Sui dynasty collapsed in less than forty years.

From the end of the Sui until the reunification of China by the

Tang, the sinocentric East Asian international order, briefly reestablished during the Sui dynasty, fell again into eclipse. The Tang dynasty founded by Li Yuan, struggled for dominance with rival forces in all parts of China proper, and found itself under military threat from the northern Göktürks. Therefore, in the early days of its foundation, Tang took a conservative attitude to Goguryeo, in contrast to the Sui's aggressive policies, and acknowledged Goguryeo's status as a sovereign power. Since Goguryeo was also taking a moderate stance vis à vis Tang, both countries were able to coexist peacefully.

However, when Tang succeeded in reunifying China in 628, the international order of East Asia entered a new phase. At this time, the Göktürks had descended into internal strife, and Tang, fully cognizant of this, seized the opportunity to defeat the Eastern Göktürks in 629. Following this, various Göktürks military commanders swore allegiance to Tang Taizong, even giving Taizong the title, "Tengrik Khan" (Khan of Heaven), that is, the supreme ruler of the Göktürks. Tang Taizong styled himself the "Imperial Khan of Heaven," a way of claiming to be both the emperor of the central plains (that is, China) and the supreme ruler of nomadic world beyond.

Having defeated the Göktürks, its primary northern threat, Tang turned west to conquer the Tuyuhun kingdom in 635 and then Gaochang in 640. Having reunified the Chinese continent, subjugated the nomadic world to the north and subdued the powers to its west, Tang now endeavored to incorporate Goguryeo to its east into the Tang orbit. It was the same foreign policy the Sui dynasty had adopted. Goguryeo broke off diplomatic relations with Tang and began constructing the so-called

Cheolli jangseong (“thousand-ri great wall”) along the Liao River in anticipation of a Tang invasion.

Even as the external threat from Tang grew, in Goguryeo in 642 the official Yeon Gaesomun seized power through a coup. Profiting from these events, Tang Taizong claimed the necessity of punishing the power hungry Yeon Gaesomun for having killed the Goguryeo king. In 645, Tang Taizong personally led a large force across the Liao River and attacked Goguryeo.

The vanguard of the invading Tang army advanced along multiple lines of attack. One force crossed the Liao River to attack Sinseong Fortress, situated in central Liaodong in Goguryeo’s northwest, while another army struck at Geonan Fortress on the Liaodong Peninsula. The naval forces of Tang did not move directly on Pyongyang, but instead attacked Bisa Fortress, located at the southern tip of the Liaodong Peninsula. This was a carefully crafted strategy that took into account the failures of the earlier campaign of Sui Yangdi. When Sui Yangdi had invaded, he had focused on Liaodong Fortress, and failed in his attack because the Liaodong Fortress benefited from the assistance of several surrounding fortresses. Thus, Tang forces attacked first other fortresses at the front of the Goguryeo defensive line, moving on Liaodong Fortress only after eliminating these other potential threats.

Despite surprise attacks by Tang forces, Goguryeo held on to Sinseong and Geonan Fortresses in central Liaodong. In the fifth month, however, Goguryeo’s Liaodong Fortress, unable to withstand the fierce Tang onslaught, finally capitulated. Though the fall of Liaodong Fortress seriously compromised Goguryeo’s defenses, Ansi, Sinseong, and Geonan Fortresses were still holding

the Goguryeo line. Soon thereafter, Tang forces attacked Ansi Fortress. For three months Ansi Fortress withstood the major Tang offensive. There can be no better evidence of Goguryeo abilities than their capacity to hold fast to even far-distant Ansi Fortress. Thus, Tang Taizong, who had gained renown for reuniting China and winning a succession of punitive expeditions, turned his armies homeward from Goguryeo without having achieved victory.

Tang, having tasted the bitterness of defeat in its first round of engagement with Goguryeo, now changed its offensive strategy. It adopted a long-term strategy that eschewed the mobilization of large-scale armies in preference for the deployment of small-scale forces to harass Goguryeo. And in this strategic reassessment, Tang could not help but take into consideration the presence on the Korean Peninsula of a friendly Silla kingdom just south of Goguryeo.

## The Silla Wars of Unification

Even as the conflict between Goguryeo and Tang lingered on, the Korean Peninsula witnessed the intensification of rivalries among the Three Kingdoms. After the ascension of its King Uija (r. 641–660), Baekje adopted a conciliatory attitude toward its former rival Goguryeo while also launching a massive offensive into Silla territory. However, this entente between Goguryeo and Baekje did not develop into an active military alliance, rather, Baekje, which bordered Goguryeo territory, attacked Silla unilaterally. In Silla, a sense of immanent crisis was growing stronger.



Tomb of King Munmu of Silla | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
King Munmu united the Three Kingdoms. After his death and according to his wishes, his body was cremated and his ashes interred on a large rock by the East Sea.

From early on Silla, who often found itself on the receiving end of aggression by Goguryeo and Baekje, made diplomatic overtures to Tang as a potential ally. During Tang Taizong's military expedition to Goguryeo in 645, Silla acceded to the Tang request to launch an attack on Goguryeo's southern flank with 30,000 troops, but Baekje counterattacked against Silla and was able to drive back their offensive. As a result, Tang chose Silla instead of Baekje as its ally on the Korean Peninsula.

In 648, the influential Silla official Kim Chunchu undertook a mission to Tang where he actively solicited Tang military assistance to punish Baekje. Tang Taizong, recognizing Silla's strategic position to the rear of Goguryeo, concluded a military alliance with Silla to punish both Goguryeo and Baekje. To solidify this new alliance, Silla now actively pursued a pro-Tang policy. Kim Chunchu requested Tang official uniforms (for use in Silla) and even left his own son to join the "Royal guards" (*sukwi*) at

the Tang court (essentially a hostage). Further, by abandoning its indigenous year designator and adopting the Tang year name, Silla signaled its increasingly pro-Tang foreign policy.

The new Silla-Tang coalition opted to make Baekje its first priority, and launched a vigorous attack on that state in 660. In the latter half of the reign of its King Uija (r. 641–660) Baekje had become embroiled in internal conflict among its nobility and thus was politically divided at the time of the Silla-Tang attack. Mustering little resistance, it easily succumbed to the surprise offensive of the Silla-Tang coalition.

Though the Baekje dynasty was destroyed, a Baekje revival movement led by remnants of that state continued the struggle in various locales. Tang now revealed its intentions to seize the



Five-story stone pagoda at Jeongnimsa Temple site | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
This pagoda was located in Sabi [today's Buyeo], the capital of late Baekje. It is one of a very small number of extant Buddhist artifacts from Baekje due to the destruction of that kingdom by the combined forces of Silla and Tang China.

former Baekje territories for itself, breaking its earlier promise with Silla. Over the former Baekje domains, Tang installed the Ungjin Commandery (Ch. Xiongjin dudufu), and even moved to subjugate Silla territory by formally reconstituting that state's area as the Great Gyerim Commandery (Ch. Jilin dadudufu). Silla was unable to suppress the Baekje revival movement and was challenged in maintaining control over the Baekje region—the original objective of its campaign. The Tang intention to now seize that territory for itself only worsened the predicament. However, as long as Goguryeo survived, so too did the Tang-Silla alliance.

The Silla-Tang coalition, which had destroyed Baekje, now commenced its attack on Goguryeo. Although Goguryeo had consistently fended off the massive invasions of Tang armies coming from both the north and south, the military situation was now turning against Goguryeo. When the Goguryeo ruler Yeon Gaesomun died in 666, a power struggle ensued among his sons. Yeon's eldest son, Namsaeng, driven out by his younger siblings, surrendered to Tang, while the country's nobility and local forces, dissatisfied with the Yeon Gaesomun regime, gradually began to defect. Tang, seizing upon the opportunity such internal conflict presented, once more launched a massive attack on Goguryeo in 667. The disintegration of its ruling authority was a fatal blow to Goguryeo, and with the fall of Pyeongyang in 668 Goguryeo perished.

It is not surprising that Silla and Tang, who cooperated in their coalition to conquer Baekje and Goguryeo, came into conflict once the common enemy disappeared with the fall of Goguryeo. Originally, Silla and Tang had come to a secret understanding

that the area south of the Daedong River was to be Silla territory, but Tang disregarded this and attempted to occupy the former Baekje territories (which were well south of the Daedong River). This led to the outbreak of war between Silla and Tang around the seventh month of 670. In 671, Silla scored decisive victories in its war with Tang and Baekje restoration elements, and seized control of the former Baekje territory in its entirety. The main battleground in Silla's struggle with Tang now shifted to the northern part of the peninsula. Silla now endeavored to check Tang power by supporting the revivalist movement of the defunct Goguryeo. After smashing the Goguryeo remnants in Liaodong and securing its control there in 671, Tang forces advanced into the Korean Peninsula to attack the Goguryeo restoration forces. The Goguryeo elements that had lost their base of operations after their defeats in the war with Tang eventually moved south to Silla, and Silla now came face to face with the Tang forces for the final showdown.

The development of the Silla-Tang war was also closely related to the changes on China's western frontier. As Tang concentrated its military strength on the Korean Peninsula from 660, the Western Regions gradually drifted from the Tang orbit, with the center of this new power being the Tibetan kingdom of Tubo. In the seventh month of 670, the military situation in the west became acute when the Tubo army dealt a serious defeat to Tang forces, and the Tang army now found itself at war in both the east and west. The Tubo alliance with the Western Turkic Khaganate (Ch. Xi tujue) and the new urgency of affairs in the western area had a major influence on Tang's managing of its war with Silla. After Silla defeated the Tang forces in a series of battles in 675 and

676 the war finally ended with Silla securing the peninsula to the south of Pyeongyang.

From the end of the 6th century, Sui-Tang emerged as a unified Chinese state, and with this East Asia began to be reorganized into a new sinocentric international order. In this process, the power of a unified Chinese empire was felt on the Korean Peninsula. As a backdrop to this were the fierce and persistent wars of rivalry between the Three Kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. As inter-Korean relations developed on the Korean Peninsula they became caught up in the larger international reordering of East Asia by the rise of the Tang and its unified empire, with the final result being the Silla-Tang military alliance and the destruction of Baekje and Goguryeo.

The war between Goguryeo and Sui-Tang may be characterized as a clash between Goguryeo as a centrifugal force and the centripetal force of a powerful unified Chinese empire seeking to subjugate the states of its periphery. The Silla-Tang war was also a conflict between Chinese forces and those of the Korean Peninsula, and in this sense may be viewed as an extension of the wars between Goguryeo and Sui-Tang. However, the consequences of the Silla-Tang war were not simply Silla driving the Tang forces from the Korean Peninsula. It was a war that gave lie to Tang's perception of itself as the "Center of All Under Heaven" by frustrating its ambitions for world domination. In this, the war forced Tang to recognize that the surrounding world was a place with which it needed to coexist rather than conquer. In fact, the founding of Balhae in Manchuria was made possible only after Silla had won its war with Tang.

However, following the destruction of Goguryeo, which had

maintained its sovereignty in Northeast Asia until the last, various dynasties and states of Northeast Asia were incorporated into a unified international order centered on China. This was not merely a political realm, but a comprehensive socio-cultural one of shared intellectual and literary traditions.

In the process of establishing a military alliance with Tang, Silla also accepted elements of Tang culture, a process distinct from its diplomatic efforts. Such receptivity was the result of Silla's will to reform its administrative system through the adoption of new cultural norms and practices. During the Unified Silla era the adoption of Chinese cultural standards accelerated. With the fall of Baekje, peninsular influences on Japan weakened, and Japan began instead to adopt cultural elements directly from Tang, which influenced such things as the establishment of the Ryōseikoku administrative structure in Japan. The state of Balhae, which was founded by Malgal tribes and elements from the defunct Goguryeo who had escaped Tang dominance, was no exception; that state's acceptance of Tang cultural elements helped establish its administrative system and led to a cultural efflorescence.

## The Flourishing of Unified Silla

From the beginning of Tang's wars with Goguryeo in 645 until the conclusion of its war with Silla in 676, the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria were a theater of war. The appearance in the Three Kingdoms region of such a mammoth external force not only changed the destiny of those Three Kingdoms but also had a con-

siderable impact on the outward perceptions of the people of those kingdoms. The war that brought together Silla and Tang in an effort to conquer Baekje and Goguryeo began as an extension of the previous punitive wars by Sui and Tang towards the kingdoms of the peninsula. However, in the course of its subsequent war with Tang, Silla, with the aim of bringing Baekje and Goguryeo loyalists to its side in the struggle, implemented policies that served somewhat to incorporate the three separate peoples, profoundly altering perceptions of the history of the Three Kingdoms and their unification.

After Silla completely incorporated the former Baekje territory and annexed portions of the former Goguryeo lands and its population, it promulgated a new system, and the transformation affected was tantamount to having a whole new dynasty. Its primary emphasis became the institutionalization of a new administrative system that would bind together the disparate territories and peoples of the former Three Kingdoms.

First, the ruling classes of Baekje and Goguryeo were granted Silla official ranks and absorbed into the ruling stratum of Silla society. Naturally, they became middling nobility, with their ranks lower than those of native Silla aristocracy, but it was nevertheless an effort to incorporate the foundations of Goguryeo and Baekje societies into the now unified state. As a central military organization, nine Oath Bannermen (*seodang*) divisions were organized, whose members derived not only from Silla but from Silla's newly conquered territories. Thus, there were 3 Oath Bannermen divisions of Silla soldiers, 3 of Goguryeo, 2 of Baekje, and 1 of Malgal tribesmen.

In order to efficiently administer a population and area that had

more than doubled, Silla implemented a system of nine provinces (*ju*) and five lesser capitals (*sogyeong*). Of the nine provinces, 3 comprised former Goguryeo territory, 3 former Baekje territory, and 3 original Silla territory (to include Gaya). This may be seen as a symbolic expression of the integration of the three kingdoms. Administratively, each province was subdivided into *gun* (counties) and *hyeon* (prefectures), with the total number of *gun-hyeon* reaching 450.

In Confucian ideology, the notion of “nine provinces” is synonymous with the entire world (All Under Heaven). The institution by Silla of this nine-province system was indicative of how that state and its peoples had adopted the concept of Confucianism and its All Under Heaven concept, with Silla at its core. The concept of “*iltong samhan*” (“three Han under one rule”), was an expression of pride



Seokgatap and Dabotap pagodas in front of Bulguksa temple | © Yonhap News



in the integration of the former three kingdoms into a unified state.

Since Gyeongju, the capital of Silla, was located in the south-eastern corner of the Korean Peninsula, Silla also set up a system of five lesser capitals. They chose to establish these five in the former territories of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Gaya. To these lesser capitals, members of the central Silla aristocracy, along with Baekje, Goguryeo, and Gaya nobility that had been integrated into the Silla state, were transferred in order to serve both administrative and cultural roles in the respective regions.

Under the *jipsabu* (Chancellery Office), the Silla central government organized 13 ministries, such as the *Wihwabu*, to share in administrative tasks. The National Confucian Academy (*Gukhak*) was established with a special emphasis on Confucian political ideology. In addition, the “three-grades reading examination” was instituted as a personnel selection system. Though the bureaucratic apparatus was set up in this way, in actuality Silla’s was a socially stratified system wherein status was determined by so-called “bone rank” (*golpum*). In this system, those from the “head ranks” (*dupum*) had ceilings placed on the rank they might attain, while only those from the “true-bone” (*jingol*) ranks were eligible for the kingship. As a political structure in which a small nobility monopolized state power, this system eventually became a constraint on the development of Unified Silla society.

Unifying the immense territories and populations of the former three kingdoms, Unified Silla amassed much economic wealth. At the same time, in incorporating the cultural traditions of Baekje and Goguryeo, Silla also expanded its own cultural base. Silla also wholeheartedly embraced cultural elements from Tang China, then



Bell of King Seongdeok of Silla | © Gyeongju National Museum

This bronze bell was cast in 771 and hung in Bongdeoksa temple. Bronze bells cast in Korea have many differences from bells cast in China or Japan. This bell is a marvel of metalwork based on remarkable casting technology.

flourishing as the international standard in East Asia, and created a golden age of resplendent cultural achievement on the peninsula. In particular, Buddhism and Buddhist temples flourished under the patronage of both the Silla royal house and aristocratic families.

The extant Buddhist cultural heritage of Unified Silla reveals the cultural achievements attained by that state. The varied examples of this heritage include Seokguram Grotto and Bulguksa Temple, as well as Buddhist statuary, pagodas, and paintings. In addition, Buddhist teachings were also developed during this period, with the Buddhist monk Wonhyo (617–686) formulating his unique doctrinal system of *hwajaeng* (“harmonizing of doctrinal disputes”), and Buddhist belief also became popularized. The Silla monk Uisang (625–702), who studied in Tang China, returned to

Silla and established the Hwaeom school (Hwaeomjong; or Flower Garland school), nurtured many Buddhist scholars, and helped spread Buddhism into the hinterland. In the latter days of Unified Silla, Seon (or Zen) Buddhism was also introduced and flourished.

## Founding and Development of Balhae

After 660, Tang began to achieve some of its key strategic objectives in Northeast Asia, such as the destruction of Goguryeo and subjugation of the various tribes of the Liaohai region, including the Khitan and Malgal. However, the cost of such long-term military campaigns in the region was that its control over areas to the north and west began to slacken. The result was that upheavals in the north and west began to once more influence events in Northeast Asia.

After Tang had destroyed Goguryeo, it forced some of that state's ruling groups to become refugees (*samin*) and resettle in China. Some of these Goguryeo remnants migrated to Yingzhou (corresponding to the current city of Chaoyang in Liaoning province, China) in Liaoxi. The Khitan and Malgal, who had been under the control of Goguryeo, also moved to Yingzhou. However, in the fifth month of 696 the Khitan leader Li Jinzhong rebelled against Tang control, an uprising soon joined by Goguryeo refugees as well as Malgal tribesmen. Escaping Yingzhou, the rebel elements crossed the Liao River and into the region of Liaodong. They defeated the pursuing Tang army and continued eastward, and in 698 the figure Dae Joyeong proclaimed the state of Balhae at Mt. Dongmo (Ch. Dongmou), at what is today the city of Dunhua in China's Jilin

province. From the time of its foundation Balhae promoted itself externally as the successor state to Goguryeo.

King Mu (r. 719–737), crowned king of Balhae in 719, adopted his own reign period called *inan* (“humane peace”) and actively expanded Balhae territory, occupying some of the former domains of Goguryeo and Buyeo. But he came into conflict with Tang over the issue of the Heishui Mohe in the north, and in 732, the Balhae general Jang Munhyu attacked Dengzhou on the Shandong Peninsula. Tang in turn enticed Silla to attack Balhae, indicating that at long last diplomatic relations between Silla and Tang had recovered, and done so in earnest.

During the reign of King Mun (r. 737–793), which succeeded that of King Mu, Balhae's administrative system was reorganized while its territory expanded north as far as the Songhua River. King Mun set up a system of centralized administration, establishing 3 chancelleries (*seong*)—namely Jeongdangseong, Seonjoseong, Jungdaeseong—and six ministries (*bu*): Chungbu (personnel), Inbu (finance), Uibu (rites), Jibu (military affairs), Yebu (punishments), and Sinbu (works). This was modeled upon Tang's own 3 *sheng* (K. *seong*), 6 *bu* government organization, though adapted to Balhae's own exigencies. The Balhae kings embraced Confucian political ideology and strengthened central kingship. The National Academy (Jujagam), a national university based on Tang's National Imperial Academy (Guozijian), was established to strengthen training in the Confucian canon and to foster men of talent. The provinces were organized into a system of 5 *gyeong* (capitals), 15 *bu* (major towns), and 62 *ju* (prefectures), with the *ju* further divided administratively into *hyeon* (districts).

King Mun also built a new capital. In Balhae's network of five

capitals, Junggyeong (lit., “central capital”), located in the state’s Hyeondeok-bu (present-day Helong city in China’s Jilin province), was the state’s first administrative capital. In 755, it was transferred to Sanggyeong (lit. “upper or primary capital”) at Yongcheon-bu (presently Yongyuan city in China’s Heilongjiang province) and then again in 785 to the Donggyeong (“lit. eastern capital”) in Yongwon-bu (present-day Hunchun city in China’s Jilin province). After King Mun’s death, in 794, the capital was moved back to Sanggyeong in Yongcheon-bu, where it remained until the fall of Balhae in 926. The process of transferring the capital between Junggyeong, Sanggyeong, Donggyeong, then back to Sanggyeong, helped to bind the ties between the Balhae state’s central administration and its provinces, and in this regard served to strengthen central authority.

Sanggyeong, Balhae’s primary capital, was that state’s true political, economic, and cultural center. In its plan and layout the walled city of Sanggyeong was modeled after the Tang capital of Chang’an (present-day Xi’an). The wall that surrounded the city



Lotus-shaped roof tile from Goguryeo(Left) | National Museum of Korea  
 Lotus-shaped roof tile from Balhae(Right) | National Museum of Korea  
 Balhae rose to power after the fall of Goguryeo. The two states shared similar cultures.

on four sides was 16 kilometers in circumference. In its sheer scale it was second in its time only to Tang’s Chang’an.

Balhae also developed a road network centered on Sanggyeong that linked its five capitals. Further, looking outward, it constructed a system of five major roadways that reveal its active engagement in foreign exchange and trade. These roads were the Silla Road (Silla-do), Yeongju (Ch. Yingzhou) Road (Yeongju-do),



Map of the Northern Southern States period

Tribute Road (Jogong-do), Khitan Road (Georan-do), and Japan Road (Ilbon-do). It was at this time that the people of Tang began to refer to Balhae as the “prosperous country east of the sea”.

Balhae’s founders included a mixture of former Goguryeo peoples and Malgal tribes, among other elements, combined with that state’s international contacts and exchanges with a variety of other states and ethnic groups, meant that Balhae culture was cosmopolitan in nature and exhibited complex and multi-cultural features. The structure, tiling patterns, and *ondol* (traditional heated flooring) features found in illustrations from the tomb of the Balhae Princess Jeongnye are an inheritance of earlier Goguryeo culture, but also reveal the embrace and development of various regional cultural influences, such as that of Tang China, the Malgal, and even distant Central Asia. The accolade “prosperous country east of the sea” is a reflection of Balhae’s diverse and colorful culture with an international character.

Baekje and Goguryeo fell in the mid-7th century, upon which Silla unified the peninsula south of the Daedong River. Afterward, in 698, the new state of Balhae was established in the former Goguryeo territory, claiming to be the successor to that fallen kingdom. Silla and Balhae were engaged in fierce rivalry for some 220 years. Balhae declared itself the successor state to Goguryeo, and the people of Silla recognized it as such. Naturally, Balhae and Silla maintained no economic, or even cordial diplomatic, relations with one another. However, Goryeo, which would unify the Later Three Kingdoms in 918, regarded Balhae as a country of a common ancestry and took an active role in welcoming the ruling classes as well as its refugee population after the fall of Balhae in the early 10th century. This period of some 220 years,

when the two kingdoms of Balhae and Unified Silla controlled a combined territory that covered the entire Korean Peninsula and into Manchuria, is referred to today as the “Era of Northern and Southern States.”

## 828~1145

- 828  
Jang Bogo establishes Cheonghaejin, the center of maritime trade in East Asia
- 900  
Later Baekje is founded
- 901  
Later Goguryeo is founded
- 918  
Goryeo is founded by Wang Geon
- 926  
Balhae is toppled by the Khitans
- 936  
Goryeo unifies Later Three Kingdoms
- 993~1019  
Invasion from the Khitans (Liao) is repulsed
- 1107  
The Jurchen are conquered and nine fortresses are built
- 1145  
History of the Three Kingdoms (*Samguk sagi*) is published

## Chapter 4

# GORYEO AND EAST ASIA

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Kim In-ho

translated by Daniel Kane

## Emergence of the Later Three Kingdoms

The situation on the Korean Peninsula was influenced by both domestic factors and the shifting international order of East Asia. Behind the emergence of the Later Three Kingdoms were growing contradictions within Silla society and the disintegration of Tang and division of China into the so-called Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. The Later Three Kingdoms emerged in the process of conflict and collaboration between the local military strongmen in each region of the Korean Peninsula.

From the 9th century, the Silla state began a descent into crisis. Since the murder of King Hyegong (r. 765–780) in the mid-8th century, disputes over succession to the Silla throne intensified. Over the subsequent 150 years, there were twenty Silla monarchs, with the average reign period but seven to eight years. These internecine struggles resulted in discord and infighting among the Silla nobility and various independent powers and had the cumulative effect of weakening Silla administrative authority. This discord and rivalry among the Silla aristocracy became increasingly severe.

In order to prevail in this political struggle, aristocrats required power, something based in both economic means and personal connections. Naturally, such economic clout was derived from landholdings, whether that be agricultural land or salary land (*sigeup*), but also from the profits of trade and commerce. Possessing such an economic power base, aristocrats could train their own administrators and raise private armies. Private armies in particular became the most important means of exerting one's power in struggles for

the Silla throne.

In the 9th century, Jang Bogo, after amassing a private fortune through profits in trade, joined in the struggle for the throne. Jang had commoner origins and as a young man went to China where he joined the ranks of the Tang military. Jang then returned to Silla to establish a maritime trading base on the island of Wando, in Jeolla-do province, and strengthening his private military power, he subdued the pirates operating in the neighboring seas. He accumulated wealth as a middleman in trade with China and Japan, and in the Silla internecine struggle helped King Sinmu (r. 839) attain the throne. Though Jang Bogo was assassinated shortly thereafter, the age of local strongmen like Jang had arrived.

Meanwhile, Silla was also experiencing social change. As already noted, Silla society had a sort of caste system based on bloodline called the bone-rank system (*golpumje*). In this, those of the middle-tier, the so-called head-rank six or below, were limited in the official grade they might attain. These “head-rank sixers” were mainly officials of middling rank, monks, and intellectuals, and they were becoming increasingly critical of such systemic constraints and of the other problems they perceived as plaguing Silla society. However, with the failure of the central government to address and solve these criticisms and complaints, demands for reform increased.

The weakening of administrative power in particular made it difficult for the Silla state to undertake the necessary functions of tax collecting, maintenance of public order, administration of justice, and public welfare. Inequalities arose between villages in terms of taxation and various other burdens, and middlemen officials began

to arbitrarily levy taxes. Thus, the economic hardships of the peasants accumulated, and the country's dispossessed population took to vagabondage, sometimes turning to brigandage. With Silla state finances slowly cut off from their tax and corvée labor base, such sources of revenue devolved to the nobles and local strongmen.

In the end, the acute crisis created by financial shortfall forced the central government to demand the payment of taxes, and the response among many of the country's peasants was rebellion. Rebellious peasants wearing red pants swept across many areas, and security became yet more tenuous. The situation became so grave that even the Silla capital of Gyeongju came under threat by the mobs.

Under such conditions, local strongmen built their own castles to defend themselves and their property against brigands and other threats. They styled themselves "castle lords" (*seongju*) or "generals" (*janggun*), and ruled over the population within their territories. In addition, these local strongmen were also in competition with rival strongmen to amass power.

These local strongmen came from a variety of backgrounds: a noble banished from central politics, a village headman (*chonju*) responsible for a local administrative area, a military commander in charge of regional defense, a merchant who had accumulated wealth through trade and other activities, and even a Buddhist monk. But among these, two figures in particular played central roles in the unfolding Later Three Kingdoms era: Gyeon Hwon, the army commander who founded Later Baekje, and the Buddhist monk Gung Ye, who established Later Goguryeo.

Gyeon Hwon, a native of Gyeongsang-do province, was a Silla



Map of the Later Three Kingdoms

commander charged with guarding the southwest coast in the country's Jeolla-do region. With Silla state authority paralyzed by peasant uprisings, Gyeon Hwon championed a Baekje revival movement in the region of Jeolla-do. In 900, Gyeon Hwon proclaimed the establishment of Later Baekje, with its capital at Jeonju. Later Baekje then pressed in upon Silla, seizing control of Jeolla-do and Chungcheong-do provinces, the area to the west of Gyeongsang-do province, the Silla heartland.

Meanwhile, Gung Ye, who lived briefly as a Buddhist monk, emerged claiming to be a scion of the Silla royal house. Gung Ye

became a follower and retainer of Yang Gil, a bandit operating out of Wonju, in Gangwon-do province. The ambitious Gung Ye soon broke away from Yang Gil to become an even more powerful regional strongman. He championed the Goguryeo revival movement and in 901 established the state of Later Goguryeo based at Songak (Gaeseong, in today's North Korea). Thus was inaugurated the period of the Later Three Kingdoms, with Gung Ye and his Later Goguryeo in control of Gangwon-do, Gyeonggi-do, Chungcheong-do, and Hwanghae-do provinces, Silla retaining control of Gyeongsang-do province, and Later Baekje controlling Jeolla-do province.

