

A Concise History of Korea

*From the Neolithic Period through
the Nineteenth Century*

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Korea in the Nineteenth Century

Korea in the nineteenth century was coming to the end of a long tradition. The states of Western Europe and their North American transplants in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries had undergone scientific, technological, political, and social revolutions that had transformed them from peripheral players on the world stage to global dominance. Korea, under the Chinese tributary system, away from the major international trade routes, had largely gone unnoticed by the West. Koreans had become aware of Europe in the seventeenth century, but until the end of the eighteenth century it was a remote region of no real interest or relevance to them. Gradually in the nineteenth century this changed.

THE "HERMIT KINGDOM"

All the states of East Asia maintained a policy of limiting contact with outsiders in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. China limited trade with Europeans to the southern port of Canton where it was strictly controlled. A few Jesuits were allowed in Beijing, and a very restricted trade existed between China and Russia. China and Japan did not maintain direct contact with each other, but indirect contact was sporadically maintained between the two through Korea and Okinawa. Chinese merchants from the south traded with Southeast Asia. Japan maintained limited diplomatic contacts and trade with Korea, and allowed the Dutch to trade at Nagasaki, but forbade its own people from leaving the country. Korea was the most isolated society in East Asia. Wary from their troubled experience with the Khitans, the Mongols, the Manchus, the Japanese, and other invaders, Koreans went even further to keep foreigners out and mini-

mize contact with them. As a result, Westerners in the nineteenth century sometimes called Korea “the hermit kingdom.”

In some ways the “hermit kingdom” appellation given to Korea was unfair because Korea remained surrounded by China, the Northeast Asian forests, and the Japanese archipelago, in the center of the interconnected East Asian region. Koreans were proud of being part of the greater cosmopolitan civilization associated with institutions and values that for the most part originated in China. Yet no land pursued a policy of isolation so zealously as late Chosŏn Korea. Koreans were forbidden to travel or even to build large boats lest they sail accidentally abroad. The main exceptions were the diplomatic missions to China. But these involved a small number of trusted officials and followed a strictly prescribed route. Chinese embassies visited Korea periodically, but they also followed a special route. No unauthorized Koreans were allowed to meet and talk with them, they entered Seoul through a special gate, and once in the capital they were confined to a special walled compound. Few ordinary Koreans saw them. Koreans sent occasional embassies to Japan, but after the mid-eighteenth century these became fewer and confined to the island of Tsushima. Japanese traders came to the southern port of Pusan, but they were restricted to a walled compound, the Japan House, where only authorized Koreans were allowed to meet and trade with them. Because of its distance from international trade routes, few Westerners or other visitors from outside East Asia came to Korea, but those who did were prohibited from entering. Thus, Koreans, confident and proud of being a bastion of orthodox teachings, the most ardent adherents to the true Way, lived in a sort of splendid isolation.

INTERNAL PROBLEMS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Historians differ on whether or not Korea was entering a period of decline, and of social and institutional crisis, in the nineteenth century. One possible symptom of dynastic decline was the politics of the nineteenth century. After the reigns of Yŏngjo and Chŏngjo, Korea entered a period in which weak kings were dominated by powerful clans related to the monarch through royal marriages. It is sometimes called the era of *sedo chŏngch'i* (“in-law government”). When Chŏngjo died he was succeeded by his eleven-year-old second son, Sunjo (r. 1800–1834). The real power was in the hands of the dowager queen, who appointed Kim Cho-sun of the Andong Kim clan to assist her in governing. From 1801 to 1834 the Andong Kim clan dominated the court. When Sunjo died in 1834 her eight-year-old grandson Hŏnjong (r. 1834–1849) became king. Power now shifted to the P’ungyang Cho clan of the boy king’s mother. Upon his death the Andong Kim clan

engineered the ascension to the throne of a nineteen-year-old royal relation living on a farm on Kanghwa Island who became King Ch’ŏljong (r. 1849–1864). Ch’ŏljong, a heavy drinker, died an early death, leaving only a daughter. The P’ungyang Cho clan then made an alliance with a relative of the royal family, Yi Ha-ŭng, to put his twelve-year-old son on the throne, who reigned as King Kojong (r. 1864–1907). Kojong was married as a boy to a member of the Yŏhŭng Min clan that through Kojong’s wife, Queen Min, came to prominence at the court. This struggle for power among the clans mostly involved the high officials at court, but two bloody purges in 1801 and 1839 also accompanied the changes in power (see below).