## Goryeo Reunification and the Nature of Goryeo Society

### Founding of the Goryeo dynasty and its reunification of the peninsula

Wang Geon (877–943) emerged from a clan based at Songak that had grown wealthy and powerful through trade. Legendary stories related the ancestors of Wang Geon as descendants of the Chinese Tang emperor or Dragon King of the Yellow Sea, reflecting the families ties with the sea and the China trade. Wang Geon joined the movement of Gung Ye and through his military exploits rose to become his top military commander. But Gung Ye soon began promoting himself as a divine authority, a self-professed Maitreya Buddha. In his pursuit of absolute power, he began to purge all



Map of Goryeo in the 11<sup>th</sup> century

whom he viewed as suspicious or of questionable loyalty. When Gung Ye went so far as to kill his own queen and children, opposition to him began to coalesce. At this time Gung Ye dismissed any politics of recognizing the reality of local power in order to consolidate their support and thereby stabilize central authority. As a result, Gung Ye's opponents overthrew him and established Wang Geon as king. In 918, Wang Geon declared the establishment of the state of "Goryeo," the choice of name reflecting his promotion of it as the successor state to Goguryeo.

It was Wang Geon's superior ability to coordinate political stakeholders that allowed him to maneuver into the kingship. After be-





Mireukjeon Hall and Geumsansa Temple | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
The Later Baekje king Gyeon Hwon was imprisoned in Geumsansa Temple by his son.

coming king, his first move was to attract local forces to his side. In addition, he won over Buddhist monks and Confucian intellectuals while at the same time reducing the people's tax burden. This last policy maneuver of Wang Geon was welcomed by many.

Further, with Silla, Wang Geon maintained cordial diplomatic relations, a cordiality that benefited both dynasties. Goryeo's goal of establishing its hegemony over the Korean Peninsula, and Silla's grudge with Later Baekje for that state's attack into Silla territory as far as its capital of Gyeongju, brought Goryeo and Silla together in common cause against Later Baekje. Later Baekje's Gyeon Hwon then sacked Gyeongju, murdering the Silla king. Wang Geon mobilized to counter the Later Baekje forces, but his close generals met with defeat and death on the battlefield.

However, Wang Geon later won a great military victory in the Andong region of Gyeongsang-do province. Soon afterward Later

Baekje became embroiled in a succession struggle for the throne. When Gyeon Hwon attempted to pass the throne on to his youngest son, the eldest son, Shin Geom, confined his father Gyeon Hwon to Geumsansa Temple. Gyeon Hwon managed to escape his captivity and thereafter surrendered to Goryeo. Subsequently, Silla's King Gyeongsun (r. 927–935) abdicated the throne and submitted to Goryeo.

The final military showdown in this drawn out struggle came between Goryeo's Wang Geon and Later Baekje's Shin Geom. However, as Shin Geom's father, Gyeon Hwon, had earlier surrendered to Goryeo, the struggle was effectively already over. Wang Geon finally succeeded in reunifying the Later Three Kingdoms in 936.

### Tasks facing Wang Geon and the problem of local strongmen

The primary political tasks facing Wang Geon were the stabilization of the infant dynasty and the integration of local strongmen into his dynastic project. At the time of the founding of Goryeo, every region of the country had autonomous local rulers with their own administrative and defensive organizations. Wang Geon faced the imperative of absorbing these into the new centralized administrative system. One way he did this was by marrying daughters of the various local rulers, in this manner taking some 29 wives.

Another strategy by Wang Geon was to grant office, land, and family names to local rulers who came over to his side, and to especially powerful figures he granted his own surname of "Wang."



Statue of Wang Geon(Left) | © Yonhap News

Statue of Huirangdaesa, a supporter of Wang Geon(Right) | © Cultural Heritage Administration

This statue of Wang Geon, the founder of Goryeo, was respected by later generations. He also received support from monks because he favored Buddhism.

In addition, through the so-called “hostage system” (*giin jedo*) he summoned the offspring of powerful local leaders to come serve in the capital, in so doing also building up the central bureaucracy. Wang Geon also empowered officials called *sasimgwan* (inspector general), who were dispatched to regional areas with semi-independent authority over the local populace and intelligence gathering. For example, Kim Bu (King Gyeongsun), the last king of Silla, was after his abdication to Goryeo named the *sasimgwan* of Gyeongju.

Wang Geon acknowledged the strength of local forces and worked to incorporate them into the new institutional framework of Goryeo. However, this accommodation of local authority was

temporary, and it would by necessity evolve with the systematization of Goryeo administration and law. Nevertheless, one defining characteristic of the new Goryeo dynasty was this aspect of local autonomy and independence.

### Wang Geon’s successors and the nature of Goryeo society

As the founder of the Goryeo dynasty, Wang Geon was revered, and his personal charisma enabled him to bring together in common cause the interests of various local forces. But Wang Geon’s successors lacked this charisma. Among the powerful local leaders, even those brought into the central administration continued to wield power in their local areas. Moreover, armed men continued to roam the country. Due to Wang Geon’s marriage practices, the number of Goryeo queens was large, most of them the daughters of powerful local hegemons. As queens, they were eager to demonstrate their abilities and to see their grandchildren ascend the throne.

After Wang Geon, a struggle for succession was inevitable. The competition between half-siblings was fierce, but in contrast to such struggles in Unified Silla, here the rivalry was confined to the immediate lineage of King Taejo (the reigning title of Wang Geon). Kings Hyejong and Jeongjong, who succeeded Wang Geon, died at young ages due to the accumulated stresses of such conflicts and machinations. Their reigns were also very short.

Goryeo’s fourth king, Gwangjong (r. 949–975), did his utmost to strengthen royal authority during his long reign, one particularly effective strategy being the undertaking of drastic purges of

the dynasty's meritorious subjects (nobles whom Wang Geon had rewarded for assisting him in reunifying the Three Kingdoms and establishing the Goryeo). The latter half of his reign saw the state's prisons overflowing with those whose political loyalty was suspect.

Following the death of King Gwangjong, the Goryeo dynasty entered a new stage in the formulation of state institutions and administrative systems. The sixth king, Seongjong (r. 981–997), established several new administrative systems to revamp the governing of the Goryeo state. In the name of social order, he decided to promote Confucian ideology, while also making efforts to overhaul and improve the state bureaucracy. The Goryeo central administrative was effectively composed of six "Boards" (*bu*) and two "Departments" (*seong*), the Jungseomunhaseong (or Chancellery for State Affairs, responsible for formulating policy) and the Sangseoseong (or Secretariat for State Affairs, responsible for executing policy). There were also other agencies, charged with such things as communicating royal orders, supervising bureaucrats, and finance.

The biggest task facing King Seongjong was the creation of an administrative system that would bind the local regions to the central government. The result was an administrative organization that divided the country into a northern border region and administrative regions to the south. The northern border region in turn was split into two regions, creating an autonomous defense system. The center of these defenses was the Western Capital (Pyeongyang) and Anbyeon in Gangwon-do province.

Among these two, the Western Capital of Pyeongyang was distinct. Originally the capital of Goguryeo, the city was almost ruined

during the struggles of the Later Three Kingdoms period. The Goryeo dynasty, which prided itself as the successor to Goguryeo, could not simply leave the city to its fate. King Taejo (Wang Geon) took efforts to rebuild Pyeongyang into a new city worthy of the new dynasty. Thus, with the opening of the Goryeo dynasty Pyeongyang saw a resurgence.

To the south of the designated border region, with some passage of time, were established five circuits (*do*), and these were the first to have local magistrates. Administratively, the area below the circuit level was divided into counties (*gun*) and districts (*hyeon*). However, in the Goryeo period, not all *gun* and *hyeon* had local administrators, the reason being a shortage of personnel to cover all regions. What the young Goryeo desperately needed to secure was the state's financial capacity, sufficient bureaucrats to manage it, and above all, the cooperation of autonomous local communities and forces. Sufficient financial resources could be achieved by identifying and organizing tax sources in all regions. The bureaucracy could not be increased unless a tax source for finance, manpower, and commodities were secured. However, the strength of regional forces remained formidable, and the state had to largely acknowledge their autonomy. Thus, a defining characteristic of Goryeo society at this stage is its social order that rested on both state and local authorities.

As a result, there were numerous administrative regions lacking in government officials. In these regions, the positions were filled by selecting someone from among the local powers. And in cases where these administrators refused to cooperate with the central

administration, the central government could not effectively administer them.

Further, when administrative tax collection came into conflict with local interests, the result was often rebellion. And although regional self-defense forces had been absorbed into the Goryeo army, the mobilization system and local defenses were autonomously administered in their local regions. In the case of external invasion, the local soldiers would retreat behind the local castle walls and defend the position, while central units would arrive to attack the invaders. Thus, it was easy for local forces to either surrender to the enemy or to revolt against central authority. For example, at the time of the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, Jo Hwi and Tak Cheong in Goryeo's northeastern region rebelled against central authority and submitted to the Mongols, allowing the Mongols to rule this area directly.

On the other hand, the Goryeo government administered directly those regions that produced essential and specialty products. It was due to the scarcity of goods available in the marketplace that the government moved directly to control and centralize the products of such areas.

But over time, the power of the central government grew. In terms of economic clout, powerful central bureaucrats in the capital slowly gained an edge over the powerful families who remained in the provinces. Several families in particular gained renown for producing generations of senior officials, and these families united their fortunes through inter-marriage. These families also rationalized their prosperity through the creation of mythological stories and eventu-

ally they came to form the aristocratic element of the Goryeo state. Of these families, the Goryeo royal family was the most prominent.

The Goryeo dynasty was more complex and pluralistic than the Joseon dynasty that would succeed it. Goryeo society was not a Confucian-centered one like Joseon. In addition, various beliefs and ideologies, to include Buddhism, Daoism and *pungsu* (feng shui) geomancy, were widespread. These diverse features are reflective of the complex nature of Goryeo society and its system of local forces. Each region enjoyed its independence and autonomy, yet each region was still directly connected to the central government despite its indigenous administrative system. However, toward the end of the dynasty, the autonomy of the local regions gradually disappeared as they were subsumed into a unified administrative network. The Joseon dynasty was able to develop into a centralized state based on this.

## The Goryeo Dynasty and the States of East Asia

Throughout its existence Goryeo came into repeated conflict, went to war and reconciled, and enjoyed peaceful exchanges with a number of states of East Asia, prime among them being the Liao (Khitan), Jin (Jurchen), Song, and Japan. Among these, Goryeo's relationship with the Khitan and Jurchen to its north was the one that most easily deteriorated into conflict and war. By contrast, with the Song dynasty, Goryeo enjoyed its most cordial diplomatic relationship. Japan was not a country that regularly dispatched em-

issaries to or traded with Goryeo.

At the time of the establishment of the Goryeo dynasty, China was still divided. Taejo Wang Geon was averse to the Khitan destruction of the Balhae kingdom established to his rear in the Manchuria region in the wake of Goguryeo's fall. This hostility was of a political nature. Many of Balhae refugees that poured into Goryeo territories following Balhae's fall helped to reunite the Three Kingdoms under Goryeo. The Khitan was the most threatening force on Goryeo's northern frontier. The Jurchen tribes, on the other hand, had not yet been consolidated and thus did not constitute a major threat to Goryeo.

The Khitan established the Liao dynasty and in 993 launched its first war with Goryeo. Faced with such a crisis, at a Goryeo court assembly it was proposed that all the territories to the north of the Western Capital (Pyeongyang) be ceded to the Liao. However, through negotiations with the Liao, Goryeo found that the reason for Liao's invasion of Goryeo was its desire to sever Goryeo's diplomatic ties with Song. Thereafter, in order to maintain intercourse with the Liao, after careful negotiations, the Goryeo government was able to secure the so-called Six Garrison Settlements East of the Amnok (Ch. Yalu) River (Gangdong yukju), in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula.

Taking full advantage of the political turbulence caused by the coup d'état of Gang Jo, Liao once more went to war with Goryeo. Gang Jo had deposed Goryeo's King Mokjong but then refused to recognize his successor King Hyeonjong (r. 1009–1031). Again, with a clear view of severing Goryeo-Song connections, Liao invaded. As a result, Goryeo's Hyeonjong was forced to flee the capital

at Gaegyeong (Gaeseong) to Naju in the southwestern province of Jeolla. The Liao eventually withdrew from Goryeo territory, fearing the overextension of their lines of supply. But Liao was not finished. It now mobilized 100,000 troops and returned to the offensive in 1018. But this time as well it failed to subdue Goryeo. Indeed, Liao advanced to the vicinity of the Goryeo capital of Gaeseong before retreating, in the process suffering heavy losses at the hands of the Goryeo army led by General Gang Gamchan. From that point, relations between the two states became more cordial, and they engaged not only in trade but the exchange of cultural items, such as the Buddhist Tripitaka (*Daejanggyeong*).

Goryeo was ever on guard against the Jurchen. To manage them, Goryeo employed a method used by China in dealing with peripheral states, that is, separating the Jurchen tribes and holding each in check. Though Goryeo considered these tribes as barbarians, some were granted material goods or even government office as part of an appeasement policy. However, in the latter 11th century, the Jurchen tribe of Wanyan extended its power, giving rise to tensions with Goryeo. In 1104, in response to aggressive movements by Jurchen hardliners, the Goryeo government mobilized troops for an attack on the Jurchen area, but failed in its objectives.

The Goryeo government regarded the lack of cavalry in its armed forces as the cause of its failures. As a result, Goryeo made preparations for total mobilization, from the training of cavalry to the recruitment of monk-soldiers. A special military mobilization organization was created called the Byeolmuban (Extraordinary Military Corps), and in 1107 an expeditionary force commanded

by Yun Gwan launched an offensive towards Jurchen territory. Once there, Yun Gwan built a system of nine fortresses to be used as a defensive base.

However, these nine fortresses, arranged as they were in a straight line, were difficult to defend against Jurchen attacks. The Goryeo



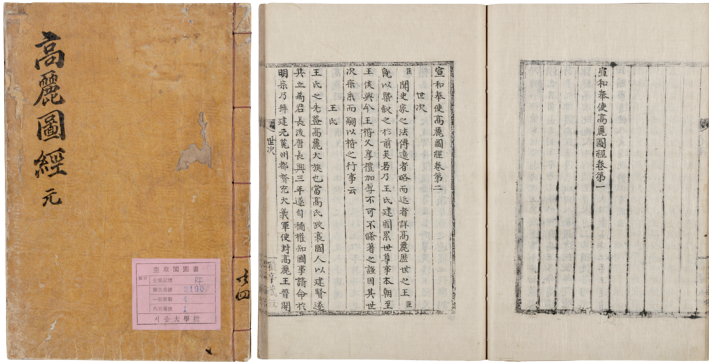
Bukgwanyujeok Portrait Album-Cheokgyeongpido | Korea University Museum  
This is a picture which shows the establishment of Yun Gwan's nine fortresses.

eventually returned the nine fortresses to the Jurchen, and in 1115 the Jurchen founded the Jin dynasty. The now unified Jurchen kingdom first attacked the Liao. Seizing the opportunity this attack presented, Goryeo secured its hold over the Uiju region in Pyeongan-do province, but did not interfere with the conflict between the Liao and Jin.

Following this, the Jin approached Goryeo to establish formal relations, first as between equals but then hierarchical in nature, between lord and subject. Within Goryeo many officials opposed the establishment of bilateral relations with the Jin on these latter terms. However, the realpolitik of the political powerhouse Yi Jagyeom and the military figure Cheok Jungyeong, who had participated in military campaigns against the Jurchen, won out and a *sadae* (lit. “serve the great,” essentially a suzerain-subject hierarchy) relationship with Jin was adopted. This decision later contributed to uprisings in the region of the Western Capital (Pyeongyang).

Goryeo paid the most attention to its diplomatic relations with the Song. The Song was established in 960, and it opened formal relations with Goryeo in 962 (13th year of King Gwangjong). After this, the two states exchanged emissaries and maintained cordial relations. Goryeo needed Song’s advanced cultural products, and Song in turn relied on Goryeo to keep the Liao and Jin in check. However, bilateral relations between the Song and Goryeo were officially suspended after Liao’s invasion of the Song. Liao did not wish Goryeo to maintain cordial relations with the Song, and so the Song and Goryeo only maintained informal exchanges and trade.

With the rise of the Jurchen Jin dynasty after the 12th century,



*Goryeo Dogyeong* | Kyujanggak Institute For Korean Studies

This is a record of a visit to Goryeo by a Song Dynasty envoy named Seogeung in 1123.

Song made common cause with this dynasty in order to attack the Khitan Liao. At this time, Song asked Goryeo to join in assisting Jin, but Goryeo spurned this request. Later, Song sought to engage the assistance of Goryeo to contain Jin arms and keep that state in check. In particular, immediately after the Song's destruction at the hands of a Jin invasion, the newly established Southern Song requested Goryeo to intercede on its behalf against the Jin, beseeching Goryeo to rescue the Song Emperors Huizong and Qinzong, then held as captives by the Jin. The Southern Song also proposed an alliance with Goryeo to counter the Jin. But to all of these requests, Goryeo demurred, and the relationship between the two countries gradually soured. However, neither Goryeo nor Song severed their mutual diplomatic relations.

On the other hand, Goryeo maintained a brisk trade with foreign countries from the port of Byeongnando, located at the estuary of

the Yeseong River not far from the Goryeo capital of Gaegyeong (Gaeseong). Up until the fall of the Southern Song, some 5,000 Song merchants visited the port. For example, the Song merchant He Tougang, who was very skilled at the game of Go (*baduk* in Korean), attempted to use his skills to win a married Goryeo woman, though his schemes ultimately failed.

At that time, the trade route extended from the Yeseong River, passing the island near the outlet of the Daedong River, then crossed the Yellow Sea to China's Shandong peninsula, or else from the Yeseong River one continued to Heuksando Island off Korea's southwest coast and then across the sea to China's Mingzhou (present-day Ningbo). From the Song, Goryeo mainly imported silk, herbs, ceramics, books, and musical instruments. These items were luxury or cultural goods needed by Goryeo's ruling class. In addition, books such as the Buddhist canon were imported. On the other hand, to Song, Goryeo exported such luxury products as gold, silver, copper, ginseng, pine nuts, and lacquerware.

In the 11th century, Goryeo even saw the arrival on three occasions of Arab merchants from what was called the country of the Daesik (or Dashi in Chinese). They seem to have arrived in Goryeo in pursuit of new trading opportunities. However, after the 11th century no more such visits are recorded.

Even as the Goryeo continued its pattern of confrontation, accommodation, and exchange with the Song, Liao, Jin, and Japan in East Asia, new trials were looming for the dynasty. The Mongols were growing into a global empire, and the Goryeo was destined soon to be incorporated into a new international order.

## 1170~1377

1170

Military officials of Goryeo stage a coup and take over the government

1231

The Mongols begin invading Goryeo, which fights against the invaders for nearly 30 years

1234

*Sangjeong gogeu yemun*, world's first book printed with metal movable type, is published

1251

*The Tripitaka Koreana*, the grand collection of Buddhist scriptures carved on over eighty thousand printing woodblocks, is completed

1270

A ceasefire is established between Goryeo and the Mongols

1377

Anthology of Great Buddhist Priests' Zen Teachings (*Jikjisimcheyojeol*), the world's oldest extant book printed with metal movable type, is published

## Chapter 5

# GORYEO AND THE MONGOL EMPIRE

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Lee Kang-hahn

translated by Daniel Kane



## Goryeo's Resistance to the Mongol Invasion (1231-1259)

In the eighth month of 1231, the Mongols launched their first invasion of Goryeo, advancing in their offensive to the middle region of the peninsula before withdrawing in the first month of 1232. The Goryeo people were greatly shocked by the power of the Mongol forces that were able in such a short time to lay siege to the capital of Gaegyeong. The Goryeo military regime, which had failed to adequately prepare the country's defenses, soon found itself at wit's end as forts on the northern frontier began to go over to the Mongols, and just half a year later, in the seventh month of 1232, the Goryeo

government fled to Ganghwa Island, off the country's western coast, to escape the Mongol onslaught.

In response to Goryeo's determination to resist, the Mongols launched another invasion in the eighth month of 1232. Though the Mongol troops withdrew on the heels of a Goryeo victory at Cheoin Fortress, the invasion's damage was significant, including many deaths and cultural losses, such as the burning of the First Edition of the Tripitaka Koreana (the complete Buddhist canon). In 1233, turmoil broke out in the Western Capital (Pyeongyang) region, which had found the hardships of the Mongol invasion intolerable. Hong Bogwon, who led the uprising, eventually betrayed Goryeo and fled to the Mongols, and his descendants later became heads of the Mongol Yuan Empire's Liaoning province administration, a source of vexation to the Goryeo government.

Following the destruction of the Jurchen Jin (1234), Mongol forces once more entered Goryeo in 1235. Within two months they had reached parts of Gyeongsang-do province, including Andong, Sangju, and Gyeongju. In the sixth month of 1236, they entered the Jeolla-do province, sacking Jeonju and Buan. Goryeo civilians, along with the government's Defense Command Patrol (*byeolchogun*) in various local regions, resisted at the cost of heavy casualties and damage to the country's cultural heritage, including the total destruction in 1238 of the nine-story pagoda of Hwangnyong Temple. However, when Goryeo promised to pay tribute, the Mongol forces summarily withdrew in the fourth month of 1239, and thereafter diplomatic missions between the two commenced. The Goryeo began to carve a new Tripitaka, yet in the fourth month of 1241,



The Mongol Empire and Goryeo



Goryeogung Palace | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
Restoration of a small palatial structure which is believed to have been part of the Goryeo-gung palace, when the dynasty's capital was on the Ganghwa Island.

members of the Goryeo royal family were sent as hostages to the Mongol court.

Some years later, in 1246, Guyuk was crowned emperor of the Mongols, and the invasion of Goryeo was resumed in the seventh month of the following year, 1247. While troops of the government's Defense Command Patrol fought off the invaders inland, the government maintained its established policy of transporting civilians to islands for their own protection. In 1251, the new Mongol emperor Monke demanded the Goryeo court return to its capital of Gaegyeong from its refuge on Ganghwa Island and then invaded Goryeo in his turn in the seventh month of 1253. This time, the Mongol army descended along the eastern coast of the peninsula, attacking various locations in Gangwon-do province, and once more invaded the peninsula's southern region in 1254. By the end of



Wooden printing blocks of the *Tripitaka Koreana* | © Cultural Heritage Administration

1255, Mongol naval forces and warships even commenced attacks on various islands off the west coast. This came as a shock to the Goryeo government, which had come to believe in the safety of Ganghwa Island's seclusion.

Around 1257, earnest voices began to be heard in the Goryeo government for accommodation with the Mongols, despite opposition from the country's military regime. And when Choi Ui, the last leader of the powerful Choi house (which led the military regime for the past half decade), was killed such voice grew even bigger. So, when the Mongol invasion resumed in the sixth month of 1258, the Goryeo government began contemplating even further on surrendering, and in April 1259, Goryeo's Prince (who later became Wonjong) embarked on a journey to China to end the Mongol invasion once and for all. It was at this point when Wonjong "accidentally" met with Kublai Khan, presumably during Winter 1259, who later

seized the Mongol Yuan throne after the succession struggle which followed the death of Monke in Summer (July) 1259. After the Goryeo government made its assent clear to the Mongol's long-held demand that it return to the capital of Gaegyeong, by destroying the inner and outer walls surrounding the temporary capital at Ganghwa, an agreement for a cease fire was reached in August 1259. And later Wonjong ascended the Goryeo throne, upon his return from China in April 1260. Peace at last, albeit a shaky one, after 30 years of Mongol invasions, sometimes sporadic, sometimes steady, yet horrific overall.

During this period countless Koreans were slaughtered at the hands of the Mongols, while some others surrendered to the Mongol army and then served as guides for the invaders. However, most Goryeo people stood fast against the Mongol interlopers. Heroic resistance in various places, such as Cheolju Fortress and Gwiju Fortress, and the resistance of the Goryeo people, regardless of their status, were the responses to the crisis that struck the Korean Peninsula in the first half of the 13th century.

### **Diplomacy with the Mongols, and Management of Domestic Affairs (1260-1307)**

When Goryeo's King Gojong died in the sixth month of 1259, just two months after Goryeo surrendered to the Mongols, the heavy responsibility of tending to a devastated Goryeo society fell upon his son and successor Wonjong (r. 1260–1274). In addition to stabi-

lizing a rural landscape made barren by the loss of countless human lives, Wonjong also faced the task of reestablishing order and regularity to a government administration decimated by both military usurpation and war, and to securing the needed financial revenues for the operation of that government.

However, the situation remained unsuited for these tasks facing King Wonjong. Pressure from Kublai Khan continued up until the Goryeo government returned to Gaegyeong in 1270, and the threat of reinvasion lingered. Meanwhile, territorial losses continued. In 1269, when military officers in the northwest revolted and surrendered their posts to the Mongols, the Yuan took this opportunity to seize the territory under revolt and annex it to their empire. In this manner, the area north of the Jabi-ryeong mountain range (including Pyeongyang) was severed from Goryeo territory, and became the Yuan administrative unit called the Dongnyeong Administration (Dongnyeongbu).

Meanwhile, when the return of the capital to Gaegyeong was completed, thus signaling the Goryeo's government accommodation of the Mongols, the forces of the Three Elite Patrols (Sambyeolcho), the mainstay of the former military regime, rose in revolt. In the sixth month of 1270, they selected and put forward a scion of the royal family as their king, and abducting government officials and their families as well as commoners, the rebels fled south to the island of Jindo and then Jeju. The Sambyeolcho forces attacked the Goryeo government's "tax boats" (*segongseon*, which carried tax revenues to the capital) and shipbuilding facilities, set up to aid the Mongol authorities' preparations for the upcoming Japanese campaign. And in

a desperate effort to survive, they also eventually made contact with the Yuan Empire and Japan. However, in the fourth month of 1273, after three years the military uprising was subdued.

Immediately following this, ships' construction and troops mobilization for the planned Mongol conquest of Japan entered its final phase. Numerous Goryeo engineers and workers were mobilized, while timber and ships were requisitioned to form the fleet of warships. The first Mongol invasion of Japan was launched in the tenth month of 1274, with a second launched in the fifth month of 1281. Both ended in failure, inflicting severe damages upon Goryeo. At the time of the first conquest, the invasion force consisted of about 8,000 Goryeo soldiers accompanying approximately 25,000 Mongol and Chinese troops, on board total of 900 vessels (among which Goryeo provided 300). In the course of preparations for the second invasion, Goryeo faced the additional hardship of preparing or mobilizing 900 more troop vessels, some 15,000 sailors, 10,000 soldiers, and 110,000 *seok* (a traditional measurement of grain) of provisions.

Under such circumstances, internal reforms were difficult. In 1269, a large-scale land survey (*yangjeon*) was carried out to repair the country's ravaged tax system, but in the 1270s, the Yuan establishment of military colonies (in this case, *dunjeon*) in some regions across the Goryeo territory inflicted further hardship on the country. In the second month of 1271, rather than reforming the official salary system, the Goryeo government boosted officialdom by distributing the lands of the Gyeonggi region to them as their salary base.

In the end, the greatest achievement of Goryeo's King Wonjong was his overthrow of the military regime and restoration of the monarchy and his ending the threat of any future Mongol invasion once peace was restored. Remaining flexible in his responses to the various demands of the Yuan Empire proved an effective means of buying time. In response to the requests of the Yuan, while King Wonjong pursued an astute strategy of acceding to those requests he could meet, such as the dispatch of hostages to the Yuan capital, repair of post roads (*yeongno*), military procurement, and tribute of grain crops, he consistently delayed on those demands he felt untenable.

Also noteworthy is the marriage between King Wonjong's son and successor, later King Chungnyeol, to the daughter of the Yuan emperor Kublai Khan, which effectively laid the foundations for a stable administration for the new king. From his accession in the eighth month of 1274, King Chungnyeol ruled Goryeo for nearly 34 years, until his death in the seventh month of 1308.