More dramatic evidence of a dynasty in decline is found in several rebellions that took place during this period. In December of 1811, Hong Kyŏngnae, a yangban who had failed to pass the civil service exams or secure a government appointment, led an uprising in the northwestern P’yŏngan Province. Hong’s followers attacked government offices and seized control of a number of towns. Joined by peasants and some local officials, the rebels soon had control of much of the province. After five months government troops put down the uprising, ending with a one-hundred-day siege of Chŏngju, a walled county seat. Government forces dug a tunnel under the city walls, set off explosives, and stormed the citadel. Hong and many rebels fought to the death. Nearly three thousand civilians and rebel troops were caught alive; all were executed except women and boys under ten. Remnants of Hong forces continued to rebel before they were finally defeated in 1817. The remoteness of P’yŏngan Province from the central government may have been a factor in explaining the swiftness with which the uprising spread. The rebellion had a distinct regional character; a manifesto issued by the rebels complained of discrimination against people from the northwestern part of the country.¹ But other popular disturbances broke out from time to time. A major riot took place in Seoul in 1833, triggered by a sharp increase in the price of rice. Most of the disturbances were in the countryside. These usually involved attacking the local magistrate’s office and burning tax records, and sometimes attacking wealthy local yangban. Most were small scale, but a major uprising took place in 1862 in the southern city of Chinju. Thousands of peasants wearing white headbands murdered local officials and merchants in the city. Shortly afterwards another uprising took place in the town of Iksan in Ch’ungch’ŏng Province. Soon violence and destruction were widespread in all three southern provinces until the uprisings were finally suppressed by government forces in 1863.

A more systematic threat to the social order came with a new religious movement, Tonghak (Eastern Learning), founded in 1860 by Ch’oe Che-u. Ch’oe combined Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in what he claimed was an attempt to counter Catholicism (Western Learning) that was entering the country. It is clear though that his new faith had incorporated some

Christian concepts too. For this reason, and because of his call for sweeping social reform, the court saw the new religion as a threat. Fearing rebellion among his followers, the state arrested and executed Ch'oe in 1864. But the new religion did not die out. It made many converts and thirty years later, in 1894, the Tonghaks led a major revolt.

Was Korea toward the end of the Yi dynasty a society in decline? All of these developments are cited by some historians as evidence that Korea was entering into a time of troubles in the nineteenth century. According to this view, peasant unrest was brought about by rural poverty, while discontent grew among frustrated local officials and "fallen yangban" who had lost their opportunity for access to government office. The domination of court politics by powerful in-law families was another symptom of this decline. Some have argued that Korea was suffering from demographic pressure, as the population grew and agricultural production remained stagnant. In the arts and scholarship as well, the brilliant efflorescence of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century was not followed by comparable cultural accomplishments in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, new, subversive ideas from West, in particular, Christianity, were trickling into Korea, slowly undermining the cultural unity of the kingdom. Christian ideas can be seen in the Tonghak religion, while a small number of dissident intellectuals became Christians.

Some scholars see a parallel with what was happening in China. In the eighteenth century China had a population explosion that continued into the first half of the nineteenth century. This led to overpopulation and, consequently, an enormous pressure on the land. Population pressure probably contributed to the decline of the Qing and to the massive rebellions of the second half of the nineteenth century that cost millions of lives. Some scholars have argued that Korea too was facing declining living standards in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century due to population pressures. In support of this view historians can point to a serious famine that took place in 1812–1813, to sporadic reports of hunger, and to the 1833 rice riot in Seoul. If this was the case, then perhaps Korea, as well as China, had a weakened and restless society at the very moment of the Western challenge.

It is not clear, however, that Korea was undergoing a rapid increase in population or a declining standard of living. Regular censuses were taken under the Yi dynasty, but the records are incomplete and their accuracy is not certain. Nonetheless, trying to work with these figures and guessing at the rate of underreporting, one scholar has come up with estimates that bring the population of Korea to 4.4 million around 1400, a number that then more than doubled to 9.8 million in 1592. This dropped to under eight million as a result of the Japanese and Manchu invasions, recovering by 1650. It rose to twelve million by 1693; then a famine from 1693 to 1695 caused it to drop toward the ten million level. The population increased again, reach-

ing thirteen million by 1732. According to this calculation, throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the population probably never grew above the thirteen- to fourteen-million range, and was still around thirteen million at the end of the nineteenth century.² Other scholars have placed the growth in population higher, with estimates of eighteen million by 1750 after which it leveled out, and perhaps declined modestly in the first half of the nineteenth century to sixteen million in 1850.³

The growth of population was accompanied by improvements in agriculture. Korea was having a modest "green revolution." The production of rice, barley, millet, and beans increased due to the expansion of paddy land. A great number of reservoirs were built in Late Chosŏn, making irrigation easier. Double cropping of rice and barley fields also increased yields. By the late eighteenth century transplanting had spread everywhere except the northernmost areas. Agriculture benefited from the introduction of new crops: red peppers and tobacco in the seventeenth century, and the potato and sweet potato in the eighteenth century. Tobacco provided a cash crop for farmers, and the potato and sweet potato could grow in hilly areas less suitable for other crops.

Evidence suggests that Korea's demographic pattern was similar to that of Japan rather than Qing China. After a steady rise in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Korea's population probably leveled off in the mid-eighteenth century. Agricultural production kept up with population growth, and the number of famines appears to have actually declined after 1750. Korea in the late nineteenth century was one of the more densely populated lands in the world, but it does not seem to have been overcrowded. In fact, the early Western visitors to Korea sometimes commented on the lack of beggars or signs of extreme poverty. In short, there does not seem to have been any great ecological or economic crisis in Korea in the nineteenth century.

Culturally as well, the traditional arts and letters still flourished, if not with the brilliance that marked the time of Yŏngjo and Chŏngjo. Tasan, one of the dynasty's most original thinkers, wrote much of his work during the reign of Sunjo. Other scholars continued the tradition of eclectic writings. Sŏ Yu-gu (1764–1845) compiled *Sixteen Treatises Written in Retirement* (*Imwŏn simnyuk chi*), dealing with a wide variety of social, economic, and intellectual topics. Yi Kyu-gyŏng (1788–1856) wrote *Random Expatiations* (*Oju yŏnmun changjŏn san'go*), another vast compilation of scholarly treatises on government administration, economics, history, and science. Yi Kyu-gyŏng's work is marked by careful methods of empirical scholarship, reflecting the influence of the Qing school of Evidential Scholarship. Kim Chŏng-ho (d. 1864) traveled all over Korea for years and produced what has become his famous *Detailed Map of Korea* (*Taedong yŏjido*) in 1861. In literature *sijo* were composed in large numbers and *p'ansori* emerged as a new

literary and dramatic form. Chang Süng-öp (1843–1897), a poor orphan who gained employment as a government painter, became regarded as one of the three great masters of the Chosön period.

An example of the continued vitality of traditional culture is the life and works of Kim Chöng-hüi (1786–1856), better known by his pen name Ch'usa. Kim came from a family of yangban landowners in Ch'ungch'öng Province.⁴ Many had served as officials. His father passed the civil service examination and held the post of Minister of Personnel. The youthful writings of this child prodigy are said to have attracted the attention of Pak Chega and other scholars. In 1809 at the age of twenty-four he passed the civil service exam with a *saengwön* degree and in the same year traveled with his father on a diplomatic mission to Beijing. There he studied the art of epigraphy from Chinese masters Weng Fanggang and Ruan Yuan. Returning to Korea he examined inscriptions from the Three Kingdoms period and became the leading member of the Evidential Scholarship school in Korea. His interests extended to Buddhism as well. He made an extensive study of Buddhist texts, and unlike many earlier Chosön Confucian scholars he made free use of Buddhist terms in his writings. A noted painter, he specialized in orchids. He became better known as a master calligrapher, developing the "Ch'usa" style, which is still much admired. His reputation as an artist and scholar did not protect him from court intrigue. In his fifties he was exiled to the island of Cheju, where he spent nine years confined to living in a small room in a remote village. While in exile he painted and exchanged letters with friends and relatives on epigraphy, geology, history, art, and Confucian and Buddhist doctrine and texts. Eventually family fortunes in the capital changed and he was allowed to return to Seoul. He retired from political life soon after to spend time tutoring a number of young disciples in a provincial town south of the capital. Kim's life illustrates the continual near monopoly of higher culture by the elite and the vicious political intrigues that made public life precarious. His life, however, also represents the best of the Korean scholarly tradition. It was a tradition that was still capable of producing innovations in art and scholarship.