Not surprisingly, immediately after King Chungnyeol assumed the throne under this new accommodation with the Mongol Yuan, the changes Goryeo had been eluding came about in various fields in the late 1270s. Upon orders from the Yuan to reorganize its government administration, Goryeo made fundamental and distorted changes to its government's traditional structure. The imperial government intervened broadly in Goryeo affairs, criticizing for instance the custom of inter-clan marriage by the Goryeo royal family or pointing out that the Goryeo government had too many ministers. The Yuan also demanded from Goryeo the tribute of large numbers of maidens, while at times forbidding the possession of weapons

by the Goryeo people. The Mongols used Jeju Island as a place of banishment for members of the Mongol imperial family, and also as pasturage for horses which were to be sent to Yuan. In various places throughout Goryeo the Mongols also established camps for *toman* (a traditional division of ten-thousand troops in the Mongol army, also called a myriarchy, or *manhobu* in Korean). The *dunjeon* (garrison farms) established in places by the Yuan Empire were also adapted for use as temporary dwelling places for military troops of the conquered Song dynasty, which put considerable strain on the adjacent areas. The authority assumed by King Chungnyeol's royal consort, Princess Jeguk (daughter of Kublai Khan), also proved vexatious to the Goryeo people. But in one more affront, the Goryeo king was named leader—with the title of minister—of the Eastern Expedition Field Headquarters (Jeongdong haengseong), a rather 'provincial' government established to organize the Mongol conquest of Japan but which continued in operation even after the Yuan had abandoned such plans, thus in effect making the king a regional government official of the Yuan empire.

King Chungnyeol endeavored to stabilize Goryeo society even as he responded to these various contingencies. The contents of both native court music (*hyangak*), such as the ballad "Ssanghwajeom" ("Dumpling Shop"), and Chinese court music (*dangak*), such as "Taepyeonggok" ("Aria of Peace"), played during Chungnyeol's reign would imply that he tried to pacify the people and help them maintain hope for the future. However, efforts at reform has been generally lackluster, with several domestic land surveys having failed and the Personnel Authority (Jeongbang), a powerful office

that had controlled personnel matters during the period of the military regime, still remained despite the downfall of the military government.

On the other hand, King Chungnyeol's diplomatic achievements were in no way insignificant. In 1278, he journeyed to the Yuan court and held negotiations with Kublai Khan over the withdrawal of the following elements: Mongol troops occupying territory on the peninsula, Mongol and Chinese soldiers being stationed at the *dunjeon* lands, and the Mongol *darughachi* officials constantly monitoring Goryeo. He even received a formal concession from Yuan on the Empire's initial demand that Goryeo should submit its household registries to Yuan. At the same time, facets of Mongol culture continued to be imported by Goryeo, so that Goryeo could maintain its cordial relationship with the Yuan Empire. Already by the end of 1272, some two years before assuming the throne, King Chungnyeol was already wearing the Mongol queue and dress. In the tenth month of 1274, shortly after his accession, he compelled the Goryeo officials to do the same, and in 1278 a proclamation was issued throughout the kingdom mandating this new style of dress.

Also embraced by Goryeo were the Yuan system of weights and measures, standards for the amnesty of vicious criminals, and the formalities of official documentation. As a result, the status of King Chungnyeol gradually stabilized, such that immediately after the king's accession in 1274, upon the visit of a Mongol *darughachi*, the king went out to meet him, whereas by 1279, a few years after Chungnyeol's accession, the Mongol emissary to Goryeo bowed to the king at the bottom of the steps of the royal palace. And in the

early 1280s the traditional practices between the Mongol emissaries and the Goryeo monarchy, greeting each other on equal standing east and west, ended as well. Due to the existence of such duly recognized leadership at last, by the late 13th century Goryeo too finally began to find stability.

As these were eventful times, and also the opening of a new era for the Goryeo people, there have been some persistent misconceptions regarding it. Prominent among these concern Goryeo-Mongol marriage practices, the aforementioned Eastern Expedition Field Headquarters (Jeongdong haengseong), and Mongol economic levies on Goryeo.

The practice of marriage between the royal houses of Goryeo and the Mongol Yuan was not something forced by Kublai Khan, but was in fact first proposed by Goryeo's King Wonjong. Historical records show that such intermarriages, first consummated in the fifth month of 1274 with King Chungnyeol's marriage to a daughter of Kublai, were in fact already under public discussion in 1269. The marriage that earned King Chungnyeol the title of "imperial son-in-law" was the confluence of the Goryeo monarchy's interest in strengthening ties with the Mongols in order to stabilize their kingship, and Kublai's interest in preventing the expansion of the power of the "three kings of the east" (the descendants of Ghengis Khan's three brothers) in the Liaodong region towards the Korean Peninsula.

The result of all this was that the king of Goryeo was transformed from the "head of an independent Goryeo court" to "a member of the Yuan imperial family." The status of the Goryeo king naturally changed as a result, and now he also had a voice in the inner delib-

erations of the Yuan court. This new status also strengthened the Goryeo king's hand in negotiations with the Yuan, as evidenced by the diplomatic performance of 1278 detailed above. What's more, with the exception of Princess Jeguk, the political influence of the Yuan princesses that married into the Goryeo royal family was negligible and did not impede the leadership of the Goryeo king. Although the jealousy of King Chungseon's consort Princess Gyeguk contributed to King Chungseon's temporary retirement from the throne in 1298, the status of all three of the Yuan women married by King Chungseon remained rather insignificant. And although King Chunghye's consort Princess Deongnyeong continued to interfere in court affairs after the death of her husband, the consort of King Gongmin, Princess Noguk, was her husband's most steadfast political supporter.

The Eastern Expedition Field Headquarters (Jeongdong haengseong) was one of 11 such Field Headquarters, or Branch Secretariats (*haengseong*, which could also be regarded as Provincial authorities or governments), established by the Yuan Empire and mostly on China. This Jeongdong haengseong, which was installed on the Korean Peninsula to organize the Mongol invasion of Japan, came to be known for its interference in Goryeo affairs. During the period of the Mongol campaigns against Japan (1274–1281), it naturally enjoyed considerable influence. Then in early 1282 it was abolished, and in 1283 a new version of it was installed. Later in 1299, when a Mongolian official was appointed the second-grade assistant chancellor (*pyeongjang jeongsa*) of the Jeongdong haengseong, its ability to check the internal affairs of Goryeo became temporarily stronger.

However, in general the influence of the Jeongdong haengseong waned from the mid-1280s, after the Mongol had abandoned its plans for a conquest of Japan, and it remained so in the early half of the 14th century, under the leadership of the Goryeo king, whom the Mongol Yuan appointed to lead it. Eventually, it became more of a vehicle for official communications between the Goryeo and the Yuan.

In the first half of the 14th century, the nephew of King Chungseon, Wang Go (alternately Wang Ho), inherited from his uncle the position of “Prince of Shenyang” (or Sim wang, derived from a combination of “prince” [K. *jewang*] and Shenyang[K. Simyang]). The machinations by combined forces of Mongol and Goryeo personnel supporting Wang Go weakened the status of the Jeongdong Haengseong almost to the point of it being eliminated and replaced with another Haengseong that could more strongly interfere in Goryeo affairs. In response to that, the kings of Goryeo insisted on retaining hold over the fragile Jeongdong haengseong and wished to guarantee the maximum autonomy in their administration of it. In time, however, the Jeongdong haengseong became a hotbed of anti-monarchical Goryeo forces, and Goryeo’s King Gongmin abolished the Judicial Proceedings Office (Imunso), a den of the pro-Yuan forces surrounding a Goryeo official named Gi Cheol(brother of Yuan emperor Shundi’s wife) inside Jeongdong Haengseong, in 1356.

Finally, let us examine the issue of Mongol economic levies on Goryeo. Early levies between approximately 1260 and 1280 were indeed harsh, with a large variety of items forcibly requisitioned by

the Mongols, to include silver, ramie, rice, minerals, handicrafts, paper, Insam(ginseng), falcons, and horses. This situation later led to the misconception that Goryeo’s economy became so depleted that normal exchange of goods with the Yuan was impossible. However, after the Yuan Empire conquered the Southern Song in the late 1270s, securing vast resources in China’s Jiangnan region in the 1280s, Yuan economic levies on Goryeo declined significantly in the 1290s. Taking advantage of the resultant economic boon, the Goryeo people began once more to trade with the outside world. In particular, this period saw the establishment of the Goryeo royal house’s own trade policy. To take one case of this, King Chungnyeol met with Muslim merchants in an attempt to sell in overseas markets the silver and ramie that had been requisitioned from the private houses of Goryeo by various falcon-rearing institutions (called *eungbang*) installed in Goryeo by the Mongols to extract supplies of falcons. Also as evidence of this active trade, one should note attempts by Goryeo to negotiate reductions in tariffs on goods carried by Goryeo trading vessels in the ports of China’s Jiangnan region.

### A New Era for Goryeo: Mixed-blood Monarchy (14th Century)

The Goryeo kings who reigned in this period—King Chungseon(r. 1298; 1308–1313), King Chungsusuk(r. 1313–1330; 1332–1339), King Chungghye(r. 1330–1332; 1339–1343), and King Chungmok(r. 1344–1348)—share a trait: they were all the issue of Goryeo-

Mongol unions. Though in this they were clearly different from previous Goryeo monarchs in that they were not of pure Goryeo blood, in the final analysis, the Goryeo monarch remained head of the Goryeo government, ultimately responsible for the administration of the state, conducted negotiations with the Yuan Empire, and managed the domestic affairs of Goryeo, with the best intentions of protecting Goryeo interests.

King Chungseon tackled the political reforms at which kings Wonjong and Chungnyeol had failed. He restored those areas of the government organization distorted under Mongol influence to their configuration in the era of King Munjong (r. 1046–1083), consolidated various government offices to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of their operations, reduced the number of government councilors (*jaesang*), and streamlined the decision-making process while inducing financial austerity as well. The Investigatory Office (Gamchalsa) was upgraded to enhance the overall integrity of the government. A more systematic local administration was created by first establishing 'additional' senior administrative centers (*mok*) to strengthen the connection between the capital city (Gaeseong) and prefectures (*ju*, *gun*) and counties (*hyeon*), and then reorganizing these recently designated new *mok* units into *bu*, right below the original *mok* centers and above the prefectures and counties. And in the frontier areas, a renovated rotational system was applied to the defensive troops, while the livelihoods of military households were improved by the provision of personnel to assist with domestic duties. The Great Ancestral Shrine (Taemyo), the most symbolic space of the Goryeo royal family, was also renovated to promote the image

of the Goryeo kings and the royal family.

Economically, the Goryeo now worked to eliminate the past government misdeeds that had effectively plundered the capital city markets, while also enforcing a salt monopoly to bolster government revenue, and creating a new tax base (*sean*) that it called the "*gabin juan*" (or tax ledger of the *gabin* year [1314]) through an extensive cadastral and household survey. In addition, Goryeo was even visited by a former high-ranking official of the Mabaar region on the Coromandel coastline of India in 1298, a hub of trade linking East and West, which indirectly contributed a few years later to Goryeo's establishment of the government Weaving and Dying Bureau (Jigyeomguk, 1308) that oversaw for instance the production of so-called *jikmun jeopo* (a type of patterned ramie cloth). *Jikmun jeopo*, which incorporated gold and silver embroidery techniques (*jikgeum*) originating in Central Asia, gained fame as a type of specialty ramie cloth (or *jeopo*) produced on the Korean Peninsula, and Goryeo maximized its commercial value such that it became one of its important exports.

In the case of King Chungseon, however, who resided primarily at the Yuan court, handling state affairs remotely gave rise to certain problems. In particular, it was a major mistake for Chungseon to pass the Goryeo throne to his son Chungusuk while passing his title and position as Prince of Sim (Sim wang, i.e., Prince of Shenyang) to his nephew Wang Go. This is because the various forces backing the Prince of Shenyang, whose status had grown increasingly elevated, were sufficient to undermine the power of King Chungusuk.

King Chungusuk, who enjoyed a long reign, earned a negative rep-



utation for having failed to effectively manage the chaotic personnel matters of his reign. And for five years from 1321, Chung Suk was even detained at the Yuan court. During this time he faced a grave crisis due to the political attacks on him by the Prince of Shenyang, his cousin Wang Go.

Despite such poor conditions, King Chung Suk made various efforts to reform and improve Goryeo affairs, a representative example being the reorganization of the state's civil service examination and education system. Chung Suk's father, King Chung Seon, had seriously eroded the traditional elements of Goryeo's civil exam system by such acts as abolishing the traditional entrance exam to the state's National Confucian Academy (Gukjagam), the *gukjagamsi*, as well as abolishing the preparatory exam given to students leaving the National Confucian Academy, the *goyesi*, and renaming the original *yebusi* (the Goryeo higher civil service examination) as the "*eunggeosi*", and turning it into a preparatory exam for the *jegwa* (Ch. *zhike*), the Yuan civil service recruitment exam. Reacting to these changes, King Chung Suk revived the previous National Confucian Academy exam, now under the name "*geojasi*", and also revived the benefits (such as exemption from certain exams) that *goyesi* qualifiers had previously enjoyed. Chung Suk also launched a new exam called the "*gujaesaksi*" (seasonal exam for the "Private school['*gujae*']" students) as a way of encouraging students from private academies to sit for the higher civil service examination as well.

In addition, various cultural and economic policies were pursued. During his period of captivity in China, Chung Suk was impressed by the Yuan's willingness to enforce and strengthen the position

of Confucius and the ancient three emperors (Ch. *gusanhwang*) among its populace through efforts at renovating codes of sacrificial rites (*sajeon*). As soon as he returned to Goryeo, following what he had witnessed in Yuan China, Chung Suk proclaimed a "change in existing customs and habits" (*ipung yeoksok*). Noteworthy here is the resumption of rituals surrounding the monumental figure of Gija, symbol of the eternal excellence of Korean civilization, rather than rites to Confucius and the mythical ancient three emperors, symbols respectively of the Confucian civilization and long history of China.

In terms of economic policy, King Chung Suk established the temporary government office called the Challi byeonwi dogam (Directorate for the Re-examination of facts and Rectification of faults) to focus on the "resolution of land disputes among the commoners," or *jeonmin byeonjeong* (i.e., returning illegally plundered land to its original owner and freeing those commoners detained by powerful houses or beings without just cause). In addition, domestic merchants were appointed as close advisors to the king, while efforts were made to induce foreign merchants to Goryeo through the provision of offices and titles, and the civil service exam was even used to attract some merchants, with a Chinese merchant named Liang Zai and a Goryeo finance expert Chae Hongcheol overseeing it. One can assume that this group came to be utilized as sort of "government agents" by the Goryeo administration or royal house in the active pursuit of foreign trade.

Goryeo's King Chunghye was crowned in 1330, but was forced to abdicate a short time later after being implicated in rebellious acts

within the Yuan, and due to attacks by powerful Yuan officials and the Prince of Shenyang he barely won reinstatement following the death of his father, King Chung Suk in 1339. Following this, he focused on improving state finances by imposing new tax and tribute duties on government offices, ships, and distribution networks. Following a visit by the Ilkhanate's Sultan Abu Said, Chunghye became deeply interested in the dynamics of the silk trade between China and the West. He even had built a palatial weaving factory for the production of specialty fabrics for sale to Chinese and Muslim merchants. One can surmise this fabric to be the *jikmun jeopo* developed by his grandfather King Chungseon.

King Chungmok (r. 1344–1348) who succeeded the throne was in his minority and unable to properly take the reins of governance. Instead, state affairs were managed by a newly established office called the Directorate of Enhancing Governance (Jeongchi dogam). This Directorate was first established under Yuan orders in reaction to what Yuan Emperor Shundi condemned as the “despotism” of Goryeo's King Chunghye. Meanwhile, anti-monarchical (that is, against the Goryeo monarch) forces working within the Eastern Expedition Field Headquarters (Jeongdong haengseong), such as the faction of powerful Gi Cheol (a Goryeo figure with close ties by marriage to the Yuan emperor through the Yuan Empress Gi, his sister) who was also serving inside the Jeongdong haengseong, began to emerge as real threats to the Goryeo king. When Gi Cheol's relative Gi Samman was killed in Goryeo in the course of an interrogation by Goryeo authorities, the Jeongchi dogam faced a crisis. Yet it continued at first to have the political support of Yuan's Emperor

Shundi who was in political conflict with his own consort Empress Gi. Though the Directorate was eventually abolished after only a few years, its historical significance lies in its having provided a foothold for the coming reforms of Goryeo's King Gongmin in 1356.

King Chungmok's successor King Chungjeong (r. 1348–1351) acceded to the throne at an equally young age, and the resulting rise in powerful officials, compounded by a series of invasions by Wokou (Waegu in Korean) pirates (originating from the Japanese archipelago), brought Goryeo affairs to a point of extreme disorder. It was against this background that King Gongmin assumed the throne in 1351.

Academia is still replete with misconceptions in its consideration of the “mixed-blood monarchy” of Goryeo and its rule in the early 14th century, positions in need of rethinking. Examples of such misconceptions include the views that politically, Goryeo kings were completely subordinated to the Yuan empire, either by dint of birth (i.e., with blood ties to the Mongol Yuan) or by political orientation; that economically, the Korean Peninsula was bound to the monetary and trading networks of the Yuan empire; and that legalistically, the Korean Peninsula was integrated into the Yuan system of laws, with the example of the Jeongdong haengseong generalized to represent Goryeo. Such received notions have led to the view that the Korean Peninsula was a “part” of the Yuan Empire, that there was no “border” between the Goryeo and the Yuan. As a result, many foreign maps even depict the Korean Peninsula and the Yuan Empire in the same color, thus presenting them as a single geopolitical entity. The result of all this has been a misunderstanding of historical reality.

Of course, from a political perspective, it is certainly true that Goryeo kingly authority, the fulcrum of political administration, was changed from that of an independent entity to one subordinate to the authority of the Yuan emperor. Members of the Goryeo bureaucracy were also subsumed, either willingly or by coercion, into the central order of the Yuan, to include the receipt of offices and official ranks (*gwangye*) from the Yuan emperor. Nevertheless, during this period, the Goryeo kings were not administering “Imperial citizens of the Yuan Empire living on the Korean peninsula,” but the “Goryeo citizens residing on the Korean Peninsula ruled by the Goryeo court (which happened to be a member of the Yuan-centered world order).” And the Goryeo officials of course served only in Goryeo, and not in China. Although the Goryeo sovereign and people were under more intense influence from China than during any previous period of Korea-China relations, this never amounted to the dissolution of the Goryeo government, or collapse of its independent, autonomous administration.

This situation is different yet similar from a policy perspective, because in the area of individual policies and institutions the traditional “border” between the Goryeo and China (in this case, the Yuan Empire) was somewhat weakened as several Goryeo kings, such as King Chungseon, in order to tackle domestic problems of Goryeo, resorted to borrowing various methods of the Yuan. King Chungseon’s political reforms, measures to increase fiscal revenue [salt monopoly policy], improvements in the systems of local and military administration, and renovation of the Taemyo, or Goryeo’s Great Shrine, were all examples of this selective grafting of particular

administrative elements borrowed from Yuan imperial institutions on indigenous Goryeo systems. In the context at that time wherein those who wielded power could easily control and block efforts by Goryeo kings, in order to strengthen the reforms and stymie any attempts by vested interests to repulse them, not only a new method but a new form of authority was needed. The Goryeo reforms utilizing elements of the Yuan model met both of these requirements,

and thus paradoxically in order for the Goryeo reforms to succeed, their contents and thrust needed to align -at least partially- with those of the Yuan.

To that end, the Goryeo government tried to incorporate Yuan-style reforms while adapting them to the realities of Goryeo, and in this way took to “appending” Chinese and Mongolian elements to its native systems. The paradoxical result was that the traditional system of Goryeo, which had been in decline, was actually buttressed. Relative to the weakening Yuan, Goryeo actu-



Portrait of Yi Jehyeon | National Museum of Korea

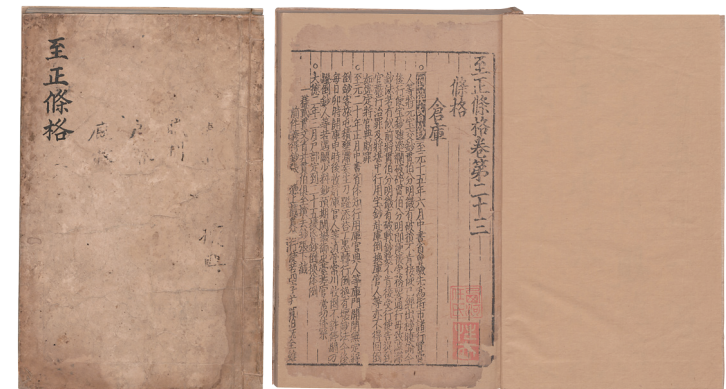
Yi Jehyeon was a renowned scholar, historian and reformer of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. He served many kings in his career as a bureaucrat.

ally laid the foundations for the maintenance of its dynasty for some time.

Thus, while both politically and in terms of state policies it is difficult to view Goryeo as simply a part of the central order of the Yuan empire, this is even more clearly the case in the economic realm. As evidenced by the tariff negotiations of King Chungnyeol (r. 1274–1308), tariffs were applied to Goryeo trade goods when they entered Yuan territory. Thus, Goryeo goods were considered foreign goods in the ports of Yuan China. In addition, Goryeo was not liable for any Yuan official tax, further implying its status as outside of the Yuan administration. Goryeo was also not burdened with new taxes for the operation of Jeongdong haengseong, unlike other Branch Secretariats (Ch. *xingsheng*, K. *haengseong*) elsewhere in the Yuan empire were. Further, initial levies were informal, and, as seen in the case of King Gongmin, later ones could even be stopped if a request was made for their suspension. The Yuan paper note (currency, called the Yuan *baochao*) was also introduced into Goryeo, but in actuality only found use as travel expenses by bureaucrats within the empire or for payments to merchants operating within the Yuan empire, rather than being used on the Korean Peninsula. In the first half of the 14th century, more Yuan paper notes were introduced, but with their depreciation the notes' impact on the economy of Goryeo was minimal and they later disappeared entirely from Goryeo following the currency's collapse in the Yuan. In short, the Yuan empire and the Korean Peninsula were clearly separated from each other in terms of trade and fiscal matters.

Though the realms of law and culture were different their situation

was also similar. It is a common misconception that the Yuan imposed its own system of laws upon Goryeo, as in fact Goryeo did not tolerate changes to its traditional status system as encoded in its laws and even opposed the Mongol figure Gorgis (Ch. Giwargis), then serving as the assistant chancellor (Pyeongjang jeongsa) of the Jeongdong haengseong, for his attempts at legal reform to the point that he was recalled. A dialogue that took place decades later between an imperial official in charge of laws within the Jeongdong haengseong and Yi Gok, a prominent Confucian scholar and diplomat of Goryeo, also reveals how the laws of the Yuan empire were not as widely and universally applied or used within Goryeo as they were intended to be. In other words, Yuan imperial law did not supplant the native laws of Goryeo, and in that sense, Goryeo did not fall under the same legal jurisdiction as the rest of the Yuan empire from the mid-13th to late-14th century



*Jijeongjogyeok* | AKS Jangseogak Archives

This was the Yuan Empire's final law code. Its contents were frequently consulted and studied during the late Goryeo and early Joseon periods.

(though it is interesting to note that in the modifications of laws that took place at the end of the Goryeo and dawn of the Joseon eras, such works as the *Jijeong jogyeok* [Legal Standards of the Zhizheng Era] are often mentioned as legal references, and in this sense the institutional influence of Yuan law began to be felt in Korea only after the decline of the Yuan empire).



Ten-story stone pagoda which was originally at the Gyeongcheonsa temple  
| National Museum of Korea

This is a pagoda actually made out of marble and modeled after the style of the Yuan Empire. This pagoda was originally built in Gaeseong but was stolen by the Japanese in 1907. It was returned to Korea and erected in Seoul's Gyeongbokgung Palace in 1960. Since 2005, it has been on display in the National Museum of Korea.

There was in Goryeo society a simultaneous interest in novel things and drive to preserve what was traditional. During this period, various aspects of Mongol culture were transmitted to Goryeo, and as a result, the daily lives of the Goryeo people were greatly altered in the areas of food, clothing, and language, yet at the same time a renewed awareness of Goryeo's traditional ways of doing things (*guje*) was stronger than ever. Manifest of the nature of the times

were the phenomena of the Goryeo officials using their [junior] Yuan ranks for their nicknames instead of their [higher] Goryeo ranks, while also (sometimes) using titles from the era of Goryeo's King Munjong for description of all the government posts they assumed in their lives (which had different names since the days of King Chungnyeol, due to Yuan urges) in tomb epitaphs. These two seemingly conflicting tendencies can even be discerned simultaneously in the same individual, Choe Hae, who on the one hand praised the reforms of Gorgis, who had been so vilified by the Goryeo government at the end of the 13th century, as a milestone in the reform of the Goryeo system, even as he lamented the Chinese ignorance of the famous Goryeo literary works of the past, and authoring the *Dongin ji mun* (Writings of the Eastern People) to make these better known. In other words, the inflow of Yuan cultural elements led to an increase in interest in rather than weakening of Goryeo traditions. With the advent of the Yuan Empire, the culture of the Korean Peninsula was forced to change, but it was a process of finding a new balance between the external and internal, foreign and native, and never amounted to a case of cultural homogenization and cultural subjugation.

### Changes in the Goryeo-Yuan Relationship (1350s and '60s)

King Gongmin (1351–1374), the younger brother of King Chunghye, finally acceded to the Goryeo throne after two attempts.

He is known for his various reform efforts, most notably those of 1356. At that time, King Gongmin succeeded in purging the faction around Gi Cheol and eradicating the anti-monarchical forces within the Goryeo government; received Yuan approval to his suggestion that the authority which had been invested by Qublai in the Goryeo kings to recommend officials for the Jeongdong haengseong be fully restored and his request that the myriarchical system of Mongol troops stationing on the peninsula be abolished; and while insisting of the Yuan government that some imperial departments cease their requisitions of Goryeo good, he dispatched troops to the Ssangseong Commandery (Ssangseong chonggwan bu; a Mongol administrative unit established over the far northeastern portion of the peninsula to control northeast Goryeo), successfully restoring Goryeo sovereignty to this northeastern border region after some hundred years of Mongol control.

In terms of fiscal and economic reforms, through such efforts as dispatching Supervisors of Salt and Iron Production (Yeomcheol byeolgam) to various regions to strengthen the monopoly on high-value materials, and promoting the monk-official Sin Don (1322–1371) to head the newly established Directorate for Reclassification of Farmland and Farming Population, Gongmin increased state revenues while also protecting the tax base. Large-scale land surveys and census during his reign, which complemented the tax measures of 1314, were very helpful in facilitating future government operations. King Gongmin, on the other hand, is also known for four rounds of restructuring the Goryeo government during his reign, which were frequently driven by internal and diplomatic needs. The

first (1356) and third (1369) reforms concerned reestablishing government order and reviving traditional Goryeo systems, which had weakened or been suspended with the advent of the Mongol Yuan, through a focus on the cultural elements and institutions of the early Goryeo. The 2nd (1362) and 4th (1372) reshufflings concerned improving relations with the Yuan and later displaying Goryeo's amity with the rising Ming.

Academic evaluations of King Gongmin's reforms have been largely favorable, but not without their misconceptions. By some, the king's 1356 reforms have been misunderstood as being aimed directly at Yuan with hostile intentions, but examining these reforms, there are not a few odd facets to them insofar as their objectives, processes, and outcomes. In making the aforementioned requests to the Yuan, King Gongmin sought to facilitate their success by making appeal to the final injunctions and legacy of the Yuan emperor (Shizu) Kublai Khan (1215–1294), which would be rather unfathomable if his intentions had been to repudiate Goryeo's relationship with the Yuan. The response of the Yuan government to Goryeo's attack on the Ssangseong Commandery -Northeast Goryeo, bordering Liaodung- also seems immoderately subdued, especially in light of the Yuan's very sensitive response to any activities by the Goryeo army in just the Yalu River -Northwest Goryeo, bordering Northern China- area. In other words, the Yuan seems to have harbored not that much resentment over the fall of the Ssangseong to Goryeo. Further, when one considers that King Gongmin had executed the general who did cross the Amnok (Ch. Yalu) River, it is highly possible that King Gongmin's military actions regarding



Portrait of King Gongmin of Goryeo and Queen Noguk of Mongol  
| National Palace Museum of Korea

the Ssangseong Commandery were not intended to provoke the Yuan.

With the defeat of the faction of Gi Cheol, King Gongmin faced the urgent necessity of laying the foundations and authority for greater internal reforms. To this end, he had to strengthen his control over the Jeongdong haengseong and abolish the Yuan military myriarchies that were established on the peninsula in the

1280-1290s, as both of which had since become dens of powerful Goryeo figures that were bringing disorder to these regions. And in order to carry out these two tasks, Yuan confirmation and approval of Goryeo plans were needed, so they were couched in language referencing the final injunctions of Kublai Khan while the targets of the Goryeo offensive were limited to the Gi Cheol faction and the Yuan Empress Gi, who held sway over the Jeongdong haengseong.

This is not an observation made to denounce or blame Gongmin for 'not being hostile enough' toward Yuan. On the contrary, he was a Goryeo king who was smart enough to know what button he had to push in Yuan to get what he wanted, and brave enough to do so when he did.