EARLY CONTACTS WITH THE WEST

The world Koreans inhabited was dominated by China, the vast continental empire that contained one of the world's wealthiest, oldest, and most sophisticated societies. Then there was Japan to the east, a participant in the broader East Asian cultural world but also a warlike and dangerous society. To the northwest were the seminomadic peoples that had so often invaded. Koreans maintained sporadic contact with Vietnamese, Siamese, and other southeast Asian people. Beyond this was the world of distant barbarians that Koreans

had little contact with, knowledge of, or interest in. Among these remote peoples were the Europeans. Early in the sixteenth century reports of the presence of "Pullanggi" (Franks) in Southeast Asia reached Korea, and in 1597 a Jesuit, Gregorio de Cespedes, arrived in Korea accompanying the Japanese troops, but there is no Korean record of his presence. Some Korean captives in Hideyoshi's invasions were brought back to Japan and converted to Christianity. One, baptized as Antonio Corea, arrived in Italy in 1606 and married an European woman. Antonio Corea never made it back to Korea to report on what he saw. Not until the late nineteenth century did a Korean visit a Western country and come back to relate his experiences to his compatriots.

Direct contact with the West came in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Jesuits under the talented polymath Matteo Ricci established a small mission in Beijing at the end of the sixteenth century. While they made few converts, they did attract admiration for their skills in perspective painting and mapmaking, their knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, and their curious mechanical devices, especially clocks. The Chinese emperors employed Jesuits to help them maintain an accurate calendar. Koreans traveling on diplomatic missions encountered these Jesuits and shared the Chinese admiration for their technical and mathematical skills. An early reference comes from Yi Su-gwang (1563–1628), who wrote the *Chibong yusöl* (*Topical Discourses of Chibong*) in 1614, an encyclopedic work with 3,500 entries. Included in his entries were brief descriptions of Western maps, self-striking clocks, ships, prisms, grape wine, Western religion, and Matteo Ricci. Among his descriptions of the countries of the world he mentioned Portugal, which he placed southwest of Siam, and England, which he confused with the Kirghiz tribe in central Asia.⁵

A number of other scholars and officials on diplomatic missions met Jesuits and picked up some knowledge of Western science and religion. One of these, Chöng Tu-wön, in 1631 brought back with him a telescope, a clock, a Western gun, maps of the world and the heavens, and books in Chinese by Western missionaries on astronomy and world geography. For the most part Koreans were dismissive of Christianity, which they viewed as nonsensical and indicative of the low cultural level of Westerners despite their technical skill. Westerners' skills at calculating an accurate calendar were another matter, since one of the most important functions of a ruler was to be able to determine when his people could plant and harvest crops. Prince Sohyön, while being held hostage in Beijing by the Manchus, met Adam Schall, one of the most learned of the Jesuits in China, and invited him to send a Jesuit to Korea. Although nothing came of this, the Koreans did adopt Western calendrical methods to determine the position of heavenly bodies over Seoul and thus make a more reliable calendar. Previously they had relied on a calendar based on the positions of heavenly bodies over Beijing.

In the eighteenth century Korean visitors to China continued to stop by the Jesuit mission, which became part of the standard tour of exotic sights in the imperial capital. Jesuits even complained about the Korean visitors who handled their musical instruments and wandered around the cathedral in Beijing, spitting on the floor, ignoring its sanctity. Some Koreans were impressed by Western painting, especially its mastery of linear perspective. Pak Chi-wŏn in his *Yŏlba ilgi* wrote how he and his companions when entering a Jesuit church stretched out their arms to receive babies falling from clouds on the church ceiling. The clouds looked real, and humans appeared to be alive and moving.⁶ Western realism even had some influence on eighteenth-century Korean artists, but as in Qing China, the interest in Western painting techniques was a fad that waned in the nineteenth century.

Few Koreans seemed to take the Europeans very seriously as bearers of a great tradition, rather seeing them as just clever barbarians. One of the early recorded exchanges between a Korean and a Westerner is preserved in the correspondence of Yi Yong-ho, a young Korean diplomat who met Joao Rodrigues (1561–1633), in which Yi challenged the Jesuit scholar on his explanation of the universe.⁷ China is the center of the universe, Yi informed the Jesuit. Rodrigues replied that there is no center of the world. Western cosmology, he further argued, is far superior to the Chinese view, for the Chinese astronomers did not know why celestial bodies moved but the West had an explanation. The Jesuit then went on to explain Catholic cosmology, linking the knowledge of celestial spheres with the broader cosmology of heaven, hell, and God. Yi was impressed with the Westerner's science, but found his cosmology unconvincing.⁸ A few took Western knowledge seriously. Yi Ik, for example, although he never met any Europeans, read Chinese translations and extracts of Western mathematics, geography, and medicine, for all of which he had great respect. Nothing, however, the Koreans learned of the West shook their belief in the superiority of East Asian civilization or their Sinocentric views of the world. In fact, Yi Ik noted that Western world maps show China in the center of the world dominating its largest continent, which he regarded as evidence of China's centrality. Mostly Westerners were strange creatures with round eyes, big noses, and sometimes red hair, who as it was frequently repeated urinated like dogs by lifting one leg.⁹

In 1627, three shipwrecked Dutch sailors washed up on the shores of Korea. They were employed building guns for the Korean military. Two died in the Manchu invasion of 1636; a third, Jan Janse Weltevree, who married a Korean woman and adopted a Korean name, survived to greet the arrival of thirty-six of his countrymen in 1653 when their ship wrecked on Cheju. These Dutch sailors too were forcibly detained in Korea and employed for their technical skills. Eight later escaped, and one, Hendrick Hamel, wrote the first account of Korea in a Western language. An accurate observer,

Hamel provided a useful outsider's view of seventeenth-century Korea. Hamel reported that Koreans treated Westerners as objects of curiosity but that even educated Koreans showed little knowledge or curiosity about Western countries. "When we nam'd some Countries to them, they laugh'd at us, affirming we only talk'd of some town or village; their Geographical Knowledge of the coasts reaching no farther than Siam by reason of the little Traffick they have with Strangers farther from them."¹⁰ After Hamel, no more Westerners are known to have arrived in Korea for nearly two centuries.

EXTERNAL THREATS AND "WESTERN LEARNING"

In the nineteenth century the world around Korea was changing. From early in the nineteenth century, Western nations began to arrive on the shores of Korea. British ships appeared on the coast in 1832. In 1846, three French warships arrived on the coast, sent a letter to be forwarded to the king, and left. In 1854, two armed Russian vessels sailed off the northeast coast and clashed with Koreans. Koreans also were aware of what was happening in China. The British went to war with China in the Opium War of 1839–1842, defeated the Chinese, and forced them to engage in trade on British terms. Britain and France went to war with China again in 1858–1860, inflicting another defeat and extracting more concessions. The Russians advanced south, acquiring territory on China's northern frontier and advancing to Korea's Tumen River border in 1860, while the United States forced Japan to open itself to trade with the West in 1854. Koreans through their diplomatic missions in China kept abreast of these changes. It was clear a new barbarian threat was emerging.