## Shifting Northeast Asian Order: Goryeo, Northern Yuan and Ming (1370s, '80s and '90s)

In 1367, the Yuan court abandoned Beijing and moved north. Its military forces in China were unable to prevail against the combination of anti-Yuan riots, the attacks from the Red Turbans, and the conflict with the emerging Ming dynasty. Earlier, in 1356, Goryeo's King Gongmin had ceased using the Yuan imperial reign code, and shortly afterwards, in 1369, Goryeo finally stopped using it, and in the 7th month of 1370 began using the Hongmu (Ch. Hongwu) reign code of the Ming. That same year, the Goryeo ban on Mongol dress, which had been suspended in 1356, came to be definitively enforced.

Of course, Goryeo's relationship with Yuan was not completely severed. The relationship with Ming, which had been gradually strengthening, was threatened by the death of a Ming emissary at the hands of Goryeo officials in 1374. After the assassination of King Gongmin that same year, the Ming delayed its approval of the king's successor, King U (r. 1374–1388) and delayed its customary bestowal of a posthumous epithet for Gongmin, even demanding tribute from Goryeo at a level exceeding that of the past. Amidst all of this, the Northern Yuan had sent a letter to Goryeo in 1373 clarifying that the court had established itself in the north, and away of Beijing. Then in the ninth month of 1374 (after King Gongmin's murder the same month) it attempted to invest the Prince of Shenyang's grandson as the new king of Goryeo. Goryeo then reported to the Northern Yuan the major internal change

that had occurred (that is, King Gongmin's assassination). Visits by Northern Yuan emissaries to Goryeo continued steadily until the early 1380s. In 1377, Goryeo again began to use the Northern Yuan year designator and expressed its appreciation to the Northern Yuan for its approval of the ascension of King U. However, when the Northern Yuan proposed to Goryeo a joint attack on the Liaodong region (then held by the Ming), King U rejected it, and in 1378 it was noted that a Northern Yuan emissary arrived in Goryeo seeking to change this decision, but that King U would not meet with him. Finally, in the summer of 1379, it was discussed that the Northern Yuan emissary to Goryeo should be seized and transferred as prisoner to the Ming. After the second month of 1380, Northern Yuan embassies of investiture to Goryeo ceased and with that so did all contact between Goryeo and the Yuan.



## 1392~1543

1392  
Joseon is founded

1446  
“Hunminjeongeum”, the Korean alphabet, is promulgated by King Sejong the Great

1543  
The first private Confucian academy (*seowon*) in Korea is constructed

## Chapter 6

# THE FOUNDING OF JOSEON AND THE FORMULATION OF ITS STATE SYSTEM

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Choi E-don

translated by Daniel Kane

## Founding of Joseon

### Upheavals of the Late Goryeo

The founding of Joseon unfolded against the political turmoil and peasant resistance that characterized the late Goryeo. The political turmoil of late Goryeo really finds its origins in the 12th-century uprising by military officials. The ruling aristocracy of Goryeo had established a system centered on civil officials, with the marginalization of military officials. With the growing power of the civilian officialdom in the middle period of Goryeo, the country's military officials and soldiers found their status even further debased. In 1170, the military officer Jeong Jungbu and others revolted, slaughtering the civil officials and eunuchs who formed the royal entourage. The military revolt was brought to a successful conclusion with the exiling of the king and crown prince.

Though the military officials had succeeded in their uprising, it was no easy task to manage the new regime. Power struggles among the military officials were fierce, but eventually power devolved into the hands of Choe Chungheon after his elimination of Yi Uimin. With Choe Chungheon's rise to power the situation stabilized, but this did not last long. The Mongols now invaded Goryeo. In response, Goryeo transferred its capital to the island of Ganghwa and offered spirited resistance to the invaders. Though Goryeo could boast some regional victories in its struggle with the Mongols, decades of war inflicted major damage that devastated the entire country.

From 1258, Goryeo pursued accommodation with the Mongols,

the result of which was the Mongol Yuan dynasty's interference in Goryeo affairs. Afterward, with the pro-Yuan faction of aristocrats in Goryeo taking over state affairs, policies at variance with the interests of the Goryeo people began to be pursued and the life of the people sometimes became more difficult as a result.

### Peasant unrest of the Late Goryeo

Even as the political turmoil caused by the revolt of the military officials continued, epidemic and famine brought on by natural disasters were frequent and the common people found themselves unable to sustain their normal livelihoods. To overcome such a situation, the people began to rise up in rebellion.

In 1176, in the low-born villages of the country's Myeonghak district, the Mangi uprising erupted, and after seizing the city of Gongju the mobs advanced northward towards the capital of Gaegyeong (Gaeseong). In 1182, an uprising of soldiers and government slaves erupted in Jeonju, taking over that city. By this time uprisings large and small had begun to appear with increasing frequency and involving the participation of tens of thousands of commoners.

The objectives of these different uprisings varied. But as evidenced by the rousing words of the low-born figure, Manjeok—who incited the people by asking, “Are generals and ministers born into their status?”—the goals of these uprisings could range from the seizure of political power to the eradication of hierarchies of status.

### Improvements in productivity and the rise in population

Even amidst all the uncertainty of the late Goryeo, the people resisted the government on the one hand while making efforts to improve their economic conditions on the other. This manifested itself in an improvement in agricultural productivity. Goryeo farming tended to rely on the fallow rotation system. Many farming fields in Goryeo were cultivated for one year and then remained fallow for the next one or two years. Lacking the resources to keep all the fields free of weeds and also with insufficient manure, the fallow rotation system was unavoidable in Goryeo.

The population of Goryeo developed a type of plowshare that made easier the weeding of fields. Namely, it was the addition of the moldboard to the plow that really allowed for the easier turning of the soil and weeding. The removal of weeds in turn made it easier to apply manure to the fields, and with the development of various new types of fertilizers the fallow rotation farming method was eventually abandoned.

As commerce and economic productivity increased so did the population. Increasing economic power improved both the nutritional state of the people as well as the medical skills for managing disease. With the growing interest in the development of medicines, more research began to be done in particular on “indigenous medicine” (*hyangyak*) based on local wild herbs and other plants. As a result, the country’s population of around 3 million during the Goryeo, increased rapidly to about 5 million by the beginning of the Joseon dynasty. Of course, as the population increased, so did the development of arable land, further improving the economic situation.

### Formation and reform of the emerging scholar-official class (*sadaebu*)

With the improved economic conditions of the people, politics entered a new phase. As the upper classes of the people began to be able to afford education they developed through schooling into a private intellectual class. Such intellectuals looked at the state of late Goryeo and recognized the need for reform.

Upon these reforms the Zhu Xi school of thought had a driving theoretical influence. The Zhu Xi school was a reformist learning that emerged in the context the economic development of the Southern Song. Understandably, the intellectuals of Goryeo, who were advocating for reform under conditions of economic development similar to those of the Southern Song, accepted the teachings of Zhu Xi (or Zhuzi, Master Zhu) as ideological guide for the reform of Goryeo state and society. These private intellectuals entered the realm of state politics via the civil service exam and coalesced into a new political force. They pushed for reform in confrontation with Goryeo’s powerful families (*gwonmun sejok*) who had seized power and plundered the wealth of the people.

The rising class of scholar-officials pursued reforms and to this end supported the efforts of King Chungseon and King Gongmin. The Directorate for Reclassification of Farmland and the Farming Population (Jeonmin byeonjeong dogam) was established to return those agricultural fields plundered by the nobility and powerful families to their original owners, and to reinstate the status of those commoners pressed into slavery by the powerful nobility. With the Yuan dynasty shaken by the uprising of the Red Turban bandits,

these scholar-officials endeavored to eliminate the pro-Yuan forces from the Goryeo government and to correct the distortions to the government brought about by Yuan interference. In particular, when Zhu Yuanchang (later the Hongwu emperor) threatened the Yuan by establishing the Ming, Goryeo initiated relations with Ming, taking advantage of the rapidly changing East Asian situation to escape Yuan interference.

### Founding of Joseon

Though these emerging scholar-officials agreed on the need for reforms to tackle the problems



Yi Seonggye, the founder of Joseon  
| Royal Portrait Museum

plaguening the late Goryeo, they disagreed on whether a new state system would be needed to realize them. While the moderates sought to maintain the Goryeo system, the more radical elements felt an entirely new country needed to be established if such reforms were to be realized.

Those advocates of radical reform gained the upper hand with the successful military coup of Yi Seonggye (later King Taejo of Joseon).

Radical reformers such as Yi Seonggye and Jeong Dojeon laid firm ground for reform by first successfully overhauling the country's land system through the implementation of the Rank-Land Law (Gwajeonbeop). Finally, with the removal of moderate reformers such as Jeong Mongju, a new state system could be established. In the seventh month of 1392, asserting that Goryeo's King Gongyang (r. 1389–1392) had lost the heavenly mandate, Jeong Dojeon and others drove Gongyang from the throne. The new Joseon dynasty was then declared with Yi Seonggye as its first king, and with this the reform measures began in earnest.

### Political Structure and Conditions of the Commoners

#### Emergence of the political doctrine of "Heaven's people" (*cheonmin*)

In establishing the Joseon state, scholar-officials worked to overhaul the country's political, economic, and social systems. First, scholar-officials promoted political reform. The literati recognized that the most fundamental problem of the Goryeo dynasty had been the "private rule" practiced by Goryeo king and powerful officials. It was thought that the kings and officials of the Goryeo had ruled the people arbitrarily, pursuing private interests, deepening social contradictions, and eventually driving Goryeo to its ruin. The literati therefore thought that in order to limit the arbitrary domination of kings and officials, the people should be granted a certain status, and

the powers of kings and officials should be limited to proper levels, with the aim being public order and rule of law.

Scholar-officials considered the common people as *cheonmin*, or “Heaven’s people,” therefore the status of all the people was that of being the people of Heaven. In line with this ideology of “Heaven’s people,” the scholar-officials sought to grant to the people their proper status. This *cheonmin* theory had similarities to the Western notion of “natural human rights.”

To this end, the king’s position was first restricted. Because the king had received his throne from Heaven in order to govern the people, the people were not in this sense “royal subjects” belonging to the king, but rather the people of Heaven, belonging to Heaven. The king, therefore, should not rule arbitrarily for personal gain, but should rule in accordance with the will of Heaven.

In this new outlook, officials too were understood to hold “heavenly office” (*cheonjik*), bequeathed by Heaven, and as such they were not to be understood as “royal ministers” (*wangsin*) belonging to the king, but as administering, alongside the king, “public rule” (*gongchi*) on behalf of the people. Thus, offices were not granted by the king, but by Heaven. Along these same lines, the territory of the state was understood not as “royal land” (*wangto*), but as “communal land All Under Heaven” (*gongcheonha*). Therefore, Joseon politics had no choice but to pursue “public rule,” that is, governing the people according to the will of Heaven on the principle that the people were “Heaven’s people.”

### Maintenance of centralized authority

In order to prevent the exercise of arbitrary authority by either the king or officials, Joseon strengthened the centralized system of authority. The political center of Goryeo had been the Supreme Council of State (Dopyeong uisasa), a collective leadership system operated by a consensus of some 70 to 80 high-grade officials. Scholar-officials of Joseon reformed this to create an all-encompassing bureaucratic administrative system composed of the Council of State (Uijeongbu), Six Ministries (Yukjo), and Amun, or middle and junior offices within the central government.

The personnel system was also reformed to reinforce its bureaucratic character. The practice of hiring officials by civil service examinations and evaluating the performance of those government officials twice a year was implemented. A so-called law of avoidance (*sangpi jedo*) was instituted that barred the assignment of close relatives to the same department or to service in their home regions. By managing government offices in this way, the appointment and promotion of officials attained a rational and transparent character.

To head the administration of counties (*gun*) and prefectures (*hyeon*), the Joseon government now dispatched local magistrates (*suryeong*), supplanting the system of rule by local clerks (*hyangni*) that had characterized the Goryeo, and established a unified system of local administration and governance. The local clerks of Goryeo constituted a local indigenous force enjoying status as lesser nobility and whose positions were hereditary. They had a formidable voice in local administration from generation to generation. Now, instead of the *hyangni* (local clerks), it was the centrally appointed *suryeong*

(local magistrates) who exercised legislative, judicial, and administrative authority at the local level, but they were usually rotated out every three years, making this an administrative system where it was very difficult for officials to cultivate a local base.

### Political status and jurisdiction of the people

What was the position of the common people within the political framework of Joseon? The status of the people during the early

Joseon period can be assessed through a look at the judicial system and their right to self-defense within it. The government of Joseon established various levels of judicial proceedings in its implementation of public rule. The people were given the right to a judicial hearing and trial at three levels: a trial before the local magistrate (*suryeong*), a trial before the provincial governor (*gamsa*), and a trial before the Office of the Inspector-General (Saheonbu). Of course, there were other avenues for



Kim Hongdo, “Nosangsongsang” | National Folk Museum of Korea  
A legal suit brought before a local government office during the Joseon period.

commoners to have their grievances informally heard before the king. For instance, there was the system of the petitioner’s drum (*sinnmungo*) established by the state, the right to “petition the King before his sedan chair” (*gajeon sangeon*), or by striking a special gong that was set up next to the royal palace. In other words, though the people were administered by their local magistrate, they had the right to appeal to higher judicial organs if they had been the victims of any illegal actions undertaken by that magistrate.

The various opportunities for judicial redress granted to the people made it easy for them to defend themselves against arbitrary and illegal acts perpetrated against them. The status of the early Joseon people was qualitatively different from that of the medieval peasantry in West, which had access only to the feudal lord’s trial and thus to that lord’s economic compulsion. The commoners of Joseon were governed within a national administrative system that provided them with legal protection against the arbitrary actions of powerful individuals.

### Push for enfranchisement and the politics of public opinion

The people found protection within Joseon’s system of public governance, though the laws that framed that governance were still being made through a consensus among ruling elites. That is, the people had not yet grown into lawmakers themselves. Therefore, while the people had secured their right to self-defense through Joseon’s trial system, they still endeavored to improve their status within the system. These efforts were led by the *sarim* (local scholars and

literati), who hailed from the upper strata of the common people. The *sarim* group was composed of intellectuals who studied Neo-Confucian metaphysics (*seongnihak*, lit. study of nature and principle) and mid- or lower-level officials serving as senior bureaucrats. But even when serving in these mid- and lower-tiered positions, they lacked the privileges that came with pedigree, and once out of office, they no longer wielded the authority that came with their formal bureaucratic rank and so never attained the status of a ruling class.

With the aim of securing political status, the *sarim* began to be politically active from the time of King Seongjong (r. 1469–1494) and endeavored to create a power structure that could reflect their views and political outlook. That is, they aimed to create a political system of public opinion reflective of the views of the *sarim* group. However, the *sarim* found their efforts frustrated by the opposition of members of the so-called Old Meritorious Elites (*hungu*) and campaigns of political persecution and purges. Despite several rounds of literati purges (*sahwa*), the *sarim* struggled to muster their collective strength, and after about a generation of effort, finally succeeded in establishing a politics of public opinion during the era of King Seonjo (r. 1567–1608).

This politics of public opinion has its origins in the general opinion or will of the local people (*hyangnon*). Local intellectuals and officials formed a notion of general local opinion, or *hyangnon*, based on the views of rural communities. This *hyangnon* then formed the basis of *sarim* views, the expression of which influenced central state politics and policies.

Therefore, Joseon politics—based on a change in the perception



Sosu Seowon Lecture Hall | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
Seowon led public opinion in the countryside.

of the people as “Heaven’s people”—aimed for “public governance” founded upon laws. After an extended struggle, this public governance was finally established in the era of King Seonjo, and the people began to approach a position where they might be political actors rather than just objects of external economic coercion.

A defining aspect of the politics of the medieval West is the recognized dominance of the private arbitrary rule of the feudal lords and the economic compulsion such a system allowed. In comparison, the politics of Joseon, and the political doctrines that informed them, were already well beyond the political development of medieval Europe.

## Economic Structure and Status of the Common People

### Improvements in agricultural productivity

The economic foundation of Joseon was agriculture. Therefore, any economic development hinged upon improvements in agricultural productivity. As already noted, from some time during the Goryeo period the fallow rotation farming method had been overcome with the development of new agricultural techniques, a trend that began in the three southern provinces of Jeolla-do, Gyeongsang-do, and Chungcheong-do and gradually expanded northward. The era of King Sejong (r. 1418–1450) saw the compilation of *Straight Talk on Farming (Nongsa jikseol)*, which effectively distributed knowledge of these new farming techniques throughout the country. Through such efforts, from the end of the reign of King Seongjong (r. 1469–1494) these new farming techniques came to be implemented as far as Hamgyeong-do, in the northern extremity of the country. Buoyed by such invigoration, the country's agricultural output increased three- or four-fold.

The early Joseon period also witnessed the invigoration of paddy-field farming. Goryeo-period agriculture centered on dry-field farming in hilly regions. But in Joseon, the plains fronting villages were cleared for cultivation. On low-lying plains, waterways were always needed to prevent flooding, but only once the waterways were linked to agricultural facilities was paddy farming activated. By the period of King Munjong, irrigation reservoirs (*bo*) were being cut

along the paths of rivers and streams, and with this new irrigation method, wet paddy fields began to proliferate.

### Reductions in the distribution area of *sujo*gwon

As agricultural output and economic productivity increased, Joseon made the people, with their increased self-reliance, the foundation of national management.

As productivity increased, the people were able to develop into independent farmers upon whom taxes might be levied, even though they worked only small fields. Thus, the Joseon state sought to use the people as the foundation of a centralized system of state administration. To this end, the state distributed a limited number of *sujo*gwon rights (that is, not the ownership of the land but the right to collect rent on it in lieu of official salary) to government officials. The officials wielded personal control over the people by means of the *sujo*gwon. But the people's economic situation was made more difficult not only by the legal requirement that they supply the officials with rent (*sujo*), but by the various other demands the officials holding such *sujo*gwon might make upon the people. Scholar-officials of the capital, aware of this danger, limited the distribution of *sujo*gwon fields to the region of Gyeonggi (the province surrounding the capital of Seoul). For the remainder of the country, Joseon established a system directly controlled by the central government, reducing the room for officials to dominate the people.

However, this was also an act of discrimination against the people of Gyeonggi, which were still subject to the distribution of *sujo*gwon



*gwon*. The people of Gyeonggi raised the issue of discrimination as a problem, and by the reign of King Taejong (r. 1400–1418) the government was faced with the need to solve this problem. As a result, all the people were integrated into a centralized system of tax collection through the promulgation of the Tribute Tax Law (*gongbeop*). Thus, the economic status of the people improved as the domination of the *sujogwon* system was eliminated.

### Reduction in taxation rates

The Joseon state also lowered taxes on fields so that the people might become self-reliant farmers. During the Goryeo, some 25 percent of agricultural production found its way into central coffers in the form of land taxes (*jeonse*), but with the advent of Joseon, this was reduced to 10 percent. Naturally, such a policy was made possible by the increase in agricultural productivity and thus the greater volume of product on which to levy a tax. But also, these tax cuts were calculated based on the idea that any increase in the self-reliance of farmers would serve to actually increase the amount of overall tax revenue received directly by the state.

A notable increase in production capacity occurred during the period of King Sejong (r. 1418–1450), allowing the state to lower the land tax to only 5 percent of agricultural production. Through such government measures, the commoners developed into self-reliant farmers able to bear the duties placed upon them. Thus, the state felt comfortable to impose upon the *yangin* population (freeborn commoners) of the people labor obligations in state projects. Though the

*yangin* class was obliged to perform various duties for the state, at the same time they were also, as members of the state's communal system, eligible to receive education and to benefit from the state's welfare policies, thus further augmenting their status relative to the past.

### Operations of a centralized system of state finance

As the people's economic status improved, the state's financial structure also transformed. As the state began to administer the people directly from a centralized administration, scholar-officials also promoted the centralized administration of state financial matters, in order to entrust it with the public nature of state finances. Accordingly, the Joseon state strengthened the functions of the Board of Taxation (Hojo), the government department most involved in financial affairs, and in the fifth year of King Taejong (1405), reorganized the government structure to make the Board of Taxation the overarching office in charge of financial matters.

The royal household was no exception to reforms in state financial management. From the end of the Goryeo period, the emerging class of scholar-officials had also pushed for the appointment of an official to oversee the finances of the royal household, seeing this as a matter of public concern, but had made little headway. However, these efforts saw major advances in the era of King Taejong (r. 1400–1418) when the so-called Five Warehouses and Seven Palatial Offices, charged with overseeing royal finances, were absorbed into the newly created public government organs, the Office of Palace Supplies (Naeseomsi) and Office of Palace Procurement (Naejasi).

Later, in 1445, King Sejong integrated the various *sujoji* (or prebends; land given temporarily to officials, with size varying by official rank, in lieu of salary, from which they could procure revenue through taxes on its produce) belonging to each government office to create a unified system of land management. As a result, the management of state land was integrated into the financial management operations of the Board of Taxation, and the state's fiscal operations became more transparent, streamlined, and publicly accountable.

### Development of a commercial economy

Agriculture was at the center of the economy of early Joseon. Thus, scholar-officials focused their energies on agriculture, which was the foundation of the economy, while displaying a reserved attitude toward commerce. In circumstances where agricultural development was lagging, it was felt commerce would only impair the stability of public welfare by creating social upheaval in the countryside and inequalities among the common people who worked the land. Thus, the government managed the rapid changes overtaking rural society while controlling and regulating commercial activity.

However, with the augmentation of agricultural productivity, surplus production also increased, raising the need for the revitalization of commerce. In Seoul, licensed shops (*sijeon*)—market venues established and sanctioned by the state—expanded while private merchants, that is, merchants whose shops were not government-established, were also increasing. In the provinces, local markets (*jangsi*) emerged, and as several of these markets became

connected, small-scale trading networks developed. These grew into a nationwide trading network connecting regional urban centers with Seoul via commercial activities that used the country's river networks. Of course, this trade network was not limited to domestic markets but was connected to international trade networks through commercial exchanges with China and Japan.

Considering such changes, the Joseon government could no longer pursue policies that unilaterally suppressed commerce. Rather, in response to the reality of developments in commerce, the government endeavored to establish a new commercial order, implementing policy changes to use this commerce for state finances.

## Structure of and Changes in the Status System

### Scholar-gentry (*sajok*)

With the founding of Joseon, the stock of the common people rose both politically and economically, a change that also affected their status. In terms of the status groups of Joseon, the majority was composed of the yangin (free-born commoner) class, above which were the ruling scholar-gentry (*sajok*), and below which the base or low-born people (*cheonin*).

In Joseon, it was the scholar-gentry that constituted the ruling stratum. This stratum consisted of those high ministers holding the second rank, their immediate families and close relations. This group enjoyed a monopoly on high-ranking offices and the economic prerogative.

### *Yangin*

The majority of the population of Joseon were of the *yangin* (free-born commoner) class. The *yangin* fulfilled their duties and enjoyed their rights in a direct relationship with the state. The *yangin* were obligated to pay taxes on the product of their fields and as well as to pay various other state levies. That said, the *yangin* were also the recipients of a state welfare policy, benefiting from relief aid during difficult times such as drought. Depending on his abilities, a *yangin* male was also able to study at a local Confucian school (or *hyanggyo*) at no cost. After his period of study there, he had the opportunity to augment his status by taking and passing the state's civil service exam (*gwageo*).

The male *yangin* were also obligated to serve as soldiers for a period of time. But this was more than a simple obligation, it also carried advantages; once becoming soldiers a commoner could then be armed, and further, the soldier would receive rank based upon the time spent in military service.

### *Cheonin*

Occupying the bottommost stratum of Joseon society were the *cheonin* (base people or low-born), whose status was hereditary. The *cheonin* could be divided into two groups: government slaves (*gongcheon*), who were property of the state, and private slaves (*sacheon*), who were privately owned. As property of the state and thus the state's subjects, government slaves enjoyed the protection of the state and had property and rights to legal redress, so their basic

status was not far from that of the freeborn commoners, the *yangin*. From an economic perspective, the levies imposed upon the *cheonin* were not much different from those of the *yangin*.

Private slaves (*sacheon*) were the property of individual owners and could be bought and sold and in this sense their circumstances were difficult. However, even in the case of *sacheon*, they were participants and subjects in the public enterprise of governance, and it was understood that they could receive the protection of the state. When an owner severely punished a private slave or seized that slave's property, the state would intervene to protect that slave and punish the owner. Though privately owned, the *sacheon* remained a subject of the state, and when the interests of the two sides came into opposition, it was the interests of the state that took precedence.

### Social mobility

In Joseon, the barriers between the social classes were firm and established by law. But the possibility of social mobility always existed. It was not easy for a *yangin* commoner to rise to join the ranks of the scholar-gentry (*sajok*), yet it was possible via the civil service examination (or *gwageo*).

Of course, passing the civil service exam was extremely difficult. The *gwageo* allowed for 33 passers over three years, meaning only about ten passers were selected annually. Since the population of Joseon in the 16th century is estimated at about 10 million, the chances of success were slim indeed. Further, even if one received an official post, the possibility of ever becoming a high government

official or minister remained very narrow. Nevertheless, a lawful route through which one could improve one's social status did exist.

Even the low-born *cheonin* could improve their social status. Accumulating merit through such things as participation in a war or playing an important role in a state policy could result in the elevation of a *cheonin* to that of *yangin*. Of course, this route was also very narrow, but there were cases where the state officially moved to augment the status of a *cheonin*, and so such a way was possible.

Therefore, though the status structure of Joseon was extremely rigid, it was singular in that it still allowed some room for upward mobility. The status system of Joseon operated primarily based on "bloodline," but it respected "ability" as a channel for improving one's social status. Therefore, Joseon's status system was unique in the coexistence within it of both a rigid social hierarchy and opportunities for upward mobility, a combination of elements of pedigree and talent. This unique status structure was fitting to meet the growing desire for social mobility among the country's *yangin* with their increasing economic and political importance.

## 1592~1860

1592

Japan invades Korea, Korea's ceramics are disseminated to Japan

1610

*Dongui Bogam* (Exemplar of Eastern Medicine)

1636

The Manchus invade Joseon

1670

*Bangye surok* (Occasional Writings of Bangye) is completed by Yu Hyeong-won, the founder of the Silhak school of Confucianism

1678

Sangpyeong-tongbo coins are minted

1708

Uniform Land Tax Law (*Daedongbeop*) is enforced nationwide

1725

Tangpyeong ("Magnificent Harmony") Policy is implemented

1784

The first Korean is baptized as a Catholic

1860

Donghak (Eastern Learning) is founded

## Chapter 7

# CHANGES OF THE LATE JOSEON

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Chung Yeon-sik

translated by Daniel Kane

## The Japanese and Manchu Invasions: Trial and Resurgence

The Japanese invasions of Korea (1592–1598), known in Korean as the *imjin waeran* (Japanese invasions that began in the *imjin* year) brought much change to East Asia. Ming China took part in the conflict and suffered great financial loss, which led to peasant uprisings in various parts of the country. The Ming dynasty fell in 1644 to the Manchu Nurhaci, who had seized the opportunity of the Ming's weakness to rise to dominance in the north. In Japan, that state's warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi died in the course of the Korean invasions, resulting in the rise to power there of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the conclusion to the civil wars that had wracked Japan, and the ushering in of a prolonged period of peace.

The Joseon dynasty did not perish as a result of these changes, as had its counterpart the Ming in China, but the entire country was impacted by the war, which inflicted terrible damage. Untold numbers of Koreans died, reducing the population, devastating croplands across the country, and seriously damaging the state's ability to effectively administer.

Meanwhile, in the wake of this came aggression by the Qing. The Later Jin (later to become the Qing dynasty) invaded Joseon twice, in 1627 and 1636. Joseon, still reeling from the economic and military costs of the Japanese invasions, was unable to fend off this new foreign invasion and so capitulated to the Manchu Qing. But the real objective of Qing's attack on Joseon was to eliminate any

movement by Joseon that might pose a rear threat to the Manchus in their planned conquest of Ming China. Thus, these two Manchu invasions, unlike the Japanese ones, did not make a battlefield of the entire country, and were brief in duration. As a result, there was no catastrophic damage as in the war with Japan. That said, Joseon was again faced with various military pressures and fiscal difficulties due to the vast expenditures of resolving diplomatic issues with China. Joseon's sense of cultural superiority and dismissal of the Qing as barbarian made of its surrender before the Qing armed forces a humiliating ordeal. This rejection of the Manchu Qing's culture later worked to hinder the influx of advanced cultural products from that state.