Even before these alarming events took place a small number of Koreans became attracted to Christianity, which became known as *Sŏhak* (Western Learning). It was introduced to Korea rather indirectly through written texts. A handful of Koreans on diplomatic missions to China met with Western missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most Koreans were highly dismissive of Christianity for many of the same reasons they objected to Buddhism: it promoted selfishness, honored celibacy, and gave credence to miracles. Even an admirer of Western learning such as Yi Ik dismissed these religious beliefs, which he called the "grains of sand and piece of grit" amidst their scholarship.¹¹ Only in the late eighteenth century did a few Koreans become genuinely drawn to the religion. In 1784, Yi Sŭng-hun (1756–1801) accompanied his father on a diplomatic mission to Beijing and was baptized by a Western Catholic priest. A small number of yangban converted, mostly from the Namin faction that was out of power and tended to

produce dissidents. Some *chungin*, however, converted as well. The converts included the scholar Tasan and his two brothers, Chŏng Yak-chŏn and Chŏng Yak-chong. In many ways Christianity's progress in Korea was unique for it was not spread directly by missionaries, but by intellectuals who were attracted to Catholicism through their readings of Christian tracts in translations and through sporadic contacts with Christians in China. The beginning of Christianity in Korea was thus unusual in world history in that early converts largely converted themselves. Lacking any ordained priest, they even baptized themselves with only a vague idea of how baptism should be performed.

In China the Rites Controversy had weakened the Catholic mission the Jesuits established there in the seventeenth century. The pope had ruled in 1742 that ancestor worship and belief in Christianity were incompatible. This angered the Chinese authorities since the rites to a family's ancestors were central to Confucian practice. As Korean officials became aware of Catholicism they too condemned it. Chŏngjo declared it a heresy in 1785; the following year all importation of books of any kind from Beijing was banned lest they contain Christian writings. In 1791, Yun Chi-ch'ung from a yangban family in the southwestern policy of Chŏlla was sentenced to death for failing to prepare an ancestral tablet for his mother. Four years later, however, the first priest from China, Zhou Wenmo, entered Korea in response to appeals from the small Christian community and began making a great number of new converts. By 1801, there were an estimated four thousand Christians in the peninsula. That Catholicism could grow was in part due to the protection given by Ch'ae Che-gong, a *Namin* who held great influence during King Ch'ŏngjo's last years. But with Chŏngjo's death and the ascension of Queen Dowager Kim (Yŏngjo's queen) as regent for the youthful King Sunjo, suppression of Catholicism resumed. This was intensified when a convert, Hwang Sa-yŏng, sent his "silk letter" to the French Catholic bishop in Beijing. In it he asked the Pope to request that the Chinese emperor require the Korean king to grant religious freedom, and to have Western nations send naval forces of fifty to sixty thousand men to compel the Korean government to do so. It was to be delivered by another convert who was scheduled to go on a tribute mission. This only confirmed what many feared, that Catholicism was a dangerous heresy. Furthermore, that many converts like Hwang were from prominent, well-educated families was alarming. In the Catholic Persecution of 1801 three hundred converts were put to death, including the scholars Yi Sŏng-hun and Chŏng Yak-chong along with Zhou Wenmo. Chŏng Yak-chŏn and Tasan were exiled to remote places. This persecution became entangled in factional disputes, since the *Pyŏkp'a* branch of the *Noron* faction that was coming to power charged its *Sip'a Namin* opponents with heresy. Religion became enmeshed with factional politics.

A few years later, however, with the Andong Kim lineage securely in power the persecution of Catholics eased. Meanwhile, the Vatican had appointed a vicar apostolic for Korea, and in 1836, the French priest Mautant, and in 1837, two others, Chastan and Imbert, surreptitiously entered the country. The number of converts reached nine thousand by the late 1830s. But when the P'ungyang Cho came to power they began the Catholic Persecution of 1839 in which the three foreign priests and seventy-five converts were executed. A few years later the first Korean priest, Kim Tae-gŏn, was ordained in Macao and then smuggled into the country. His arrival was shortly followed by the arrival of three French naval ships to investigate the massacres of 1839. Assuming a connection between Kim and the arrival of foreign ships, the court executed him along with eight converts in 1846. With King Ch'ŏlchong on the throne in 1849 and the Andong Kim in power again, the persecutions let up. Twelve French Catholic priests entered and Catholic books and pamphlets were published. The number of converts reached twenty thousand by 1864. In the nineteenth century many converts were from the urban poor; many were women. Most were from the Seoul area. Christianity was by no means sweeping the country, but the presence of a Christian minority with its foreign links was troubling to Korean conservatives.

REFORMS UNDER THE TAEWŎN'GUN

As Korea faced internal and external challenges a vigorous effort of reform took place under the Taewŏn'gun, who was the father of the young king Kojong and served as his regent from 1865 to 1873. The Taewŏn'gun's program of reform was designed to strengthen the monarchy, weaken the power of the factions and great clans, and enhance the revenue of the state. He appointed members of the four major factions to office. As part of his effort to restore the dignity of the royal house, he rebuilt the Kyŏngbok palace in Seoul and restored royal tombs. One of his most radical measures was the abolition of most of the *sŏwŏn*. These private academies had served as institutional bases for various aristocratic factions and for critics of the court. The *sŏwŏn* also possessed considerable land and slaves that were exempt from taxes. Thus by closing down hundreds of the academies he would be eliminating institutions that challenged royal authority and also bringing agricultural land under taxation. After imposing a number of restrictions on *sŏwŏn*, in 1871 he closed down all but forty-seven.

The Taewŏn'gun carried out important tax reforms, reorganizing the grain loan system to make it more efficient both as a source of famine relief and as a source of government revenue. More significantly he instituted a new household tax that replaced the military cloth tax. What made this reform

significant was that it was levied on the yangban as well as on commoners. To pay for his new royal palace and other projects he levied a number of new taxes such as a land surtax and a gate tax on goods transported in and out of Seoul. Not all of his reforms were successful; he issued a new coinage that was arbitrarily given a value far above the worth of the copper itself, bringing about inflation.

Initially the Taewŏn'gun was tolerant of Christianity. But the growing foreign crisis in East Asia fed fears that Christianity was a dangerous Western doctrine that would undermine the political and social order. The connection between Catholicism and the French presence in Asia resulted in a belief that Catholic missionary activities were part of hostile French designs on Korea. The regent launched a major persecution in 1866 on the advice of many of his officials, and the government executed nine French missionaries and many Korean converts in what became known as the Catholic Persecution of 1866. He also vigorously resisted any attempts by outsiders to end the country's isolation policy. The French sent seven ships on a punitive expedition to Korea in response to the massacre of Catholics, including several French missionaries. They were fiercely fought by local defenders and forced to withdraw without accomplishing their aims. In the same year, 1866, the *General Sherman*, an American merchant ship, sailed up the Taedong river to P'yŏngyang to engage in trade in defiance of the Korean ban against foreign vessels. After it refused to follow an order to leave, it was burned and all aboard perished. News of the *General Sherman* eventually reached the Americans in China. In 1871, when the United States sent a punitive expedition, the Koreans fiercely fought back, inflicting enough casualties on the Americans that they decided to retreat. The Taewŏn'gun proudly put up stone signs proclaiming, "Western barbarians invade our land. If we do not fight we must then appease them. To urge appeasement is to betray the nation."¹²

The vigor of the Taewŏn'gun's reforms suggests that the Chosŏn state in the third quarter of the nineteenth century was far from being in an irrecoverable decline. Perhaps if the state was left alone it would have continued to flourish for centuries more. But it was not left alone. East Asia was caught up in the relentless expansion of Western nations. Chosŏn officials watched in alarm as China was humiliated by the British in the Opium War in 1839–1842 and again by the British and French in 1858–1860. In the second conflict the British and French attacked and briefly occupied Beijing. When the Americans forced Tokugawa Japan to open up its ports to Western traders and to establish diplomatic ties with the West, it set in motion an internal crisis that resulted in the overthrow of the shogunate in 1868. The government of the Meiji emperor that replaced it was dominated by reformers quick to adopt Western institutions, ideas, and technologies. When the new Japanese government sought to open relations with Korea in 1869, the Kore-

ans were shocked at its representatives' Western dress and their disregard for the diplomatic forms of the East Asian world order.