However, even with the end of the second Manchu invasion of 1636 (referred to as the *byeongja horan*), Joseon faced further trials. Famine and epidemic broke out on unprecedented scales. This was also a period of severe climatic conditions, with a "little ice age" having global repercussions. As average annual temperatures dropped globally by 2 degrees, the consequences were severe. In England, the cold was enough to freeze the River Thames, ruin crops, and cause famine. Joseon faced similar conditions. At a time when cotton use was still uncommon, many perished from exposure to the severe cold. When crops are poor and nutritional intake falls, immunity also weakens and epidemic disease results. The state's census registers record a population of Joseon of about 7 million people prior to the great famine of 1670–1671 (*gyeongsin daegigeum*), after which famine and epidemic reduced the population by nearly 500,000. In the reign of King Sukjong, the great famine

of 1695-1696 (*eulbyeong daegigeun*) and its aftermath reduced the population by another 1.4 million over the course of five years.

There were several movements to meet and respond to these national crises. Already from the 16th century there had been indications of a movement away from using expensive medicines imported from China in favor of native medicines (*hyangyak*) acquired from the fields and mountains of the Korean Peninsula. And rather than treating ailments with a concoction of various medicines, a tendency emerged to treat disease with simple medicines composed of only a few ingredients. This in turn led to the production of the Korean reference work on medicine, *Dongui bogam* (Exemplar of Eastern Medicine), which sought to address the immediate issue of treating people's ailments rather than following the dangerous trend of limited-ingredient medicines.

Another response was tax reform. As the country's production capacity had not increased while its population fell drastically, it was impossible to collect taxes as in the past, and the now unreasonable tax system had to be reformed. In the past, when the common people were required to make payment of tribute tax (a tax payable in local specialty products) directly to the government, they would often prevaricate, finding any excuse to avoid payment. As a result, powerful figures voluntarily took on the responsibility of making the payment of tribute goods to the government, and they in turn would then levy the cost of these tribute goods on the ordinary farmers, and at a high price. This was called "indirect payment" (*bangnap*), and the dealers in such payments pushed the people to the point of destitution. Therefore, to alleviate such sufferings, a plan to unify



*Dongui bogam* | AKS Jangseogak Archives

The first edition of the *Dongui bogam* was added to the UNESCO World Heritage registry in 2009.

the tribute tax system to make it payable only in rice was advanced. Eventually, in order to lessen the ill effects of the tribute tax, after much deliberation the Uniform Land Tax Law (*Daedongbeop*) was implemented. Instead of imposing tax in the form of specialty tribute products, this new law allowed it to be paid in rice, lumber, or cash, and instead of imposing the tax based upon the household unit, it did so based upon land. The Uniform Land Tax Law, which began in the period of rule by King Gwanhaegun (r. 1608–1623), gradually expanded in scope. The persistent efforts of the official Kim Yuk served to expand its application greatly during the reign of King Hyojong (r. 1649–1659), and the law's implementation was complete by the time King Sukjong (r. 1674–1720).

On the other hand, the massive decrease in population inevitably led to a reduction in the number of men able to meet military



Kim Yuk (1580–1658)  
| The Museum of Silhak

service obligations (*gunyeok*). However, after the enthronement of King Injo in 1623 (*Injo ban-jeong*), which toppled the rule of the Gwanghaegun, the newly empowered Westerners faction (*seoin*), in order to expand their power base, increased the system of military garrisons. Thus, even as the population decreased, the army size was increasing. This had a very negative effect in regards to the military service obligation (*gunyeok*). When an excessive number of military obligations were levied upon a village relative to its number of inhabitants, resi-

dents would flee, unable to bear the additional burden, thus only increasing the service burdens of those left behind, who would have to pick up the slack. Neighbors and relatives of the deserters, who were now burdened with the military obligations of others, fled in their turn and so the vicious cycle was repeated. Government efforts to solve this difficult problem began in the 17th century, but they were repeatedly frustrated by vested interests, including those exempt from military service. Then, in 1750, when the country was revisited by large-scale famine and heavy death tolls, the central government was compelled to action. In 1750, King Yeongjo promulgated the

equal service system (*gyunyeokbeop*) that reduced the military cloth tax (*gunpo*; a tax imposed on commoners to pay for the upkeep of soldiers) on the *yangin* (freeborn commoners) from 2 rolls annually to 1, which was followed up in 1752 with new modifications. About half of the tax obligations had now been transferred from individual heads to land. This was one step in the process of transforming the pre-modern system in which taxes were imposed on human beings.

In addition to tax reform, efforts continued to be made to increase productivity. In the realm of agriculture, the use of seed beds spread, a technique wherein seedlings were grown to a point in beds prior to being transplanted to paddy fields. This change brought about an increase in productivity, but more importantly, it greatly reduced the labor involved in weeding and so crops could be cultivated with fewer hands. Such crops as raw cotton—used for the manufacture of clothing and socks—and tobacco began to be produced. Higher productivity also made possible large-scale agricultural production. But on the other hand, these developments also brought negative repercussions, as some tenant farmers were pushed out of their holdings.

In commerce, there was a surge throughout the country in the appearance of local markets (*jangsi*), which generally circulated within a given region, appearing in each county of that region every five days. In the country's major cities large-scale merchant guilds (*sangdan*) developed. The activities of the so-called Gyeonggang merchants—those merchants centered on Seoul—included the establishment of networks for grain transport linking Seoul with the provinces.



The merchants of Uiju (called *mansang*) and those of Gaeseong (called *songsang*) were also active in creating their own guilds. In many parts of the country, peddlers and itinerant merchants carried and traded in small items. The merchants of Seoul enjoyed a privileged monopoly under the aegis of the government, but as commerce flourished, the number of new privileged positions (*nanjeon*) also increased, making it increasingly difficult for these privileged merchants to maintain their monopolies in reality. Also, the conflict between privileged merchants and private merchants

eventually led to the promulgation of the commercial equalization enactment (*sinhae tonggong*) at the end of the reign of King Jeongjo (r. 1776–1800), which resulted in the disbanding of many of the private merchants and thus the victory of the *nanjeon*.

In the area of foreign trade, though from early on some small-scale trade in specialty products was effected via the translators that accompanied the official embassies to China, it was later through officially sanctioned markets with China (the so-called *junggang gaesi* near Uiju and the *chaengmun husi* in Manchuria) and the black



Gyeonggyangbu Imjindo | Kyujanggak Institute For Korean Studies / Seoul National University Library  
The Han River was the center of Joseon's economic growth, and Seoul was the center of the Joseon economy.

market activities of private traders that goods found their way into and out of Joseon. At this time, major items of trade included silver, widely used as a payment method, and ginseng, a particular specialty of Joseon.

On the other hand, artisans too, who were semi-bound to state institutions in the production of handicrafts, were occasionally able to steal a day between periods of their *corvée* labor to work for their own profit. Craftsmen were growing by gradually expanding the private manufacturing sector in response to private demand. This growth was discernible in areas such as ceramics and papermaking. But this growth in craftsmen had its limits. In some cases, merchants with large-scale capital at their disposal built their own factories and hired craftsmen to produce goods.

## A New Society

The development of the late-Joseon industry gave rise to new lifestyles and ways of thinking. In pre-modern society, the importance of agriculture far surpassed that of other industries, and one side effect of changes in agricultural productivity was a growing gap between rich and poor. Of particular importance in this regard were issues of land ownership, disparities in arable land holdings, and inequalities in taxation. To solve such problems, various intellectuals offered a variety of proposals. In this process, free and innovative thinking emerged that was not bound by traditional ideas. This new thinking is called *silhak*, sometimes translated as “practical learning.”

Through various publications, a great variety of ideas were put forth regarding political, military, educational, and status-system reforms. There was also an increased interest in the exploration of new fields of study, such as paleontology. In the field of production and consumption, a number of arguments were also made, including the idea that saving was not a virtue, but that consumption would promote industry and commerce through monetary circulation. The subject of farming in particular saw some singular proposals, including putting a cap on land holdings, introducing communal labor and distribution, and even introducing the so-called well-field system (*jeongjeonje*) of ancient China.

But these ideas were rarely manifested in actual policy. Though some scholars of the period dreamed up a variety of idealistic systems, they were pie-in-the-sky, as unfeasible and extremely difficult to implement in Joseon as in any country. Thus, these new ideas presented by the *silhak* scholars often remained just that, ideas.

Though the reform of the Joseon social system made little headway, progress was made in the exploration of new disciplines. New trends appeared in the fields of agriculture, geography, astronomy, and medicine, and several encyclopedias were also compiled. Also during this time, as the economy grew, writings on cuisine began to occasionally appear.

Unfortunately, this period saw no major scientific developments, an essential component of technological advancement. A major leap in the natural sciences occurred in the West in the 17th century—the Scientific Revolution—which led directly to the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. This also brought great changes

to China, and especially to Japan. Joseon, however, had much less contact with the West than did China or Japan, so it received fewer external stimuli and the introduction of new scholarship was more difficult.

But over the years, people's thinking did begin to shift. The scholar-official class of Joseon largely dismissed the Manchu Qing as savage barbarians and as such were unreceptive to writings and scholarship from the Qing. Yet there were some Joseon literati who traveled in official embassies to China, and so encountered the advanced writings that had already made an impact in that country. In particular, Hong Daeyong, Bak Jega, and Bak Jiwon argued that Joseon could learn sound systems and culture from these "Northern barbarians" (that is, the Manchu Qing). Thus they came to be called the "School of Northern Learning" (Bukhakpa).

Little by little Joseon was opening to the outside world. Through encounters with Western Jesuit missionaries in China, men of Joseon heard news of the outside world. After the map *Kunyu wanguo quantu* (Map of the Myriad Countries of the World; 1602), with its cartographic representation of the entire world, made its way to Joseon, it was realized the world was not China-centric. Although such new knowledge was not transmitted to everyone, it did gradually alter the thinking of the Korean people. In the construction of Suwon Fortress (Suwon Hwaseong) in the last decade of the 18th century, new contraptions were designed and used to move heavy objects, contraptions that were modeled after similar—albeit antiquated—Western machinery. From Western missionaries encountered in Beijing the Joseon envoys learned the earth was not square

but spherical and that it rotated at a tremendous speed. Although the geodetic theory transmitted to Joseon was not the Copernican doctrine of a heliocentric solar system, but rather the new model of the universe proposed by Tyco Brahe with the earth at the center and the sun rotating around the earth and the planets around the sun, a new model of the universe had nevertheless been passed to Joseon.

In the realm of painting, realism in landscape painting (*jingyeong sansu*) appeared. Even as late as the 17th century, the natural landscapes depicted in Joseon paintings were the landscapes of China, and the human subjects of the paintings were likewise Chinese. In other words, the subjects of Korean landscape paintings and portraiture came only from the imagination of the artist. Then, after the



Apgujeong | © Kansong Art and Culture Foundation  
A view of Apgujeong along the Han River by the artist Jeong Seon

fall of the Ming and the perceived destruction of Chinese civilization at the hands of the barbarian Manchu, the Koreans began to turn inward. As a result, the mountains of Korea began to appear as the artist's subjects. It was the painter Jeong Seon (penname Gyeongjae; 1676–1759) who took the first steps in this direction. Rather than relying purely on his imagination to paint traditional subjects such as natural Arcadias or the “eight views of Xiaoxiang” (*Sosang palgyeong*) along China's Yangtze River, he began to paint the landscapes of Korea's Mt. Geumgang and Han River.

Meanwhile, genre paintings also became popular. These took as their subject the vulgar customs and practices of the common people, including farming, fishing, drinking, and gambling, and sometimes even the furtive lovemaking between men and women. During the reign of King Jeonjo in the 18th century, when the government appointed official artists (*hwawon*), one criteria of selection was the ability to paint depictions of everyday customs of the common people. This change is what allowed literati figures like Kim Hongdo (1745–ca. 1814), active as official government artists in the Royal Academy of Painting (Dohwaseo), to bequeath us so many depictions of folk customs and everyday activities of the people.

There were also changes in the realms of music and literature. During this period there emerged a new type of music called *pansori*. This new art form, which relayed long stories before large audiences through a combination of storytelling, ballads, and gestures, proved well suited as a method for directly relaying emotions to an audience. Such extended storytelling was not exclusive to *pansori*.

In the private sector, novels called *banggakbon*, printed by private publishers for sale to the common people, began to appear. The interesting stories contained in these books included *pansori* narratives as well as new types of stories. In addition, in large cities there emerged a new kind of professional storyteller, called a *jeongisu*, who would narrate these stories to an audience.

Changes in the larger world were felt at the local level. By long tradition, the people were segregated by class, with each class having its appropriate dwellings, clothing, and diet, in some instances even regulated by law. But as these social barriers began to weaken, the law could be compliant. It was commonplace for the offspring of petty officials (*ajeon*) to ride about in sedan chairs and to see the use *samogwandae* (the traditional outfit for the scholar-official class) even in marriages among the common people. Changes in the country's economic conditions also changed the social positions of individuals. Even as fallen *yangban* (another name for the scholar-official class) had to endure the shame of their reduced status, wealthy *yangin* were seeking ways to raise their own social status. However, this was not such an easy thing to do. In the family registers (*hojeok*), there was a huge increase in the numbers of those claiming to be Confucian scholars (*yuhak*) and members of the *yangban* status group, though not all of them were accepted as such. Often it was only to be exempted from military service that this deception regarding social status was perpetrated in a family register. But even exemption from military service alone was considered a great advantage to the people of that time.

However, challenges to the established order were also occurring

in rural villages. In this new order of things, where communal compacts (*hyangyak*), village aid societies (*donggye*), and local gentry associations (*hyangcheong*)—conceived and created by the *yangban* in the mid-Joseon period in order to maintain their dominance over rural society—were no longer acceptable, it became increasingly difficult to obtain village consensus when the insistence was solely on the rights of *yangban*. There were even changes to the status of servants and indentured labor. In the early Joseon dynasty, according to the law titled Cheonjasumobeop, even if only one parent were a *nobi* (slave), all of the offspring had to live as *nobi*. But at the outset of the reign of King Hyeonjong (r. 1659–1674), through the promulgation of the law called the Jongmojongnyangbeop (Law of Matrilineal Inheritance), if the mother were a *yangin* (or freeborn commoner), the offspring were also *yangin*. This act was one attempt to address the stubborn and strict system of hereditary *nobi* status that was a major hindrance to national life. Indeed, a considerable number of *nobi* became fugitives, causing a great deal of frustration, and even in the case of government slaves, flight and disappearance was a common occurrence, with the only trace of the fugitive being their name in the census registry. Eventually, in the early 19th century, the paperwork of slaves of the palace treasury (*naenobi*) and government office slaves (*sinobi*) were burned. Further, the amount of slave tribute (*nobigong*), which *nobi* were obligated to pay in kind every year, was gradually reduced, such that by the early 18th century it was approximately 1 roll of hemp cloth per year, or about the equivalent levied upon a servant or able-bodied *yangin*.

## A New Crisis

The early 19th century was a turning point for Joseon. With the death of King Jeongjo and accession of the young King Sunjo in 1800, a new system of government emerged. The period of so-called “in-law politics” (*sedo jeongchi*) commenced, in which a handful of clans commandeered the running of state. With Sunjo in his minority, the regency of the queen dowager (called “ruling from behind the bamboo curtain,” or *suryeom cheongjeong*) began, and the houses of the king’s mother and queen consort rose to dominance. In this, the highest-ranking offices (*dangsanggwon*), meaning those officials who could participate in royal discussions and formulate state policy, numbered only about ten, almost all controlled by the Andong Kim and Pungyang Cho clans.

Amidst these political changes, the country’s productivity also began to fall. The slackening of public authority and order meant an increase in unequal and unreasonable taxation and other arbitrary burdens being placed on the people. Traditionally, the taxes of Joseon Korea had been considerably lighter relative to those of the surrounding countries, and so were not a rallying point for social unrest. But as conditions worsened, a backlash against the state’s tax administration emerged. In the 19th century, Joseon Korea—as neighboring Japan and China—experienced various disturbances and struggles that flared up intermittently but frequently. In 1811, the uprising of Hong Gyeongrae caused upheaval in Pyeongan-do province, leading to a prolonged struggle before it was finally suppressed. In 1862, starting with one in Jinju in Gyeongsang-do prov-

ince, various uprisings flared, spreading widely through the three provinces of Jeolla-do, Gyeongsang-do, and Chungcheong-do. As the unprecedented crisis spread, the central government sought and promulgated various measures in attempts to placate public sentiment, and although this seemed to quell the troubles for the moment, it was not enough.

Meanwhile, the active, independent, and creative atmosphere of the recent past seemed to peter out. The middle ranks of society sought to join the new era, while still trying to imitate the authority and lifestyle of the old *yangban* class. The activities of the country's mid-ranking professionals (*junjin*), such as in forming poetry societies (*sisa*) or publishing books that championed traditional values, can hardly be characterized as progressive. In the realm of art, in the 19th century, the genre of literati paintings (*muninhwa*) prevailed, which followed the artistic tastes of the literati aristocracy, while realism in landscape painting (*jingyeong sansu*) and genre painting, two groundbreaking movements of the 18th century, were devalued. The work of Kim Jeonghui (1786–1856), whose artistic creations rose beyond Joseon to compete with that of China, was certainly a great accomplishment in the world of Korean art, yet one can say that one side effect was its arresting the development of Joseon's indigenous and independent cultural impetus.

Amidst these new trials facing Joseon, Catholicism made its appearance. During the period of Western expansionism, European interest in missionary work and trade in East Asia increased. Yet despite this, Western countries never developed any meaningful contact with Korea. In the middle of the 13th century, when the

Pope sent monks to the Mongols, Goryeo was facing the Mongol invasions, and in 1271, when a combined Mongol-Goryeo army defeated the revolt of the Sambyeolcho (Three Elite Patrols) at Jindo, Marco Polo's *Travels* was published in Europe. Europeans sent Jesuit missionaries to China to focus on proselytizing and the development of commercial relations, and it was in the course of such voyages to China that storms blew some to the shores of Japan. But this did not happen with Joseon. As a result, Korea had no knowledge of Europe and Europe knew very little about Korea. Many rumors and fantastic stories regarding Korea circulated, such as it being a land abundant in gold but also a realm of cannibals. In 1549, the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier entered Japan and began his mission work there, and in 1601, shortly after the Imjin Wars in Joseon,



Doejae Cathedral in Wanju | © Choi Woo Young

Constructed in 1895, this was the first cathedral in Korea built in the traditional Korean style. This one-story building contains all the aspects of a basilica, but is built from wood following the Korean style.

the Jesuit missionary and scientist Matteo Ricci built a cathedral in Beijing. But it was not until 1783 that the Korean Yi Seunghun (1756–1801), while accompanying an official Joseon embassy to China, was baptized a Catholic before returning to Korea, and the following year the Korean Catholic Church was established. About fifty years later, in 1836, foreign Catholic missionaries were first dispatched to Korea, much later of course than they had first been sent to China, and even some three centuries after they had first appeared in Japan. But before the dispatch of these missionaries, men of Joseon had been traveling to China, becoming baptized into Catholicism, and returning to Joseon bearing Catholic texts.

However, the Catholic missionaries arriving in Joseon in the early 19th century were not of the Jesuit denomination, which had a sound knowledge of Eastern culture and customs, but from the Paris Foreign Missions Society (*Missions étrangères de Paris*), whose sole objective was to spread the Gospel. These missionaries generally perceived East Asians as lazy, untrustworthy, vulgar people caught up in superstitions, but who could be reborn as new human beings through the Christian Gospel. The Joseon *yangban*, with their obdurate doctrinalism, and the Paris Foreign Missions Society, with its sense of racial superiority, inevitably came into conflict. In 1791, incidents of *yangban* Catholic converts actually burning the ancestral tablets (*wipae*; used in ancestor worship) of their parents came as a shock to the Joseon authorities. Ultimately, the French priests as well as the Korean Catholic converts in Joseon were rounded up and executed. As a result, it became even more difficult for books of Western learning, which had only been trickling into Joseon to



Chojijin Fort on Ganghwa Island | © Cultural Heritage Administration  
Joseon built fortresses like this on Ganghwa Island to stop French and American warships from approaching Seoul by water. However, these measures proved inadequate.

begin with, to enter the country.

In response to Western learning (*Seohak*), symbolized by Catholicism, in the mid-19th century Eastern Learning (*Donghak*) emerged in Joseon. The *Donghak* movement, whose doctrines were established by an impoverished *yangban* from Gyeongju named Choe Jue (1824–1864), combined traditional Eastern beliefs with notions of universal equality. But *Donghak* did not remain merely a movement of faith, but took on an increasingly social reformist and anti-foreign agenda. As the *Donghak* faithful continued to grow, the Joseon government sensed a crisis and arrested its leader Choe Jue, executing him on the grounds of spreading heterodoxy and deceiving the people.

The execution of Western missionaries and *Donghak* believers

could not go unnoticed. Strangely shaped Western ships began to appear at various locales along the Korean coast. Then some of them made landfall, coming into contact with Koreans. Finally, in 1866, French gunboats appeared off the shores of Ganghwa Island and commenced shelling. Five years later, American warships appeared in the same place. These were the so-called foreign disturbances of the *byeongin* year (1866) (*byeongin yangyo*) and *sinmi* year (1871) (*sinmi yangyo*). But the overwhelming size of the foreign warships, with their powerful guns and cannon, was not enough to prevent acts of patriotism, valor, and military preparation on the part of Joseon and the Korean people. Nevertheless, the writing was on the wall. The opening of Joseon to the outside world was imminent.



## 1876~1905

- 1876  
Ports are opened formally and diplomatic relations with Japan are established
- 1879  
Protestantism is introduced to Korea
- 1882  
Diplomatic relations with the United States of America are established
- 1884  
Gapsin Coup is staged
- 1894  
Donghak Peasant Revolution, Sino-Japanese War, and Gabo Reforms take place
- 1896  
The Independence Club is formed
- 1897  
The Korean Empire is founded
- 1904  
The Russo-Japanese War breaks out
- 1905  
The Japan-Korean Treaty (*eulsa neugyak*) is signed

## Chapter 8

# THE MODERN WORLD AND THE KOREAN EMPIRE (DAEHAN JEGUK)

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Suh Young-hee

translated by Jong-Chol An

## Opening of Ports and the Enlightenment Policy

In the late 19th century, Western ships began to appear in various places on the Korean Peninsula demanding Joseon Korea adopt an open policy toward the outside world. The Western capitalist powers, having already forced opening policies upon China and Japan, were eager to seek out new Asian markets beyond their own saturated ones. The Korean ruling class, fixated with a traditional Sino-centric worldview, opposed diplomatic relations and commercial intercourse with Western powers, to say nothing of the propagation of Christianity. The Joseon government prepared to fend off Western infiltration, establishing fortifications along the entire coastline of the peninsula and developing new military weaponry. At this time, there were some cases in Joseon of upper-class *yangban* converting to Catholicism, resulting in their branding as heretics. The Catholic idea of the equality of all people posed a great challenge to the *yangban* elites, who had adhered to a strict hierarchical and feudalistic system of social status. Added to this, there was growing concern in Joseon over the southward advance of Russia (Korea's only Western neighbor) and two skirmishes between Joseon and a Western power occurred, with France and the United States (referred to in Korean as the *byeongin yangyo* and *sinmi yangyo*, respectively). Thus, antipathy towards Western powers and objections to an opening policy towards them were strengthened.

Western powers continuously requested the mediation of the Qing dynasty in the negotiation of treaties with Joseon Korea while

also directly approaching the Joseon dynasty with their requests for opening the country. Around this time, in the wake of the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan first attempted to formulate a new relationship with Korea by demanding Joseon's recognition of the new Japanese regime. When Japanese forces provoked the Joseon dynasty ("Un'yō Incident"), the latter finally decided to adopt an open-door policy, and with Japan concluded its first modern amity and commerce treaty in February 1876. However, this treaty was unequal because it established such things as tariff-free trade and extraterritorial rights. The ensuing treaties with the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Russia, Italy, France, and Austria-Hungary were generally unequal ones.

Having adopted an open-door policy by concluding new treaties, the Joseon dynasty now began to push forward modernization policies based upon Western models. Korea's King Gojong (r. 1864–1907), who learned from Bak Gysu, a teacher of the reformist party, realized that an enlightenment policy was inevitable, and now pursued a reformist policy with the objective of creating a "prosperous country and strong military" (*buguk gangbyeong*). However, the country's conservative ruling class objected to the enlightenment policy while military elements of the lower-class instigated a mutiny against King Gojong's rule (the Immo Mutiny of 1882). The enormous expenditures of the enlightenment policy, and consequent rise in taxation and prices, had heightened the sufferings of the lower classes.

On the other hand, the Qing government, which suppressed the Immo Mutiny on behalf of the Joseon government, now stationed

its military troops in Korea, putting further pressure on the country and endeavoring to rule Joseon as a vassal state. In opposition to this Qing policy, a reformist group instigated a coup (called the *gapsin jeongbyeon*, or coup of the *gapsin* year [1884]) to topple the pro-Qing government with the assistance of Japan, and to spearhead a reformist enlightenment policy. But it was a political upheaval that was suppressed in only three days. The reformist group behind the coup attempt had ambitions to establish a Western-style modern nation-state based upon the Japanese model by severing traditional ties with China. However, the coup failed due to insufficient preparation and blundering execution.

Following this, King Gojong who himself dreamed of being an enlightened monarch, pushed forward with enlightenment policies. Despite the Qing government's objections, the king sent Korean diplomatic officials to the United States in 1887 while actively accepting facets of Western civilization and technology, from electricity to military advisors. Against this backdrop, Protestant missionaries and foreign advisors initiated modernization projects in the realms of education, technology, industry, and the military.

However, with the unprepared opening of Korean ports under the unequal treaties, there followed an unchecked rise in Korean rice exports to Japan and a consequent rise in prices, which added more suffering to the lives of the peasants. While landlords, rich peasants, and merchants grew rich on rice exports, the outflow of rice to Japan resulted in domestic rice shortages and the rise in prices to poor peasants and the urban poor. This is because Japan, in the full swing of industrial revolution, was importing rice from Joseon in order to

supply cheap rice to the laborers in its new industrial undertakings.

Among Korea's impoverished peasants, the Donghak (Eastern Learning) Movement, founded by Choe Jeu, spread like wildfire. Although Donghak was a religion, standing in opposition to Catholicism (also referred to by Korean as Seohak, "Western learning" or Seogyo, "Western religion"), both teachings—Donghak and Catholicism—were labeled and repressed as heresies by the Korean ruling class, the *yangban*. One of the fundamental tenets of Donghak was that human beings were manifestations of heaven or god, so that the people should be treated as such, an idea that constituted a revolutionary rejection of Korea's traditional feudal class order. The idea of *hucheon gaebyeok* (renewal of the world since Heaven's opening), which was to inaugurate a new world where all would be treated as equal, gave new hope to the down-trodden Korean peasantry. Donghak faithful, who dreamed of a world where the rich and poor, the noble and base would be as one, were instrumental in eventually triggering a national peasant uprising in 1894.

In addition to their anti-feudal catchphrases in opposition to the old order, participants in this peasant war also demanded an anti-foreigner policy, criticizing the damages inflicted by the foreign merchants who had newly appeared in Korea after the opening of ports. The Joseon government, frightened by the rise of this peasant army, asked the Qing government for assistance in quelling the peasant rebellions. In response to the dispatch of military troops by Qing to the Korean Peninsula, Japan also decided to mobilize large-scale military forces to Korea. The Korean peasant army, worried by the prospect of Japanese intervention in Korean politics, made peace

with the Joseon government. However, after refusing to withdraw its troops from the Korean Peninsula even after the peace convention between the Joseon government and the peasant army, Japan suddenly attacked the Korean royal palace, Gyeongbokgung, effecting a coup d'état that established a pro-Japanese, reformist regime in Korea. Japan simultaneously launched a surprise attack on Qing naval vessels, triggering the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895).

Evicting Qing from the Korean Peninsula with a great victory in arms, Japan then subdued a resurgent Korean peasant army. The new pro-Japanese Korean cabinet move ahead with the so-called Gabo Reforms (*gabo gaehyeok*, or reforms of the *gabo* year [1894]), which included eradicating the traditional government civil service examination and the country's feudalistic status system, curtailing royal power, establishing a cabinet system and modern bureaucratic apparatus, and reforming the revenue system and local administration. However, these reform policies were buttressed by Japanese military power, rather than the reformists' own capability, so that these policies did not win over the support of the peasantry. Rather, the modern currency system and laissez-faire commercial policies that resulted from the reforms only expedited Japanese economic aggression in Korea.

In April 1895, however, the Triple Intervention of Russia, France, and Germany forced Japan to retrocede the newly acquired Liaodong Peninsula, seized from Qing following Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War, and with this the political situation around the Korean Peninsula once more changed dramatically. In the wake of this, in October 1895 Japan heinously slaughtered Korea's Queen

Min (an incident referred to as the *eulmi sabyeon*, or incident of the *eulmi* year [1895]), who was seeking Russian aid to fend off Japanese influence. This act of brutality worsened international public opinion regarding Japan. Therefore, following this, Japan decided to withdraw from the Korean Peninsula.

## The Empire of Korea and Movement to Establish a Modern State

After the inhumane slaughter of the queen, King Gojong retreated to the refuge of the Russian Legation in Seoul, returning to a new palace, Gyeongungung a year later to proclaim the Empire of Korea (Daehan jeguk) in October 1897, a proclamation that made him an emperor.

Traditionally, the Joseon dynasty referred to its own leader as a king, that is, one step lower than the Chinese emperor. But with the defeat of Qing in the Sino-Japanese War, the Joseon dynasty realized that the country would be on par with Qing in having an emperor. This proclamation was an expression of the Korean will to leave the traditional Sino-centric world order and enter the modern international order of sovereign states, with an association with the Western powers. The new royal palace was located in the Jeongdong area of Seoul, the location of churches built by missionaries, modern schools, hotels, as well as the legations of Russia, the United States, Great Britain, and France.

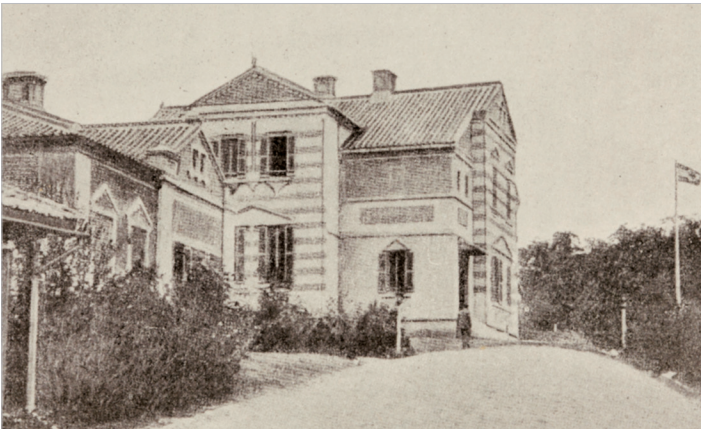
Emperor Gojong drove this modernization policy from above,



US legation in Korea | © kt-collection/bookfoto



UK legation in Korea | National Palace Museum of Korea



German legation in Korea | National Palace Museum of Korea



Russian legation in Korea | National Palace Museum of Korea

creating hybrid institutions out of the old ones and those created from the Gabo Reforms, and by supporting a policy of boosting production and promoting national industries. Around 1898, citizen activists, whose main organ was the Independence Club (Dongnip hyeophoe), held anti-government demonstrations protesting Russian intervention in Korean affairs, official corruption, and the unilateral actions of the emperor and his entourage. Mass protest meetings (Manmin gongdonghoe), attracting diverse groups who had been emancipated from Korea's old feudal status system, were a part of this civil rights movement that aimed at greater political participation by the people. However, Emperor Gojong suppressed this movement and disbanded the Independence Club.

After the dissolution of the Independence Club, the "Korean Empire's dynastic system" (Daehanguk gukje) made the state's power structure clear, and with the Emperor at its center. Gojong ran the state primarily with the government officials of the Department of the Royal Household (Gungnaebu). This Department had originally been instituted during the Gabo Reforms to check royal power. However, following the establishment of the Korean Empire in 1897, it was transformed into a government office that monopolized statecraft through its officials. Yi Yongik, an innermost aide to the emperor, in particular established various new modernization enterprises within the Department, and tried to evade the checks of the State Council (Uijeongbu), where government ministers formally convened.

Among the royalist power groups during the Korean Empire period who had the favor of the emperor, were many successful



A Joseon delegation sent to the US in 1883 | Korea University Museum

upstarts who not only did not hail from yangban families but originated from the base peoples, even lower than the middle people. Emperor Gojong did not depend on high officials who incessantly challenged his power, but instead trusted this royalist group who were faithful to him. They did not criticize or challenge the emperor based upon Confucian political ideas, but rather actively executed policies as the emperor's right-hand men.

During the 1880s, with the inauguration of a reformist policy, Gojong adopted a personnel policy to employ and promote personnel who were good at adapting themselves to concrete tasks regardless of their social background. In accepting Western technologies and civilization, the group below the middle echelon, rather than *yangban* elites, showed themselves best able to adapt to the new exigencies. Despite the *yangban* officials' dismissal and mocking of



Gyeongung Palace (today's Deoksugung Palace) | National Palace Museum of Korea

this middle group, the latter arose as a power block. Some officials in the Department of the Royal Household, who had received a modern education, supported the reform policy with their practical knowledge. The officials of the middle and lower echelons of government were intelligent men equipped with modern education, rather than the passers of the traditional government civil service exams. Graduates from various foreign language schools, medical schools, commercial and technical schools, mining schools, and overseas schools, secured government positions. Exemplary silk-worm houses and industrial training institutions also produced practical-minded mid-ranking officials.

In 1896, Emperor Gojong and his officials proceeded with the “Gwangmu Reforms” (Gwangmu gaehyeok) as a project of modern state-building with the emperor at the center. Though the Korean

Empire became politically conservative with the expansion of imperial power, it no doubt aimed at creating a modern society. It invited many Western advisors to introduce Western civilization to Korea, with the result that Seoul actually preceded Tokyo in the installation of electricity, trams, and the construction of modern roads. For modern mining management, the Korean government imported mining machinery and invited French technicians.

Following the Gabo Reforms, public opinion increasingly demanded yet more drastic modernization efforts, while voices urging adherence to the old ways weakened further. One editorial in the *Hwangseong sinmun* (Imperial Gazette) asserted that amid the mixture of new and old systems, people could not follow new ways without demolishing old ones. Conservative government officials such as Yi Dojae and Shin Giseon did tearfully cut off their traditional topknot (a symbol of the old ways), as did military soldiers and police officers. Thus, even Yi Dojae, who had once actually participated in a reformist government but who opposed a government ordinance requiring the removal of men’s topknots, acquiesced with resignation, unable to deny the changed times. In Confucian ideology, to cut one’s hair was equal to denying tradition and embracing Western civilization.

The Korean Empire was eager to accept new ideas while abandoning old ones, save for the preservation of the emperor’s power. It started surveying lands for the establishment of a modern economic system based upon the idea of a prosperous country and strong military. For the exact appraisal of taxable lands, the government established the Bureau of Land Survey (Yangji amun), and hired



Namdaemun before trams were introduced | National Palace Museum of Korea



Namdaemun after trams were introduced | Myongji-LG Korean Studies Library

Western surveyors to undertake a modern evaluation of the national territory. Further, in order to issue a land title document to each landowner, the Bureau of Land Ownership (Jigyae amun) was set up. The accurate estimation of lands was to be the basis of a modern revenue administration, which was to secure the finances for modernization projects. It also set the foundations for the establishment of a capitalist economic system based upon modern ownership.

Thus, many modern companies and factories were established. The Korean government set up government-owned companies, and government officials invested in these new firms and banks. There was one case of craftsman introducing machinery and expanding his facility into a modern production plant. Rich merchants such as market brokers (*gaekju*) or port merchants (*yeogak* with lodging facilities) provided the capital to handicraft technicians to produce commercial items. In the realm of agricultural tools and everyday life, larger-scale manufacturing plants for such things as iron products, pottery, brassware, and paper were established to supplant cottage industries. Some cotton or silk manufacturing plants introduced modern weaving machines. The Jongno Weaving Company (Jongno jikjosa), founded in 1899 by Seoul merchants who controlled large capital, being one such example. In addition, factories producing consumer goods, such as rice, beer, tobacco, and matches, popped up. Several economic organs in which mostly high officials invested were also established: Hanseong Bank (1897), Daehan Cheonil Bank (1899), Daehan Railroad Co., Ltd (1899), and Inhan Steamship Co., Ltd (1900). Further, a government corporation, Samjeongsa, funded by the imperial household as well as the Office



of Royal Property (Naejangwon) of the Department of the Royal Household (Gungnaebu), was also founded for the monopolization of the *insam* (ginseng) industry.

However, for the establishment of modern enterprises, large sums of capital, technology, and professional human resources were necessary, with the result that Western encroachment on the Korean economy also expanded. Yi Yongik pushed forward a plan to found a Central Bank and modern monetary system for the establishment of the capitalistic order in Korea. Korea was not able to issue a standard currency, though a law on new currency issuance (Sinsik hwapye jangjeong) was adopted in July 1894 in response to Japanese encroachment upon the Korean monetary system since the opening of Korean ports to the Western powers. However, the situation was only exacerbated by government over-issuance of the *baekdonghwa*, a copper coin. In order to secure money for the royal court, Yi Yongik, chief of the Bureau of Mintage, issued too much currency. However, despite Japanese objections, the Korean Empire pushed forward with monetary reforms by issuing the Ordinance on Currency (Hwapye jorye) in February 1901, Ordinance on the Central Bank (Jungang eunhaeng jorye) in March 1903, and Ordinance on the Convertible Note with Gold (Taehwan geumgwon jorye) in March 1903. In the end, however, the Korean Empire was unable to standardize the currency and secure the enormous sums required for the establishment of a Central Bank, but only managed to lay the initial groundwork before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904.

With the rise of tensions between Russia and Japan in 1903,

most modernization policies in Korea came to a halt. Japan, which defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), now dispatched its advisors to Korea, and dissolved most organizations concerned with modernization projects along with their personnel, particularly in the Department of the Royal Household. Most enterprises controlled by Yi Yongik in particular, undertakings to reform finances and reorganize royal property, were halted. Thus, the Gwangmu Reforms were aborted without substantial results, and instead colonial modernization under Japanese control commenced. Colonial modernization hitched itself to the modernization projects commenced by the Korean Empire, robbing the royal court and the Korean public of their property in the process. Japan began to circulate Japanese bank notes under the guise of financial reforms from June 1905, a step that created a colonial finance and monetary system. With the exchange of old Korean coins for Japanese silver coins, Japan robbed Korea of its monetary capital overnight.

## Diplomacy of the Korean Empire and the Road to Colonization

Amidst the fierce rivalry between Russia and Japan for dominance on the Korean Peninsula, the Korean Empire left the traditional Chinese world order, strengthened its diplomatic ties with Western powers, and sent its diplomats to foreign countries. With the Qing dynasty—with which Korea had formerly maintained a traditional tributary relationship—the Korean Empire concluded a modern

treaty of commerce in 1899, establishing a Korean legation in Peking, thus demonstrating a now equal relationship between Korea and China. At the time, it was the hope of the Korean Empire to become a sovereign member of an international family of nations founded upon international law (Manguk gongbeop).

However, in reality, the Korean Empire became a diplomatic bargaining chip between two fiercely rival nations—Russia and Japan. Thus, the utmost diplomatic concern of the Korean Empire became how best to secure its independence as a neutral state caught between two rival powers. Though there had been a discourse on neutrality going back to the 1880s, the Korean Empire now sought a concrete policy of neutrality. The fact that the Korean Empire secured a peace and commerce treaty with Belgium, an eternally

neutral country, in 1901 and invited Belgian diplomatic advisors to Korea, shows the Korean Empire's preference for a non-militarized neutrality to the Swiss type of armed neutrality. Considering the Korean Empire's weak military power, the Belgian type of neutrality based upon agreements with neighboring states, was more realistic. In order to strengthen national defenses, the Korean Emperor had himself taken command of the army and navy, established a military academy and a Supreme Military Council (Wonsubu), and spent more than 40 percent of the government budget on modern military weaponry. However, even though the military draft was instituted in 1903, it was never executed.

In the 1880s King Gojong had tried to conclude a secret Korean-Russian compact in order to fend off Qing incursions into Korea, had escaped the Japanese grip on Korea following the Triple Intervention of 1895, and in 1896 had found refuge in the Russian Legation in Seoul with the collusion of Russia. Consequently, Gojong came to believe that if Korea could not be a neutral power, it had best depend on Russia rather than Japan, whose ambition was to establish complete control over Korea. Russo-Japanese rivalries intensified over the issue of Manchuria. When Russia did not withdraw its military forces from Manchuria (they had been deployed there to help in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900), Japan criticized Russia and worried about the possibility of Russia extending its power on to the Korean Peninsula. Thus, Japan and Russia had concluded the Nishi-Rosen Agreement in 1898 to maintain a balance of power, while Japan continued discussions with Russia over the idea of dividing the Korean Peninsula along the thirty-ninth parallel, or the



Korean legation in the US  
 Left: 1893 | © The Independence Hall of Korea  
 Right: 2019 | © SEONA SHIN

In 1887, Joseon dispatched Bak Jeongyang as its first diplomat to the US, and purchased a legation building in Washington, DC in 1889. This building was sold by the Japanese in 1910, but following its repurchase by Korea in 2012, it became a museum.

idea of an exchange of Manchuria for Korea. Japan secured a firm ally with the signing of the First Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902, while in 1903 Russia suddenly took a more hardline stance in its policy toward both Manchuria and the Korean Empire. Russian demands from Korea for the right to construct a railroad between Uiju (on the Korea-Manchuria border) and Seoul, its moves to secure a lease on the port of Masan and logging rights along the Amnok (Ch. Yalu) River, and to illegally construct military bases at Yongampo, on the lower reaches of the Amnok River, all contributed to creating an explosive situation around Korea.

Though the Korean Empire proclaimed its neutrality on January 21, 1904, Japan launched a surprise attack on the Russian fleet at Lüshun (Port Arthur) on February 8, 1904, thus triggering the Russo-Japanese War. Simultaneously, Japan deployed a large military force to the Korean Peninsula. On February 23, 1904, Japan forced the Korean Empire to sign the Korea-Japan Agreement (Han-Il uijeongseo), ensuring Korea was under Japan's firm military control. Further, on August 22, 1904, under clauses regarding "civic improvement", Japan also secured an agreement for the dispatch of advisors (*gomun hyeopyak*) to the Korean Empire. Following this agreement, finance advisor Megata Tanetarō and American diplomatic advisor Durham W. Stevens were dispatched to the Korean Peninsula.

Having defeated Russia at Lüshun in January 1905, at the Battle of Fengtian (Mukden) in March 1905, and at sea in the Battle of Tsushima Strait in May 1905, in July 1905, Japan secretly concluded the "Taft-Katsura Agreement" with the United States, and with it

won official American recognition of its control over Korea. Japan concluded the Second Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Portsmouth Peace Treaty through the mediation of America President Theodore Roosevelt, in August and September 1905, respectively. Consequently, Japan obtained the right to a protectorship over Korea. On November 10, 1905, Japan dispatched Itō Hirobumi as envoy plenipotentiary from the Japanese emperor to conclude the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty. Emperor Gojong resisted the conclusion of this treaty to the end, but Japan coerced Korean high officials into signing the treaty on November 17, 1905, resulting in what Koreans came to call the *eulsa neugyak* (Forced Treaty of the *eulsa* year [1905]), that is, the Japan-Korean Protectorate Treaty. However, Emperor Gojong argued that the treaty was concluded without his consent and ratified under duress, making it null and void under international law. In its wake, Japan quickly established the Tonggambu, or Japanese Residency-General for Korea, and nominated Itō Hirobumi as the first Resident-General.

Emperor Gojong and his entourage sent personal missives and envoys to several powers with the assertion that the Protectorate Treaty was null and void, and thus international society should intervene in Korean issues, but to no avail. Of particular note was the Korean emperor's personally written appeal delivered by the American Homer B. Hulbert to nine heads of state, including that of the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Austro-Hungary, Italy, Belgium, and China. Furthermore, an appeal to raise the Korean issue before the Hague International Arbitration Tribunal was also not realized. Although the Korean special envoys

to the Second Hague Peace Conference of 1907, Yi Sangseol, Yi Jun, and Yi Wijong, did not participate in the formal meetings, they published on the Korean national cause in *Courrier de la Conférence de la paix* published by William Stead, and criticized Japan's violation of international law in Korea.

However, on July 20, 1907, Japan dethroned Emperor Gojong through a ceremony of abdication, one day after securing a surrogate proclamation from the Korean crown prince on July 19. Shortly afterwards, on July 31, Japan also forced the last Emperor, Sunjong to proclaim a Royal Edict disbanding the Korean army, thus beginning to dissolve the sovereignty of the Korean Empire. The disbanded soldiers fiercely resisted this policy, and joined national anti-Japanese civil armies called *uibyeong* (righteous armies). At this crisis of national sovereignty, Confucian *yangban*, commoners, and disbanded soldiers proceeded to join the anti-Japanese movement. With the aim of restoring national rights, enlightenment intellectuals participated in a self-strengthening movement by establishing schools and publishing newspapers or magazines, rather than taking up military resistance.

In spite of this resistance movement, the Japanese government decided to annex the Korean Peninsula on July 6, 1909 and began to prepare concrete plans to this end. Having secured Russian and British agreement to the Japanese annexation of Korea in April and May 1910, respectively, Japan dispatched Terauchi Masatake to Korea, and concluded the Annexation Treaty on August 22, 1910. When the treaty was proclaimed on August 29, 1910, political association or campaign meetings were strictly banned by the Japanese

gendarmerie. Those who raised their voices in opposition were imprisoned without exception. Thus, Korean resistance was totally suppressed, and the Korean Empire became a Japanese colony.

## 1910~1941

1910

Korea is forcibly annexed by Imperial Japan

1919

March First Independence Movement takes place,  
Korea Provisional Government is established

1941

The Pacific Ocean theater of WWII begins as war  
against Japan is declared

## Chapter 9

# JAPANESE COLONIAL RULE AND THE KOREAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

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Chun Woo-yong

translated by Jong-Chol An

## Japanese Aggression in Korea and the Korean National Movement after the Russo-Japanese War

Having competed with Russia over the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria from the late 19th century, Japan initiated the Russo-Japanese War in February 1904, with the result being its occupation of Korea. After achieving victory in this war, Japan also threatened Korea with stationing of the Japanese army in Korea and robbed Korea of its sovereign diplomatic rights. The Korean Emperor sent secret envoys to the Hague Peace Conference in 1907, and turned to the international community with claims of the injustice of Japanese policy towards Korea. In response to this, Japan dethroned the Korean Emperor and disbanded the Korean army. In addition, Japan named Japanese vice-ministers to every government department. The Residency-General that was installed in 1905 as a pretext for handling Korean diplomacy actually became the supreme administrative organ, preparing the foundations for the colonization of Korea in the realms of finance, local administration, and the land system.

When Japan robbed Korea of its diplomatic rights, Korean intellectuals and peasants organized righteous armies, or *uibyeong*, to resist Japan. And in 1907, when the Korean army was formally dissolved, some of its disbanded soldiers joined these righteous armies. These *uibyeong*, with the assistance of peasants, waged guerrilla warfare against Japan. In response, Japanese forces burned some villages where righteous army units operated, killing their inhabitants. Most

righteous army soldiers, unable to withstand the overwhelming Japanese firepower, were killed or imprisoned while some remnants crossed the country's northern border into Northeastern China (Manchuria). Other righteous army members or sympathizers continued to resist the Japanese invasion at the individual level. For example, in 1908, Jeon Myeongun and Jang Inhwon, staying in San Francisco, assassinated Durham W. Stevens, who as a diplomatic advisor to Korea had supported Japanese aggression in Korea. In 1909, An Junggeun, leader of a *uibyeong* unit, assassinated Itō Hirobumi, the first Resident-General of Korea, at the Harbin Railway Station in Manchuria. That same year, the laborer Yi Jaemyeong stabbed and severely wounded Korean Prime Minister Yi Wanyong, who had collaborated with the Japanese aggressors.

Some intellectuals who believed that in order to regain sovereignty national power should be cultivated, participated in enlightenment movements to expand modern industry and educational institutions. In Seoul, many societies (*hakhoe*) were founded that served as the intellectual association of a given region. In addition, many schools were also established. Merchants also set up incorporated companies to counter Japanese capital. Further, in 1908, the National Debt Redemption Movement (Gukchae bosang undong) was launched by Koreans with money saved by personal abstinence from alcohol and tobacco in order to pay back Korea's foreign debt to Japan. In 1907, a secret society, the Sinminhoe (New People's Association) was also active in bringing together righteous army elements abroad and domestic enlightenment groups.

## Japanese Annexation of Korea and the March First Movement

Japan coerced the Korean emperor to agree to the Annexation Treaty on August 22, 1910, and it was proclaimed a week later. The name of Korea changed to Chōsen (Joseon), and the Korean emperor was demoted to king while the Japanese emperor became the sovereign leader of Korea. The Japanese colonizer adopted brutal colonial rules based solely upon military power. The Japanese Governor-General of Korea, answerable only to the Japanese emperor, exerted plenary powers in the executive, legislative, and judicial realms. Only Japanese army generals were able to become Governor-General, and military police handled general police administration. Government-General officials, even down to elementary school teachers, worked with swords at their waists. Colonial military police and civil policemen had summary judgment power, able to summarily punish misdemeanor offenders without any due process. The Government-General strictly prohibited all Korean associations and assemblies, while using the fabricated pretext of an abortive assassination attempt on the Governor-General to arrest and imprison many of the intellectuals who had the potential to lead independence initiatives. All Korean newspapers and magazines were discontinued, and books critical of Japan ceased publication.

As it subdued Korean resistance with military force, Japan was busy reorganizing Korea into a supply base for food and resources for the Japanese economy. Japanese political and military leaders



Seodaemun Prison | © Seodaemun Prison History Hall

Seodaemun Prison was opened in 1908 with the name "Gyeongseong gamok" as a place to imprison Korean liberation activists.

and scholars of colonial policies estimated that in order to perpetuate the colonial rule of Korea, many Japanese had to be moved to the Korean Peninsula. They believed Koreans were incapable of utilizing the land due to their backward agricultural technologies, while tax collection remained shaky with details on land ownership uncertain. In 1909, the Residency-General had set up the Land Survey Bureau (Toji josaguk) in association with the Korean government—but which after annexation came under control of the Government-General—and began a comprehensive cadastral survey of all Korean land. The purpose of the land survey was to determine land owners and taxpayers, but also to convert such things as royal land, military land, pasturage, and non-public communal land into government-owned land. The Oriental Development Company (Tōyō Takushoku Kabushiki Gaisha) and other Japanese companies obtained these newly created government lands, and in turn sold them to Japanese migrants to Korea. The Government-General originally planned to train these migrants as independent farmers, but most Japanese became absentee landlords who leased their land to Korean tenants at high rates. The Government-General transformed communal land into state land and moved Japanese migrant farmers to Korea, with the result that many Korean peasants lost their farmland. Thus, competition among peasants to lease land was fierce. With the steep rise in lease fees, most Korean tenants became impoverished even as the rates of commercialization of rice grew with the increase in rich landlords. Landlords and tenants concluded seemingly modern contracts, but the real status of tenants was as serfs to landlords due to the extremely high lease rates.

The Government-General in Korea suppressed private capital, preventing it from going to non-agricultural sectors in order to preserve Korea as a migrant settlement and agricultural colony. With the enactment of the Ordinance on Companies (Hoesaryeong) in 1911, the Government-General established control over the formation of Korean companies. By this law, the location of a company's headquarters and branches, changes to its board of trustees, and any change in a company's purpose all required government permission. Consequently, most pre-colonial Korean companies were unable to obtain the necessary permissions and so shut down. Only a few companies, such as banks which lent money to landlords to purchase land, companies processing natural sources destined for Japan, and companies concerned with infrastructure, were now established, while Korean commerce and industry became generally stagnant and shrank.

World War I, which broke out in 1914, fractured the imperialist world system, with the conflict's horrible casualties surpassing those of all previous wars. More than 8.5 million were killed by new weaponry created by state-of-the-art sciences—the machine gun, tank, submarine, airplane, and poison gas. Several millions more suffered irreparable harm. Within European countries that experienced the ravages of war, some movements emerged to reflect on the former imperialistic expansion. Shattered was the belief that history progressed in a unilinear fashion amidst continuous competition, and a spirit of humanitarianism, human dignity, and self-determination, became widespread. Justice and humanitarianism became a new spirit of the times, while the idea of self-determinism in the interna-



tional arena found wide consensus.

On March 1, 1919, Korean representatives composed of intellectuals and religious leaders held a ceremony for Korean independence, and presented a written declaration of independence in Seoul. To shouts of “Hurrah!” and “*manse!*” the citizens of Seoul and Pyeongyang marched through the streets, revealing their ardent desire for independence. The movement spread throughout the Korean Peninsula, attracting several million participants, transforming it into a national movement. Japanese military and civil police brutally suppressed bands of marching Koreans with guns and sabers. At the village of Jeam-ri near Suwon, they killed all the residents, but the demonstrations continued for several months. Between March and May 1919, some 2,023,089 people throughout the Korean Peninsula participated in 1,542 meetings. Among these, 7,509 were killed, 15,961 wounded, and 46,948 arrested. Overseas Koreans in Northeast China, on the west coast of the United States



Dilkusha | © Yonhap News

Dilkusha in Seoul was the home of American Albert Taylor (1875–1948). News of the March 1st Proclamation of Korean Independence and the Jeam-ri massacre were first reported to the world from this house. It is now a museum.

and in Hawai‘i, in Russia’s Maritime Province, even in Havana, Cuba, joined in this *manse* movement. The March First Movement was the first large-scale national movement to occur within the colonies of the

victorious nations following World War I under the banner of justice, humanity, and national self-determination.

National independence activists judged that because of the Korean declaration of independence, they had to establish a government as soon as possible. Thus, there arose several provisional governments both inside and outside Korea. From April 1919, coalition movements emerged. Korean activists inside and outside Korea decided to recognize a provisional government proclaimed in Seoul, and to place a unified government and national assembly in Shanghai, China. On September 11, 1919, the Korean Provisional Constitution was proclaimed, and the Korean Provisional Government (Daehan minguk imsi jeongbu, KPG) and Provisional Assembly were also established. Considering that the newly pro-



Members of the Korean Provisional Government | The Independence Hall of Korea

claimed Korean state was a republic, the March First Movement may also be considered a popular revolution.

## Japanese Colonial Rule and the Korean Independence Movement in the 1920s

The March First Movement, which offered peaceful resistance to the brutal rule of an imperial power, had a substantial impact upon the liberation movements of oppressed peoples around the world. It also laid bare Japanese colonial savagery and brutality. Thus, the Japanese government, which propagated the notion that Koreans were happy under the civilized rule of Japan, had to change its own methods of rule in order to assuage Korean resistance and fend off world criticism. Saito Makoto, a navy admiral and the new Japanese Governor-General in the wake of the March First Movement, declared that the military rule, or *mudan tongchi*, that had characterized Japanese colonial rule thus far, would be changed to cultural rule, or *munhwa tongchi*.

The Government-General now permitted the publication of newspapers and magazines in vernacular Korean, partially allowed Korean gatherings and associations, stopped the carrying of swords by civil officials and teachers, and excluded military police from general police tasks. Governor-General Saito gave public assurance that he would implement a system of local self-government and increase the number of educational institutions, so that Koreans could enjoy autonomy and the opportunity to enjoy their culture.

However, the main purpose of the policy change was to divide and rule Koreans. The Government-General provided limited rights of speech to a small number of wealthy Koreans who were cooperative with the colonial rulers, a right that divided people into those with political rights and those without. Therefore, this new cultural rule was fundamentally deceptive. Although some council-type organizations were instituted, these had no decision-making authority over policies or budgets, but only produced advisory opinions. Suffrage was only granted to large taxpayers, leading to the formation of local councils with Japanese majorities. Furthermore, the general police force was largely composed of those released from the military police, such that it retained its military character.

The Government-General actively pursued its policy of boosting rice production in Korea with the pretext of improving the lives of Korean farmers. But the fundamental purpose was to ease rice shortages in Japan. During World War I, when European capital retreated back into Europe, Japanese capital moved in to occupy the vacuum. The Japanese economy enjoyed unprecedented prosperity with the rise of investment and production. For a short time, the young people of Japan's rural farming communities migrated into urban centers as laborers. This meant that former rice producers were now commercial consumers. The drop in population of farming villages and the rapid rise in urban population produced an imbalance between rice production and consumption, triggering rice riots. In 1918 rice riots erupted in major Japanese cities. Consequently, the Japanese government judged that for the stability of rice prices, the importation of Korean rice at low prices was inevitable. The

Government-General accepted this demand, and planned and implemented its policy of boosting Korean rice production from 1920. The Government-General proposed two methods for realizing this policy's aim. One was to convert dry fields into paddy with enlarged water irrigation equipment, which was considered a land improvement project. The other was to increase crop output per area by teaching "advanced agricultural techniques," which was considered an agricultural improvement project. However, the latter did not bring meaningful results because Korean farming techniques were not as primitive as the Government-General posited. However, the project to create reservoirs with landlord financing produced some meaningful dividends.