In 1876, the Japanese used Western-style gunboat diplomacy to demand that Korea open its ports to Japanese merchants and establish formal diplomatic ties with Tokyo. The young monarch Kojong and his court gave in to the demands. Six years later, on the advice of the Chinese, Korea signed a treaty with the United States opening the country to American missionaries and merchants, and establishing diplomatic relations. Soon a trickle of Koreans were traveling to Japan, to the United States, and to Europe. Koreans proved to be eager students, with many quick to see the necessity and advantage of change. But the nation was not allowed to absorb the flood of new ideas entering the country. Instead, Korea became caught in the aggressive imperialistic power politics of the late nineteenth century. China struggled to maintain its influence in Korea, while other powers, most of all Japan and Russia, intrigued to establish control over the peninsula. Ultimately Japan emerged the victor in this competition, and in 1910 Korea was annexed to the island empire. When the occupation ended Korea found itself the pawn of the world's two great powers of 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union, and was effectively partitioned. Korean conservatives warned that the ending of isolation would result in disaster for the country. They were proved right.

THE LEGACY OF TRADITIONAL KOREA

Korea in the nineteenth century was an ancient land with a proud cultural tradition, a cultural tradition with origins going back several thousand years. As a unified state it was more than twelve centuries old, making it older than any state in Europe. Besides China, that vast continental empire, only Japan, and perhaps Cambodia and Ethiopia, could claim as much political continuity. The boundaries of Korea had not changed radically in almost a millennium. The present borders were established during the reign of Sejong in the fifteenth century. These were the most stable national boundaries in the world. Even the eight provincial boundaries had existed largely unchanged for eight centuries, longer than provincial boundaries of any other country. Politically the aristocratic-monarchical system had undergone some modifications but remained fundamentally the same since the Silla period. And the Yi (Chosŏn) dynasty was the third-longest-ruling dynasty of any major state; only the imperial houses of Japan and Ottoman Turkey among major states were older. Socially most of the great families traced their ancestry back many centuries; some, such as the Kyŏngju Kim clan, had been prominent since at least as early as the fifth century. This was an ancestry several centuries longer than that of any royal or aristocratic family in Europe.

Within this relatively stable political framework a well-defined Korean society, possessing a sense of its own identity as a people with their own culture, had emerged. Korea was an ancient land characterized by change within tradition, a strong sense of continuity, and stability. Politically independent, suspicious of outsiders, and remarkably homogeneous with no ethnic minorities, Korea was a land apart. Yet the Koreans were participants in a great cosmopolitan civilization centered in China. Koreans were aware of their distinctiveness as a people with a language very different from their neighbors and their own style of dress, housing, cuisine, and folk customs. Nevertheless, the elite took pride not in their distinctiveness, but in their adherence to cultural values that had their origin in China. Culturally, in some respects the gap between the yangban and the commoners was greater than that between the yangban and the Chinese literati. But this cultural gap between the elite and the nonelite narrowed as Neo-Confucian norms were absorbed by all members of society. Korea was not a "nation" in the modern sense; it was, rather a clearly defined political, ethnic, and cultural unit within East Asian civilization. But the great civilization that the Koreans were so proud to be a part of underwent a severe challenge in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This challenge would fundamentally alter Korean culture and bring the old order to an end.

Yet the rich and ancient cultural tradition of Korea did not die out as much as it was transformed by the exposure to the Western-dominated world of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Just as in the past Koreans had looked to China as a cultural model, they now sought to take the best in the achievements of Western civilization and adopt and adapt them to their culture. Twentieth-century Koreans were to look to Japan, the United States, and Europe. Just as they proved to be China's most studious pupils, they would be among the twentieth century's most ardent and eager students, absorbing and bringing back ideas on society, politics, art, literature, music, science, economics, thought, and fashions. These they developed into a unique Korean synthesis. In North Korea the result of this synthesis was the creation of one of the most totalitarian and oppressive systems of government the world has ever seen. In South Korea this led to the emergence of a vigorous if contentious democratic society with an internationally competitive economy. Thus, even at the start of the twenty-first century the legacy of premodern history would continue to shape Korean society, culture, and identity and the ways Koreans responded to the challenges of the rapidly evolving global civilization that they had joined.

NOTES

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