During the period of this policy, rice production increased greatly, from 1.9 million tons in 1920 to an average of 2.1 to 2.2 million tons per year in the 1920s. However, during this same period, Korean consumption of rice as well as other grains decreased. The volume of Korean rice exported to Japan surpassed the increase in production. Rice exports to Japan increased dramatically, from 260,000 tons in 1920 to 820,000 tons in 1930. Thus, approximately three times the increase in production went to Japan. Around the time of Japan's annexation of Korea, Koreans and Japanese were similar in terms of rice consumption per capita. However, in 1928, for example, Japanese consumed on average 170kg of rice per capita a year, while Koreans only consumed 81kg. Moreover, because a considerable number of dry fields were converted into rice paddy, production of other grains also decreased. Thus, with this rice production boosting project, Koreans suffered chronic hunger.

During the period of the policy to boost rice production, landholdings became more concentrated in the hands of large landlords. Due to new reservoir construction and the related fees, many medium-sized landlords and independent farmers had to sell lands to cover the construction costs. Large landlords then purchased these lands with the financial support of banks. Thus, Korean peasant society became starkly divided between a few large landlords and the large majority of poor tenants. Furthermore, competition among the tenant farmers became fierce with the rise of tenant fees. Consequently, many peasants were unable to secure farmland and had to move to urban centers to become lowly laborers or migrate to China or Japan.

The Japanese economy, which had flourished during World War I, entered a depression with the return of European capital to Asian markets after that war. The Great Kantō Earthquake that hit the Tokyo region in 1923 pushed Japan into earthquake panic mode, leading to financial depression. The Government-General now abolished the Ordinance on Companies (Hoesaryeong) in order to create an investment haven for Japanese capitalists that had made superfluous investments in industrial equipment. Thus, with the influx of Japanese medium-sized capital and Korean landlords' capital, native Korean industries grew, as did the urban labor pool, through the 1920s.

With the March First Movement and changes in Japanese colonial rule, advancements in Korean industrialization and urbanization, the mode of independence movement changed. Despite the atmosphere of heightened humanitarianism and self-determination,

Korean nationalists judged that the core nature of the imperialistic world system had not changed, and returned to Social Darwinian ideas. They saw the world as a stage for national competition, so that in order to survive in this competition, they had to engage in self-strengthening. Immediately after the March First Movement, domestic nationalists launched campaigns to establish a university and to produce and consume Korean indigenous items because they estimated that buttressed by intellectual and economic self-reliance, political independence might then be achieved. This movement obtained nation-wide support in its early stages, but lost momentum after several years. This was mainly due to the Government-General's suppression and hindrance, but the criticism of socialist elements also played a role.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 triggered a global spread of Marxist-Leninism. In Asia, Koreans were the first to accept Marxist-Leninism due to the fact that Korea bordered Siberia, a place of Russian exile, and that a considerable number of Koreans had moved to the Russian Far East starting from the 1860s. Some Korean socialists directly associated with the COMINTERN and the Russian Communist Party, while other Korean socialists studied Marxism in Japan and returned to Korea. First of all, they dismissed the movement to establish a university and to produce or consume Korean indigenous items, labeling this a "bourgeois reformist movement." Many Korean youth sympathized with socialism, so they endeavored to organize Korean laborers and peasants to form national organizations. Furthermore, they were successful in establishing a Korean communist party. But the Japanese police learned of the

party's organization, and most of its members were imprisoned. Nevertheless, they remained tireless in their efforts to reestablish a communist party.

In 1926, Japan enacted the Peace Preservation Law (Chian yu-jibeop) to imprison those espousing communist or anarchist ideologies, though these people had committed no criminal acts. On the one hand, the Government-General cracked down intensively on socialists, while on the other it endeavored to divide the nationalist group by appeasing some among them. The COMINTERN adopted a policy of prioritizing support for national liberation movements. In this situation, Korean socialists endeavored to create a coalition with hardline Korean nationalists. Those intransigent nationalists also agreed to this movement, and they formed the New Trunk Society (Singanhoe) as a part of this coalition movement. The New Trunk Society set up branches throughout Korea, and led the nationalist and socialist movements.

The Korean overseas independence movement after the March First Movement was for some time led by the Korean Provisional Government (KPG). The KPG set up a secret liaison mechanism (*yeontongje*), sent laws and government documents to Korea, gathered domestic intelligence, and also secured funds for the independence movement. It also issued patriotic bonds to Koreans both within and outside of Korea while also publishing a newspaper, the *Dongnip sinmun* (The Independent) for the propagation of news on independence activities. In Northeast China near the border with Korea the KPG also established the General Headquarters of the Restoration Army (Gwangbokgun chongyeong). Young Koreans

who had fled Korea after the March First Movement flocked to join units of an Independence Army (Dongnipgun), while Korean society in China and the now Soviet Union also lent its support to this armed force. It was not so difficult to obtain weapons because due to the large amount of surplus weaponry and materiel circulating after World War I and the Russian Revolution. The Gwangbokgun, having secured military personnel and weapons, launched several surprise attacks against Japanese military units, and achieved a great victory over a pursuing Japanese force in the vicinity of Mt. Baekdu (Mt. Changbai) in October 1920. Meanwhile, a heroic group calling itself the Uiyeoldan (Righteous Patriots Corps), formed in China in 1919, became active in assassinating Japanese government officials of the Government-General and bombing key Japanese facilities.

The KPG dispatched delegates to several international conferences in the name of Korean independence. However, the major powers paid little heed to the Korean independence cause. With the meager results of diplomatic overtures, criticism of the KPG became more vocal among independence movement activists. Thus, in January 1923, the Convention of the National Representative Council (Gungmin daepyo hoeui) was convened to review the independence movement's course. The convention ended without any conclusions or resolutions because there were two contending opinions at the meeting: one was to dissolve the KPG and establish a new government, and the other to change the KPG's organization and overall strategy.

As KPG leadership weakened, and with growing ideological cleavages between nationalists and socialists, the Korean indepen-

dence movement lost its centripetal force and splintered. Armed Korean independence forces in China's northeast endeavored to retain unity, but to no avail. In 1929 they also splintered between the Single Party Promotion Council of Manchuria (Jaeman yuildang chaekjinhoe) and the National People's Government (Gungminbu).

## Japanese Invasion of Mainland China and the Korean Independence Movement

The Great Depression that commenced in the United States in 1929 soon spread worldwide. Japan tried to overcome the economic depression through military and colonial expansion, provoking war in Manchuria in 1931 and then occupying Northeast China with the installment of the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932. In 1933, the League of Nations demanded the immediate Japanese withdrawal, but Japan spurned this, instead withdrawing from the League of Nations. In 1937, Japan invaded China proper, occupying urban areas, an invasion that met with stern resistance on the part of Chinese guerilla units in agricultural areas. Japan now plunged into the Second Sino-Japanese War, and with the sanctions of the League of Nations found itself lacking in military materials. Thus, Japan now advanced into the South Pacific area, ultimately attacking Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i and triggering the Asia-Pacific War, or World War II in the Pacific.

With the Great Depression, wages dropped significantly while rice prices also fell. Thus, the lives of laborers and farmers became

grimmer. In many places, socialists initiated strikes, demonstrations, and riots. Korean socialists argued that the bourgeois nationalists were preventing the working masses from advancing to the revolutionary front, and decided to cut their coalition with the nationalists and to dissolve the New Trunk Society (Singanhoe).

As the Great Depression caused rice prices to plummet in Japan, the Government-General ended its policy of boosting Korean rice production. Instead, in order to appease Korean peasants and weaken the influence of the socialists, the Government-General pushed ahead with a Rural Revitalization Campaign (Nongchon jinheung undong). It encouraged farmers to take on side jobs during the winter, arguing that Koreans were poor because they were lazy. Furthermore, it granted loans for land purchases to cooperative tenant farmers. In addition, the Government-General moved tenants in southern Korea to Manchuria and the peninsula's northern industrial zone in order to ease competition among tenant farmers. On the other hand, colonial police arrested and imprisoned socialists who were active in farming villages.

The Government-General vehemently pushed forward a policy to make the northern part of the peninsula bordering China a logistical base. Large Japanese capitalists constructed hydro-electric power plants, chemical fertilizer, gunpowder, and metal factories in the northern Korean Peninsula. Japan also expanded many roads and railroads to connect south-central Korea and the northern regions. The ratio of industry in the colonial economy grew, while the number of laborers soared.

With the expansion of the warfront, most Japanese youth were

drafted, so that Japan tried to fill the labor shortage with Korean workers. The Government-General moved Korean men into the northern industrial zone, Japanese mines, and military plants, while it forced Korean women and even children to work as well. Thought control was also strengthened to stifle Korean labor unrest or anti-Japanese agitation. In addition, Korean language and history education was abolished in schools while related research associations were also dissolved and researchers sentenced to prison terms. With the outbreak of the Asia-Pacific War in 1941, Korean language education was completely prohibited, Korean names were changed to the Japanese style, and Korean newspapers and magazines discontinued. Whenever there was a government or company ceremony, Koreans had to bow towards the east—the direction of the Japanese emperor—and read an oath of loyalty to him, and occasionally attended Shinto shrines (Japanese religious temples). In 1938, Japan enacted the National Mobilization Law (Gukga chong dongwon-beop), with the aim of mobilizing not only the colonial labor force but also vital commodities. Based on this law, from 1939, Japan conscripted Korean males and deployed them to military plants, coal mines, and military construction sites. In 1938, Japan also began to draft Korean women as sex slaves. The Government-General pushed Koreans into a state of extreme penury by instituting such things as grain offerings, compulsory savings, a distribution system for necessary daily commodities, and the requisition of metal items for weaponry production.

After the New Trunk Society (Singanhoe) was dissolved in 1931, domestic nationalists and socialists continued their independence

activities, though now divided into separate camps. Korean nationalists put their energies into research and dissemination activities to preserve the Korean language, history, and culture. Intellectual youths participated in the rural enlightenment movement to eradicate illiteracy. Socialists led labor strikes and peasant movements while secretly working to reestablish the socialist party in Korea. However, the Government-General even drastically suppressed academic activities meant to preserve Korean culture. Consequently, it became impossible to publicly criticize Japanese colonial rule within Korea.

After the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the Chinese anti-Japanese movement kicked into high gear. The Korean military units fighting for liberation operated in conjunction with Chinese forces in operations against the Japanese army. Some peasant groups who rioted after the Great Depression also joined this anti-Japanese struggle. With the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan, the COMINTERN adopted an anti-imperialist, anti-fascist strategy, and urged socialists in oppressed countries to cooperate with nationalists there. In Northeast China, Koreans and Chinese, nationalists and socialists, formed several unified military groups to resist the Japanese army.

The Korean Provisional Government established the Korean Patriotic Corps (Hanin aegukdan) under its auspices, and also exerted a heroic fight. In January 1932, one of the Corps members, Yi Bongchang, tossed a grenade towards the Japanese emperor's carriage in Tokyo, though causing no significant damage. In April of the same year, Yun Bonggil also threw bombs at Japanese military



Korean Flag signed by members of the Korean Restoration Army  
| The Independence Hall of Korea

and government figures in Hongkou Park, Shanghai, killing several high officials. Thus, after these events, the Chinese government decided to support the KPG, and the KPG recovered its leadership status with the Korean independence movement outside Korea. In May 1940, the Korean Independence Party (Hanguk dongnip-dang) was founded, a party which gathered diverse organizations within China, and led the KPG. In September of the same year, the formal army within the KPG, the Korean Restoration Army (Hanguk gwangbokgun) was established (not to be confused with the Gwangbokgun chongyeong established immediately following the March First Movement). With the coalition of scattered military bands, the Korean Restoration Army prepared for a full-scale an-

ti-Japanese struggle. Soon after Japan provoked war with the United States, the KPG declared war against Japan, participating in some battles and also preparing for advance operations on the Korean Peninsula. Some Korean military members moved to China's Yan'an region, then under control of the Chinese Communist Party, and participated alongside Chinese communist forces in battles against the Japanese.

With the Allied victory at the Battle of Midway in 1942, and with growing signs of Japan's imminent defeat, Korean independence activists on the Korean Peninsula also secretly prepared for the Japanese capitulation and Korea's liberation. In schools and companies, they instigated propaganda campaigns against cooperating with the Japanese wartime effort. In 1945, on the eve of the Japanese surrender, independence activists organized the National Foundation League (Geonguk dongmaeng) for establishing the future independent Korea. At this time, international society now took notice of the Korean independence movement which had fought alongside the Allies against Japan. Thus, at the Cairo Conference in 1943 and Potsdam Conference in 1945, the Allied leaders agreed that Korea should be freed from the Japanese yoke at the end of World War II. Japan submitted its unconditional surrender to the Allied powers on August 15, 1945. Simultaneously, Koreans were liberated from Japanese colonial rule.



## 1945~1953

- 1945  
Korea gains independence from Japan
- 1948  
The two governments are established (Republic of Korea, The Democratic People's Republic of Korea)
- 1950  
The Korean War breaks out
- 1953  
The Korean Armistice Agreement is signed

## Chapter 10

# NATIONAL DIVISION AND THE KOREAN WAR

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Hahn Monica

translated by Keith Seidel

## Liberation and Division

### Liberation and the Soviet and American Occupation

The Korean Peninsula was liberated from Japanese colonial control on August 15, 1945, with the declaration of defeat by the Japanese emperor Hirohito. While Korean liberation was a result of the Allied victory, it was only made possible by the continued efforts of the independence movement amongst the Koreans themselves. Not only did Koreans want to restore the basic rights denied them under Japanese colonial rule, they also strove to establish an independent country with a democratic system of government.

However, because liberation was not achieved by their own force, Koreans were limited in their power to establish an independent country. Upon its liberation, the Korean Peninsula was immediately occupied by foreign forces. The US made a proposal to the Soviet Union to split the peninsula along the 38th parallel into two occupation zones, to which the USSR agreed. The occupation of US and Soviet armed forces south and north of the 38th parallel, respectively, was justified by the need to disarm the Japanese military forces. However, it was also a reflection of the confrontations and compromises between US and Soviet interests on the Korean Peninsula.

The 24th Corps of US Army Forces in the Pacific was dispatched to the area south of the 38th parallel and assumed all authority from the Japanese Government-General of Korea. US forces established a military government to establish direct control over the area, with

American military officials declaring the US military government to be “the only actual government” in the area south of the 38th parallel and refusing to recognize any Korean political force. The US military government disbanded the locally administered local People’s Committees (Jibang inmin wiwonhoe) and the People’s Republic of Korea (Joseon inmin gonghwaguk), government entities created directly after liberation by Koreans. They also denied the right of governance to the Korean Provisional Government (Daehan minguk imsi jeongbu). On the other hand, the US military government implemented status quo policies in regards to the bureaucracy and police organizations established during the Japanese colonial period. The US military government was passive in eliminating vestiges of Japanese imperialism and showed unfriendly attitudes towards the efforts of Koreans to do so.

Meanwhile, the Soviet 25th Army Command was dispatched to the area north of the 38th parallel. Soviet forces chose a more indirect form of governance, organizing civilian governing bodies and using them to support or regulate Koreans’ political activities. This is in contrast to the Soviet military’s actions in East Germany. The Soviet army transferred executive power to the local People’s Committees and recognized the Provisional People’s Committee of North Korea (Bukjoseon imsi inmin wiwonhoe) and the People’s Committee of North Korea (Bukjoseon inmin wiwonhoe) as the official governing bodies. Nevertheless, the Soviet military strove to control the main policies and establish a government that was friendly towards the Soviet Union.

### The Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers and the trusteeship crisis

In December 1945, the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union held a trilateral foreign ministers conference. The purpose of this conference was to address issues arising from the end of World War II, including how to handle Korea's independence. The conference's agreed upon resolution on the Korea problem included the following. First, a provisional democratic government would be established to help rebuild an independent country. Second, a US-Soviet Joint Commission would be established to form the provisional government. Third, a four-power trusteeship of up to five years would be established by the US, Soviet Union, Great Britain, and China, to advise the provisional government. This resolution was a compromise between the US position, which sought a trusteeship of Korea, and that of the Soviet Union, which sought to immediately establish a free, independent Korean government.

The Moscow Conference resolutions were very disappointing to Koreans who were seeking immediate independence. However, there was some logic behind them. The resolutions resolved many of the ambiguous elements in international agreements about Korean independence remaining since the Cairo Declaration of 1943, and they laid out a path for the establishment of an autonomous government on the Korean Peninsula. However, the process of informing Koreans of these decisions led to division and confrontation between all political forces, eventually bringing about the complete division amongst political powers in the liberated country.

In Korea, the problem of trusteeship was debated much more

hotly than the problem of establishing a provisional government. Exacerbated by incorrect reporting in the *Donga Ilbo* of "Soviets for trusteeship, US for immediate independence," the political world in South Korea became divided between those who opposed trusteeship and those who supported the acceptance of all tenants of the Moscow Conference. Right-wing forces led by such figures as Syngman Rhee and Kim Gu led the anti-trusteeship movement, but their purposes in doing so were different. Rhee wanted to establish an independent government as quickly as possible, even if it meant doing so in just the southern half of the peninsula. Kim, on the other hand, aimed to establish a unified government for both the North and South using elements of the Korean Provisional Government. Left-wing forces, such as the Communist Party of Korea (*Joseon gongsandang*), also opposed the trusteeship initially. However, they came to see the establishment of a provisional government as the core of the Moscow Conference resolutions and changed their attitude to fully support the resolutions. In this process, left-wing and right-wing political forces fiercely opposed each other, and the anti-trusteeship movement soon became anti-Soviet and anti-communist movements. Many anti-nationalists who had cooperated with the Japanese colonial government used this opportunity to participate in the anti-trusteeship movement and joined the right-wing ranks. Whereas the main values, issues, and powers in Korean society immediately after liberation were based on the confrontation between nationalists and anti-nationalists, this morphed into a struggle between left-wing and right-wing political forces following the upheaval over the trusteeship issue.

In March 1946, the US-Soviet Joint Commission was created to establish a provisional government in Korea as agreed upon at the Moscow Conference. However, the US and USSR argued about which Korean political parties or social organizations to include in the discussions. The US wanted to include all organizations, but the Soviet Union sought to exclude all organization who had participated in the anti-trusteeship movements, i.e., the right-wing groups. In the end, the first US-Soviet Joint Commission was suspended indefinitely. A second commission was organized in May 1947, but the two sides could not reach any consensus. The US recommended transferring the Korean problem to the United Nations, while the Soviet Union insisted on the immediate withdrawal of all US and Soviet troops and the establishment of a government by the Koreans. As a result, the US-Soviet Joint Commission broke down without resolution.

### **Failure to establish a unified independent country and the establishment of two governments**

The first political organization to emerge in the immediate aftermath of liberation from Japan was the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (Geonguk junbi wiwonhoe, CPKI). This was even before American or Soviet troops had arrived on the peninsula. CPKI was organized by members of the Korean Restoration Brotherhood (Joseon geonguk dongmaeng), which had a public base and was led immediately prior to independence by Lyuh Woon-hyung (Yeo Unhyeong). On August 15, 1945, Lyuh received

assurances from the Secretary for Political Affairs of the Japanese Government-General of Korea, Endō Ryūsaku, for the continuation of public order, the founding of a new government, the release of political prisoners, and food security. Lyuh's CPKI took control of security and administrative affairs in Seoul and other regions. By the end of August, 145 local government organizations had been organized, all of which were spontaneously created by local citizens. These organizations included left-wing and right-wing elements.

Before the US military arrived on the peninsula, the CPKI felt the Korean people needed an institution to represent them and so proclaimed the People's Republic of Korea on September 6, 1945, in order to present the appearance of a nation. Left-wing groups led the establishment of the People's Republic of Korea, while right-wing groups showed negative attitudes towards it. Moreover, the People's Republic of Korea was dismantled because the American military forces arriving in the southern half of the peninsula declared that the US military government was the only legitimate authority and would not recognize any other.

Following liberation, Koreans became politically active and began organizing numerous political and social groups. After learning of the US military's arrival in Korea, prominent right-wing figures such as Song Jin, Kim Seongsu, and Jo Byeongok formed the Korea Democratic Party (Hangukminjudang) on September 16, 1945. The Korea Democratic Party represented the positions of landowners, capitalists, and pro-Japanese forces, and, therefore, did not amass strong popular support in its early stages. However, their support was expanded thanks to backing from the US military government

and its use of the pro-Japanese forces. People who had participated in liberation movements abroad during the Japanese colonial period also returned to Korea and formed political parties. Syngman Rhee, who returned to Korea with American backing, formed the Independence Promotion Central Committee (Dongnip chok-seong jungang hyeopuihoe). Kim Gu and other members of the Korean Provisional Government were able to return to Korea under their own volition. They formed the Korea Independence Party (Hanguk dongnipdang), which led movements protesting the Moscow Conference resolution and supporting the continuation of the provisional government. Bak Heonyong and other left-wing figures worked under the banner of the Communist Party of Korea. They expanded their organizational power based on the popularity of the independence movement led by socialist forces during the colonial period, but that influence was diminished by the trusteeship crisis and the US military government's policies to exclude leftist forces. The Korea Democratic Party was on the far right of the political spectrum, while the Communist Party of Korea was on the far left. The Korea Independence Party can be seen as a right-leaning party. Additionally, An Jaehong led a center-right party called the Democratic Party (Gungmindang), and Lyuh Woon-hyung led a center-left party called the People's Party of Korea (Joseon inmindang). The Democratic Party and the People's Party of Korea, both of which adopted neo-nationalism and neo-democracy as their political ideologies, wanted to consolidate the leftist and rightist political forces in Korea. These middle-of-the-road parties received widespread support from the general population, but this support



Members of the Korean Provisional Government returning to Korea following liberation | The Independence Hall of Korea

was weakened by confrontations between leftists and rightists and the assassination of Lyuh Woon-hyung in July 1947.

Concerns that the Korean Peninsula could be divided were heightened after the suspension of the US-Soviet Joint Commission in 1946. Political moderates like Kim Kyusik and Lyuh Woon-hyung strove to create a unified, independent country through cooperation between left-wing and right-wing forces and between the North and South. The US military government supported the popular movement to bring together the political left and right. Through this, they gained the support of Koreans and attempted to reinforce left/right cooperation through the South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly (Namjoseon gwado ipbeop uiwon). However, such collaboration ultimately foundered due to far-right politicians like Syngman Rhee—who called openly for the establishment of



The division of Korea (38<sup>th</sup> parallel) | © Yonhap News

a government for just South Korea, extremist policies of far-left organizations like the Worker's Party of South Korea (Namjoseon nodongdang), the establishment of the South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly which the US had conceptualized, and efforts by the US military government to weaken the leftist forces. As the global Cold War began in 1947, the US withdrew its policy of supporting left/right collaboration and brought the issue of Korea to the United Nations (UN), an organization that was led by the US.

On November 14, the UN passed a plan to establish a Korean government through a general election to be held in the North and South under its own supervision. However, the Soviets opposed this plan, stating that it was unfair to the North because the population of the South was much larger. In March 1948, the UN resolved in committee to hold elections only in the South. In the end, a general



Ceremony announcing the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948  
| © Yonhap News

election was held in South Korea on May 10, 1948, to establish a Constitutional Assembly. This first assembly named the country the Republic of Korea (Daehan minguk, ROK) and created a constitution. The establishment of the government was declared on August 15, 1948, with Syngman Rhee as president and Yi Siyeong as vice president.

North Korea criticized the UN resolution to hold a general election solely in the South and insisted on establishing a unified government. However, the North was also making efforts internally for the establishment of an independent country, establishing the Korean People's Army (Joseon inmingun) in February 1948 and the Supreme People's Assembly (Choego inmin hoeui) by general election in September 1948. The founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Joseon minjujuui inmin gonghwaguk,

DPRK) was announced to the world on September 9, 1948, with Kim Il-sung as its first elected prime minister. All of this rendered the movement to create a unified country impossible, and separate governments were established in the North and South that were mutually hostile and politically antithetical.

### Dealing with remnants of Japanese colonialism and pursuing socioeconomic reform

Following liberation, Koreans were eager to form an independent, unified country and to institute democratic reforms rapidly. The most urgent measure was to do away with the remnants of Japanese colonialism and create a new social order. Koreans wanted to punish anti-nationalists who had collaborated with the Japanese colonizers and reform the social structure by abolishing systems created during and for colonial rule.

The punishment of anti-nationalist pro-Japanese collaborators was a key factor in the settlement of other remnants of Japanese colonialism and the establishment of a democratic society. The prosecution of pro-Japanese collaborators took place after the government was established. The Constitutional Assembly enacted the Special Act against Pro-Japanese Traitors and established the Special Investigation Committee for the Prosecution of Anti-National Offenders along with a special tribunal to hear such cases. The Special Investigation Committee for the Prosecution of Anti-National Offenders acted enthusiastically in arresting pro-Japanese collaborators, but only investigated 682 cases. In fact, the special tri-

bunal convicted and sentenced only twelve of the people indicted. None of those tried were executed, and most of the sentences were either commuted or suspended.

This lack of activity by the Special Investigation Committee was due to policies aimed at maintaining the US military government. This government included pro-Japanese collaborators in the central administration and at every level. The US military government's main priority had been anti-Soviet and anti-communist policies, and they appointed bureaucrats and police officers from the Japanese colonial period. Rather than focusing on dealing with the pro-Japanese collaborators, the Syngman Rhee government adopted these anti-communist policies from the US military government, and President Rhee publicly impeded the work of the Special Investigation Committee. The National Assembly members who led the Special Investigation Committee were arrested on espionage charges, and police raided the Special Investigation Committee's offices. Eventually, the Special Act against Pro-Japanese Traitors was revised to cut short its period of enforcement, from June 20, 1950 to August 31, 1949, and so the Special Investigation Committee was dismantled only a few months after beginning its work. As a result, anti-nationalist pro-Japanese collaborators came to hold positions of power in all areas of South Korean society, forcing that society to continue efforts to correct social injustice and expel the remnants of Japanese colonialism even to the present day.

Land reform was a key issue in solving the problem of public welfare, dismantling the landowner system used by the Japanese to maintain its physical rule, and establishing a new economic system.

Calls to reform the system of landownership went back to before liberation due to the negative effect that system had on farmers' livelihoods. At the time of liberation, tenant farmers accounted for half of all farmers, and it was difficult for these farmers to provide enough food for their own families. For this reason, land reform was so popular that even members of the landlord-centered Korea Democratic Party could not oppose it.

However, the US military government in the South showed very little interest in land reform. Only after seeing land reform in North Korea and the deterioration of public opinion in the South did the US military government grant land that had belonged to Japanese individuals and the Oriental Development Company to farmers. Full-scale land reform took place after the establishment of the South Korean government in 1948. A land reform bill was debated in the National Assembly until it was passed in April 1949. It was announced to the public in March 1950. The land reform bill stated that each family could own up to three *jeongbo* (about 30,000 square meters) of land and was based on the principles of reimbursement and compensation. As a result, the issues of repayment from farmers and compensation for landowners became an important issue. In the bill created by junior assemblymen, farmers would need to reimburse 125% of the land's average annual output over five years while landowners would be compensated at 150% of an average year's output. However, the government proposed that both reimbursement and compensation should both be paid at 150%, and this was reflected in the revised bill.

Many landowners either sold their land or concealed their hold-

ings while the land reform bill was stalled. As a result, less than half of the tenant farmland was redistributed. In addition, land reform was further complicated because it was interrupted and suspended during the Korean War. However, land reform was significant in that it brought about the disappearance of the landowning class and many farmers were able to obtain their own land and become independent farmers. This land reform contributed to Korea's economic development and was significant in spreading the ideal of equality in Korean society.

In North Korea, the Provisional People's Committee of North Korea implemented land reform in March 1946. The Committee confiscated land and tenant farms owned by Japanese and Japanese collaborators and distributed it freely to farmers. This type of land reform with confiscation and distribution without compensation or payment was a large factor in socialist forces gaining support from farmers.

In addition to land reform laws, the Provisional People's Committee of North Korea implemented so-called "democratic reforms," including gender equality laws, the nationalization of important industries, labor laws, judicial reforms, etc. Through these reforms, North Korea hoped to build a new socioeconomic system. By nationalizing enterprises, mines, forests, fisheries, power plants, railways, transportation, postal services, banking, commerce, and cultural enterprises previously owned by the Japanese or collaborators while allowing small-scale individually owned industries and commerce, North Korea built the economic foundation for a people's democracy. North Korea's economic foundation was built in contrast to South Korea's policies of selling the Japanese-owned



land to the common people. As such, contrasting economic systems began to be established in North and South Korea.

In the North, many of those who opposed the economic policies of land reform and nationalization of industries, or those labeled as national traitors, landowners, capitalists, or religious people, chose to migrate to the South rather than oppose the Soviet military or the Provisional People's Committee of North Korea. Many farmers also fled south due to the difficulty of making a living in the North. Workers who had been relocated north during the Japanese colonial period returned to their hometowns in the South. By the end of 1947, more than 800,000 people had left the North for the South, and eventually more than 2 million people (including those that went South during the Korean War) fled to South Korea. People who opposed North Korea's system actually made the North's reforms easier by leaving North Korea and moving south. On the other hand, this also brought about an intensification of the left-right conflict and anti-communism in South Korean society.

## The Korean War and Permanent Division

### Beginnings of the Korean War

War between the two Koreas was foreseeable from 1948 and the establishment of separate governments in the South and North. Concerns of an international or civil war abounded along with concerns that Koreans would bear the brunt of the damage. These concerns became reality. The young governments of North and

South Korea openly expressed their desire to establish a unified government even if it took military force to do so. As if to prove this, small- and large-scale skirmishes broke out along the 38th parallel, peaking in the summer of 1949. In South Korea, guerilla warfare and large-scale civilian massacres to oppress the guerillas were carried out on Jeju Island, and in Jirisan, Odaesan, and Taebaeksan Mountains. Meanwhile, the oppression and suppression of political dissidents intensified in North Korea.

The Cold War also intensifying globally. The Soviets successfully tested an atomic bomb in 1949, and that same year a communist government was established in China. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson announced in January 1950 that the US would actively respond to the spread of Communism in East Asia. However, he also declared that Korea and Taiwan would be excluded from the US Far Eastern defense perimeter.

North Korea prepared for a full-scale war with the blessings of the Soviet Union and China. With aid from the Soviet Union, the North built their military might in the form of weapons and military advisors. In addition, 50,000 ethnic Korean volunteers who were part of China's People's Volunteer Army (PVA) were sent to fight with the North's army. South Korean president Syngman Rhee supported forceful unification with the North, but the South's military preparations were inadequate.

The Korean War began on June 25, 1950, with a preemptive strike from North Korea. North Korea invaded the South all along the 38th parallel and within three days they had captured the South Korean capital of Seoul. The US called for a meeting of the UN Security



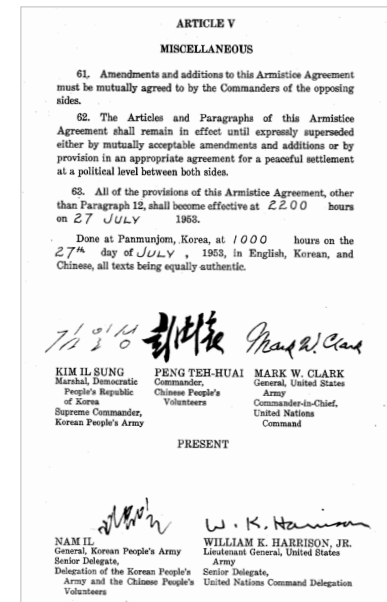
Refugees and the Incheon landing operation (September 1950) | © Yonhap News

Council, and the Council declared North Korea the aggressor and imposed military sanctions on North Korea. A Unified Command was established on July 7, deploying UN soldiers for the first time in that organization's history. Within two months, North Korean forces were occupying most of the Korean Peninsula, the only exception a small area near the Nakdong River in the southeastern corner of the peninsula. On September 15, 1950, UN forces launched an amphibious landing operation at Incheon that reversed the tide of battle. UN forces recaptured Seoul on September 28. On October 1, UN troops advanced north of the 38th parallel, and by mid-October, they had taken Pyeongyang and advanced to the Amnok (Ch. Yalu) River on the border with China. However, China, which had authorized North Korea's attack on the South, now deployed a large number of troops, both for their own defense and to aid North Korea. The tide of the war turned once again as the UN and South Korean troops were pushed out of Northern territory and Seoul was recaptured by the North in January 1951. UN forces retook Seoul in March 1951, but they could not gain much more ground, and battle lines eventually hardened near what is today's armistice line.

## Signing of the armistice agreement and the Korean War's legacy

Armistice negotiations began when both UN and communist forces realized that victory could not be guaranteed for either party. The Soviets officially proposed a ceasefire in the UN in June 1951, and both the UN and communist sides accepted this proposal. Armistice negotiations began between the UN forces and the North Korean and PVA forces in July 1951. While the Syngman Rhee government was directly involved in the war efforts, it was merely an observer to the ceasefire talks. These talks struggled over issues such as the establishment of a military demarcation line, the formation of a neutral supervising country, and the exchange of prisoners. The talks were drawn out for two years. Even as negotiations were going on, both sides fought fiercely to gain control over small areas of land to gain leverage in the armistice talks.

The armistice negotiations continued for more than two years before both sides, realizing they could not continue



The Armistice Agreement  
| National Archives of Korea

the war, signed an agreement. North Korea had been devastated by US Air Force bombings. Stalin, who had approved of all-out war, was now dead, and Eisenhower had been elected president by promising to end the war in Korea. However, Syngman Rhee pushed for the continuation of the war and unification through force even as the armistice agreement was signed. In the end, Rhee's administration secured military and economic aid from the US, including the signing of the ROK-US Mutual Defense Agreement, in exchange for accepting the ceasefire. The armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953 by UN Forces Commander Mark W. Clark, North Korean Commander Kim Il-sung, and PVA Commander Peng Dehuai.

The Korean War created special boundaries and regions in the division of the Korean Peninsula. The ceasefire line, established by the outcome of the war (rather than the 38th parallel as from before the war) became the border between North and South Korea. In order to prevent military clashes, a demilitarized zone was created extending two kilometers on from both the northern and southern sides of the ceasefire line. Also, unique areas between the 38th parallel and the DMZ were created. South Korea now gained “reclaimed area” north of the 38th parallel, while North Korea now claimed “newly liberated land” south of the 38th parallel. As a result, the history of villages and people who had lived in the demilitarized zone vanished, while those inhabiting areas that now exchanged hands had to switch their identities—from North to South Korean or vice versa.

The armistice agreement was not an end to the war, and it did not guarantee peace on the Korean Peninsula. The Geneva Conference, held in 1954 to discuss peace on the Korean Peninsula, ended



Comparison of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and the military demarcation line

without result. In addition, small- and large-scale military clashes continued to occur along the demilitarized zone, despite it being demilitarized. Each time a conflict breaks out, the US (representing UN forces) and North Korea hold meetings at Panmunjeom.

The Korean War inflicted severe damage on both North and South Korea—in lives, material destruction, and psychological wellbeing. There were over a million killed, injured, and missing in each country. Countless families were separated, and many children became war orphans. The entire peninsula was devastated, and almost all industrial facilities, housing structures, and schools were destroyed. The Korean War's emotional and psychological aftereffects were even more severe. Many citizens had either supported or opposed the occupation of either North Korean or UN forces. The two governments used this as an excuse to foment conflict and slaughter their own citizens. Hostility arose between those who had lived through the war, and resentment and distrust amongst the people grew steadily. Anti-communism in South Korea and

anti-Americanism in North Korea became shibboleths, and this became a major factor in preventing reconciliation and unification.

Both Koreas used the hostility caused by the war to roll back democratic reforms and strengthen authoritarian rule. The Syngman Rhee administration established anti-communism as its main cause and suppressed political opponents such as Cho Bongam. In North Korea, Kim Il-sung's rule became autocratic through the promotion of anti-Americanism and the purging of political foes such as Bak Heonyong. In addition, the military gained unprecedented influence over the societies of North and South Korea. The ROK army grew to 600,000 troops, which led to about thirty years of military dictatorship in South Korea starting from 1961. North Korea became a "garrison state" in which political, economic, and social sectors operate militarily.

The two Koreas built completely different systems during their postwar recoveries. American airstrikes in North Korea during the war destroyed the North's production base so thoroughly that many people estimated they would be unable to recover for a hundred years. North Korea mobilized its citizens to carry out extensive postwar reconstruction. This reconstruction was also backed by the aid and support of fellow communist nations. The economic aid from these countries amounted to about a quarter of North Korea's total budget. This not only restored North Korea's economy to its prewar status by the mid- to late-1950s, but also provided a foundation for the establishment of its socialist system. By 1958, all farming villages and commercial and industrial companies were reorganized into cooperatives. Through this process, North Korea established a

socialist economic system that emphasized a planned economy and collective ownership of production facilities.

On the other hand, South Korea strengthened its market economy. South Korea revised its constitution in November 1954, and this strengthened the anti-communist, free-market economy aspects of the government by majorly revising the nationalization of public enterprises. Firms that bought government property at low prices grew into large conglomerates called *chaebol* (*jaebeol*). The US provided ongoing assistance to South Korea in order to strengthen it as an anti-communist base. It provided large amounts of grain, including wheat and corn, which were overproduced in the US. The amount of aid from the US totaled around 40% of government revenues in the mid- to late-1950s. This helped to relieve food shortages and to procure the needed defense costs, but it had negative effects on South Korea's agricultural sector.

The Korean War also influenced the strengthening of the global Cold War. The US formed an anti-communist block connecting South Korea and Japan. The US used Japan as a "military base" or "strategical base for anti-communism" during the Korean War, and this became a foundation for rapid economic growth in Japan. In Europe, West Germany began to discuss the reconstruction of its military after seeing the destruction of the Korean War. Anti-communist alliances amongst Western European countries were strengthened, and Eastern European countries formed a military alliance known as the Warsaw Pact. The arms race between the US and the USSR intensified. This global reinforcement of the Cold War in turn influenced the hardening of the division of the Korean Peninsula.

## 1960-2016

- 1960  
The April 19 Revolution is held
- 1961  
The May 16 military coup is staged
- 1962  
The five-year economic development plan begins
- 1970s  
Policy prioritizing heavy chemical industry is implemented, Seoul-Busan Expressway is opened, New Village Movement begins
- 1972  
South-North Joint Communiqué is issued, the Yusin constitution is promulgated
- 1979  
Military coup is staged
- 1980  
The May 18 Gwangju Uprising takes place
- 1987  
The June Struggle takes place
- 1991  
South Korea and North Korea join the United Nations simultaneously
- 1995  
“Correcting History” movement is initiated
- 1997  
The Asian financial crisis is overcome
- 2000  
The inter-Korean summit is held
- 2016  
Candlelight rallies for the resignation of president Park Geun-hye are held

## Chapter 11

# TODAY'S KOREA

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Chung Chang-hyun  
translated by Keith Seidel

## The Spread of Industrialization and Popular Culture

### The positive and negative sides of economic growth

After the Korean War, the Korean government needed to promote economic policies that would restore the country's damaged industrial capacity and stabilize people's lives. However, the government had to resort to relying on foreign aid due to the severe economic collapse caused by the Korean War. In particular, the US provided \$3.1 billion in aid over the seventeen years from Korea's liberation in 1945 through 1961. This huge amount of aid represented 12% of the average GDP and 73% of average imports to Korea.

American economic aid was the basis for economic growth in Korea and became the foundation for the development of Korean capitalism. However, economic aid, which accounted for a large portion of the national economy, centered on consumer goods. This had the side effect of weakening the independence of Korea's economy, making Korea dependent on outside forces.

Full-fledged economic development began after the Park Chunghee regime came to power in 1961 through a military coup. These measures were aimed at solidifying the military government and promoting modernization. The basic goals of the first economic development plan (1962–1966) established by the military government were to achieve industrialization and to become a self-supporting economy. However, in response to US recommendations, the economic development plan was revised to focus more on the

introduction of foreign capital and the importance of exports. In particular, the military government collaborated with *chaebol* to further promote economic development.

As a result of the first economic development plan, Korea's GDP grew by 7.8% between 1962 and 1966, well surpassing the plan's target. By industry, secondary industries led the overall growth with 14.9% average growth per year; primary industries grew by 5.6%; and tertiary industries grew by 7.7%. Exports increased rapidly at an average rate of 43.7% each year, exceeding \$100 million in 1964 and \$250 million in 1966—nearly doubling the plan's goal.

Based on the success of the first economic development plan, the Park Chunghee regime established and promoted its second economic development plan in 1967. The aims of the second plan were to modernize Korea's industrial structure and to establish a self-supporting economy. In particular, emphasis was placed on developing the agricultural sector, expanding employment, building the heavy chemical industry, and promoting science and technology.

The Korean economy grew by 17.9% during the second economic development plan period due to the rapid growth of basic and export industries such as fertilizer, cement, and oil refining. At the same time, the mining industry gained importance in the economy, and industrial advancements were pursued.

The Park regime chose a strategy of building the heavy chemical industry during the third economic development plan (1972–1976). The first two economic development plans were extremely successful in building up light industry, but heavy industry in Korea remained weak. Deciding it could no longer rely solely on light industry, the

Park regime changed its economic policies to focus on building the heavy chemical industry. The government aggressively pursued heavy industrialization to achieve the goals of \$10 billion in exports, per capita GNP of \$1,000, and 60% heavy industrialization by 1981.

Accordingly, the Korean economy took on the form of a developed nation's industrial model when the share of secondary industry overtook that of primary industry. Due to the rapid recovery of the global economy starting in the second half of 1975, Korea's GNP per capita actually exceeded \$1,000 by 1977 while the country's exports surpassed \$10 billion. The amount of exports reflected the industrial changes in Korea, and by 1984, the amount of exports from heavy industry exceeded those of light industry.

The Korean economy faced a crisis around 1980 due to overinvestment in the heavy chemical industry, the second oil crisis (1979), and domestic political strife. However, due to the boom of the mid-1980s caused by low oil prices, low interest rates, and the weak US dollar, the Korean economy again showed quick gains. Technology-intensive industries, such as semiconductors, automobiles, and industrial electronics, began to lead growth.

In the 1990s, the Kim Young-sam administration pursued a New Five-Year Economic Plan, and Korea joined the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1996. However, Korea faced the 1997 financial crisis due to continued trade deficits, the collapse of financial institutions, the lax management of *chaebol*, and the exodus of foreign investment. Korea received emergency financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Kim Dae-jung administration came



Automobile factory | © Yonhap News

to power in 1998 and overcame the financial crisis by establishing neoliberal policies, instituting intense structural reforms, pursuing a foreign policy of opening, and appealing to the South Korean citizenry to share in the suffering.

Since that time, Korea has continued to enjoy rapid growth centered on its semiconductor industry. According to standards set by the World Bank, in 2016, Korea became the 11th largest economy in the world with a GDP of \$1.41 trillion.

However, the rapid growth of Korea's economy also exposed some side effects. First, the average living standard of Koreans is relatively low in comparison to the size of the Korean economy due to high housing costs and inflation. Korea's gross national income (GNI) per capita, an indicator of standard of living, is 45th in the world at \$27,600.

As Korea pursued economic development through foreign investment, the economy faced serious foreign debt problems starting



Semiconductor factory | © Yonhap News

in the 1970s. Eventually, the repayment of foreign liabilities soared to over 10%. Even though exports rose by more than 20%, imports also increased until the trade deficit exceeded one billion dollars by 1971. This exacerbated the foreign debt crisis. Import dependency also rose significantly, establishing an economic structure dependent on foreign powers.

High inflation accompanied the rapid economic growth. This is of course a global phenomenon, but inflation in Korea was especially severe because the economy relied so heavily on foreign capital. This inflation resulted in lowering buying power and increased the hardships of workers and other average citizens in the cities. It also widened the gap between rich and poor due to rising real estate prices for land and houses.

In addition, rapid economic growth led to a decline in agricultural production and a bloat of the consumer goods industry. It also encouraged many people to leave agricultural areas for the cities,

contributing to the growth of periurban slums.

While some large corporations and *chaebol* were able to sustain rapid growth due to unilateral distribution of foreign loans introduced to the development economy, financial preferences, and tax benefits, small and medium-sized businesses were negatively affected by the inequitable economic structure because they were not recipients of any of these benefits. Korea's economy was fully focused on the *chaebol*, and corruption between corporations and the government increased dramatically.

Although Korea is among the world's top ten economies in terms of trade volume, these are some problems that Korea has yet to resolve.

### The spread of popular culture and *Hallyu*

Industrialization brought many significant changes to the daily life and culture of the Korean people. First, industrialization led to rapid urbanization. Large-scale migration from rural to urban areas resulted in housing shortages, traffic problems, pollution, unemployment, and a rise in the number of poor.

In 1974, 90% of all households were supplied with electricity. The rate of water supply also gradually increased, so that by 1980 54.6% of households had a water supply. This increased access to electricity throughout Korea caused a dramatic rise in the use of household electric appliances. This increase of home appliances changed lifestyles, leading to a decrease in domestic working hours and the growth of leisure time.



Industrialization led to the global emergence of mass media, such as television, newspapers, radio, and cinema. This supplied the public with knowledge and information which, in turn, led to the development of popular culture. As the public's education level rose along with opportunities to enjoy culture through mass media, the gap between high culture and general culture narrowed.

The enrollment rate in middle and high school in Korea increased sharply in the 1970s and 1980s, and the college enrollment rate increased in the 1990s. There was also a quantitative expansion of mass media during this period. The number of newspapers and magazines steadily increased, and there was an expansion in the spread of television and radio. Radio and movies led popular culture in the 1960s. The 1970s saw the beginning of the television era, and TV came to play an important role in the public's leisure life. The number of televisions in Korea exceeded 4 million by 1977. Color broadcasts began in 1980, and marketing strategies called the 1990s "the age when each household should have two color TVs."

In the 1970s and 1980s, the authoritarian government established cultural policies in an endeavor to gain popular support through popular culture. The Park Chunghee and Chun Doohwan regimes not only censored news outlets, they also intervened and controlled the contents of movies and television shows. This is reflected in the many banned songs and books produced during this time.

As Korea rapidly democratized after the June 1987 Democratization Movement, the environment surrounding popular culture in Korea also changed rapidly. The power of markets and capital grew with the weakening of political censorship. With the rapid development

of information and communication technology, the media industry, which produced and distributed elements of popular culture, demonstrated speedy growth, and the size of the cultural industry developed quickly. Teen culture emerged as the main component of the pop culture market starting in the 1990s. With the development of computers and the internet, digital, online, and mobile cultures have emerged as important areas of pop culture. The structure of the culture industry changed from selling physical copies of cultural products, such as videos or records, to the distribution of cultural products through communications networks, such as the internet and mobile networks. This also brought about changes in the way people consume culture. Pop culture changed into an industry that forms and gives high added value to individuals' lifestyles.

*Hallyu*, or the "Korean Wave," is symbolic of this change. The term *Hallyu* originated in Taiwan, China, and Korea as Korean pop



The *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) celebrities, BTS | © Yonhap News

culture gained popularity. The term was first used by Chinese media in February 2000 to describe the phenomenon of a wave of Korean pop culture sweeping through China.

In 1996, Korean television dramas were exported to China, and K-pop followed two years later. This led to the popularization of Korean pop culture in Asia. Following this, the wave of Korean pop culture expanded to reach Southeast Asian countries like Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Especially after 2000, the scope of the Korean Wave expanded from just pop culture such as dramas, K-pop, and movies; people began to prefer Korean products such as kimchi, gochujang (red pepper paste), ramyeon (ramen), and electronic devices.

In fact, many young people go beyond merely consuming Korean pop culture. Because they feel such an affinity for Korean singers, actors, Korean people, or Korea itself, many go on to learn Korean or buy Korean products.

## The Expansion of the Democratization Movement and Establishment of a Democratic System

After the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the Syngman Rhee, Park Chunghee, and Chun Doohwan regimes were all authoritarian ones that pursued long-term power. In response, opposition parties and the South Korean citizenry continuously engaged in anti-authoritarian, democratization movements.

Democratization movements refer to all the activities undertaken to achieve democracy by resisting non-democratic political systems such as military dictatorships. The development of a democratic political system in Korea after the establishment of the government may be likened to a war between authoritarian dictatorships and the people who sought democratization.

The First Republic (1948–1960), led by Syngman Rhee, used the issue of Korean division as a way of emphasizing anti-communism, utilizing this to rule the country through his authoritarian Liberal Party (Jayudang). Rhee oversaw two revisions of the constitution in order to extend his regime and participated in widespread election fraud in 1960. Students and other citizens rose up against these injustices in protests, leading to Rhee's resignation and the end of the First Republic (the April 19 Revolution).

The April 19 Revolution was the first time since the establishment of the South Korean government that a democratization movement had brought down an authoritarian regime. However, just over year later democracy was once again undermined when a military regime was established following the May 16 Coup of 1961. The Park Chunghee regime, which took power through this military coup, established an authoritarian regime using the logic of economic growth and anti-communism. In particular, in 1972, the Park regime suppressed democratization movements and revised the Constitution under the name of "Yusin" (Renewal). The purpose of these measures was to ensure long-term power and to restrict basic human rights, such as the right to protest and freedom of assembly. In response, the opposition party and the citizens continued their

anti-Yusin democratization movements. In the end, President Park was assassinated on October 26, 1979, bringing about the end of the Yusin authoritarian system.

However, the military under General Chun Doohwan took advantage of the ensuing political chaos and in-fighting amongst the opposition parties and regained power through a coup d'état on December 12, 1979. After seizing power, Chun Doohwan suppressed the people's drive for democratization. This led to the May 18 Gwangju Uprising in which hundreds of citizens were killed.

Chun became president through a military coup and indirect elections by an electoral college. He faced demands for democratization from very early in his presidency. By 1987, these demands spread to a national resistance demanding constitutional change to allow for direct elections. The June Struggle of 1987 was an uprising of

citizens demanding Chun's resignation, democratic constitutional reforms, and direct presidential elections. Citizens from all walks of life participated in the June Struggle, and the Chun regime had no choice but to accept the people's demand for constitutional reform through the June 29 Declaration.

As a result, bipartisan constitutional reforms were accomplished for the first time. However, Roh Taewoo, another military strongman and leader of the 1979 coup, was elected president in the first direct presidential election since 1971 because the opposition camp had failed to agree on a single candidate. Nevertheless, democratic changes and reforms continued. In December 1992, long-time opposition leader Kim Young-sam became the first civilian president in a generation. Peaceful transfer of power has been accomplished continuously ever since. This is testament to democracy's strong roots in South Korean politics.

As political democracy became solidified after the June Struggle, the people's demands for political democracy changed to demands for political democracy in everyday life. Democratic politics in everyday life appeared in various ways, including monitoring corruption in the government, improving citizens' welfare through increasing social justice, striving to improve the human rights of women, and protecting the rights of disadvantaged workers and farmers.



The June Struggle, 1987 | © Yonhap News

## Policies for the Unification of North and South Korea and Striving Towards Unification

Korea was liberated after 36 years of Japanese colonial rule by Japan's unconditional surrender after its defeat by the Allied Powers in World War II. However, the cooperative spirit between the US and USSR formed during that war soon disintegrated, and the Cold War between the two countries began. The global Cold War was reflected in the situation on the Korean Peninsula, and the division of Korea into North and South was fixed at the 38th parallel. The movement to establish an independent and unified nation by doing away with the border at the 38th parallel and autonomously building a unified nation-state was unsuccessful due to Cold War politics. As a result, the Republic of Korea was established on August 15, 1948, south of the 38th parallel, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established on September 9 to the north. Two different governments were set up and the official history of division on the Korean Peninsula began.

Neither of the regimes in the North and South recognized the legitimacy or political reality of its counterpart. While the desire for unification was strong, the reality remained that no progress was made towards unification, and only confrontation remained.

A possible opportunity for North-South reconciliation emerged when Syngman Rhee's authoritarian regime was overthrown during the April 19 Revolution. The theory of reunification through force disappeared with the fall of the Rhee regime, bringing about the

theory of peaceful unification. Rather than attacking the North, the new Chang Myeon administration that emerged after the April 19 Revolution suggested a "UN-led North and South general election" as its main unification policy. The students, revolutionary parties, and progressive social groups that led the revolution supported exchange and negotiations with the North, and the first inter-Korean student conference was held in May 1961.

This era's unification talks were not continued due to the military coup of May 16, 1961, but they were important for introducing various unification plans, including inter-Korean exchange, neutralization, and a proposal for building a federation.

With the establishment of a military regime in South Korea, the relationship between North and South Korea quickly spoiled. Military tensions between the two countries rose. The Park regime's unification theory may be summarized as "reconstruction first, unification second." This was revealed in the so-called "Revolution Pledge" announced on May 16: "We will concentrate on cultivating capacities to confront communism and achieve unification, the hope of the people."

However, the period of "confrontation without dialogue" began to change in the 1970s as the international situation changed rapidly. An international release of tensions and era of peaceful coexistence was fostered by the 1969 announcement of the Nixon Doctrine, US-China and Japan-China reconciliation, and the formation of a new balance of power between the US, USSR, China, and Japan. This affected the atmosphere on the Korean Peninsula as well, fostering more dialogue instead of confrontation. This led to the

North-South Red Cross Talks of 1971 and the July 4 North-South Korea Joint Statement announced simultaneously in Seoul and Pyongyang in 1972.

The July 4 North-South Korea Joint Statement was a historic declaration that signified a new stage in the North-South relationship. In particular, agreements from the Statement on the three main principles of national reunification are still accepted today. These are the principles of independence, peace, and national unity.

While the impetus shifted towards dialogue for a short time after the Statement, confrontation and conflicts between the two Koreas continued, as witnessed by Park Chunghee's policy of "North-South confrontation through dialogue."

Amidst stalemate, inter-Korean dialogue took a dramatic turn for the better in the 1980s with international and domestic changes. In terms of international affairs in the late 1980s, post-Cold War tendencies arose, socialist countries implemented reforms, and the socialist bloc started to crumble. These were clear signs that the Cold War, which had dominated the global stage since the end of World War II, was approaching its end in the late 1980s.

In addition, after the June Struggle in 1987, demands for reunification increased along with the demands for democratization. Reunification movements arose centered on students.

In response to the domestic and international situations, the Roh Taewoo administration announced the "Special Declaration for National Independence and Prosperous Reunification" on July 7, 1988 and initiated North-South dialogue. On September 11, 1989, Roh recognized North Korea as a dialogue partner through the

"Korean People Reunification Plan." The Roh administration's reunification plan differed from previous plans in that it defined North Korea as "a partner and not an enemy."

In December 1991, both North and South Korea signed the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement, which comprehensively defined the North-South relationship for the first time since division. Through the agreement, the two Koreas reaffirmed the three main principles of reunification as defined in the July 4 North-South Korea Joint Statement. The agreement also acknowledged that the relationship between North and South Korea was not one between two countries, but a temporary relationship formed in the process of unification.

Based on these achievements, in June 2000, a South Korean president, Kim Daejung, visited North Korea for the first time since division and participated in an inter-Korean summit. This summit released the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration. Seven years later, in October 2007, President Roh Moo Hyun crossed the military demarcation line and announced the "2007 North-South Summit Declaration" (October 4 Declaration). These dialogues resulted in the South and North agreeing to open a new era of national prosperity and independent unification.

There were all historic and meaningful agreements between North and South Korea. However, none of them were properly implemented due to several complex issues, such as the North Korean nuclear issue, hostile North Korea-US relations, and changes in administrations in South Korea.

The inter-Korean relationship up until 2007, which had made

definite progress as both sides came to agree on “a real reunification process,” reverted during the presidencies of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye to the point these have come to be known as “the eleven lost years.” The relationship reverted to its pre-1980s state with the advent of theories of imminent North Korean collapse.

New breakthroughs in the North-South relationship began to occur with the emergence of the Moon Jaein administration in 2017. North Korea's top leader Kim Jongun stepped over to the South's side of Panmunjeom on April 27, 2018. A month later, on May 26, South Korea's top leader visited the North's side of Panmunjeom and occasional talks were held between the North and South. The first US-North Korea summit since the division of the Korean Peninsula was held in Singapore on June 12. In September, President Moon visited Pyongyang.

The three inter-Korean summits and the first US-North Korea summit in 2017 signify a “great transition” in the North-South relationship in two ways. First, the inter-Korean summits stabilized the relationship and opened the door to reunification. This opened the door for the two countries to enter the second stage of reunification as described in the National Community Reunification Plan (Reconciliation and cooperation → North-South federation → Unified country).

Second, North Korea and the US took the first steps towards settling the oldest antagonistic relationship in the world. This means that the last vestiges of the global Cold War on the Korean Peninsula would end.

Major transformations of the situation on the Korean Peninsula

were instigated with the “April 27 Panmunjeom Declaration” and the “June 12 Joint Declaration of the US and North Korea.” When this transformation leads to denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula and normalized relations between North Korea-US and North Korea-Japan, a “great historical global transformation” will occur and the 20th-century Cold War system will come to a definitive end. Of course, such a transformation will not come to the Korean Peninsula all at once. Rather, the three processes of denuclearization, establishing peace, and unification must be pursued simultaneously over time.

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## Photographs

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