

# Discovery of the World - A Korean Perspective

The inaugural Ra Jong Yil Lecture in Korean Studies

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When I was asked to give the first of this series of lectures on Korean topics, my first choice was to attempt a scholarly analysis of the nature of Korean studies, its current status as well as the history of its making and its implications for the future. However when I was in the middle of preparing my first draft, gathering references and consulting scholars in the field, Dr John Swenson-Wright here in Cambridge asked me to consider doing something more personal, rather than scholarly, centered around my experiences both as an academic and as a public servant. Obviously he valued my personal experiences more than my scholarship! However, I thought it might be worth trying to do so as I have lived through perhaps the most dramatic period of developments in Korean history both in academia and in the public arena.

Equally, if not more, important may be my experiences as a private person who has lived in the real world of ordinary people through all the turbulence of modern Korean history. The greatest single event that has happened to Korea throughout its long history is, I think, the discovery of the modern world. And I have not only lived through this, but observed and participated in the process too. From at least the beginning of the twentieth century, the internationalization of Korea had been going on for sometime in the margins of the world. but I think it is fair to say that the world finally found Korea in 1950 when the Korean War broke out, while Korea discovered the world in 1988 when it hosted the Summer Olympic Games.

## World of Violent Conflicts

Some time ago someone raised a totally irrelevant question after a lecture on an international topic, "You have a reputable family background and that must have helped your academic career and made it easier for you to attain a public position. What do you think you would have become if you had been born to a poor peasant family like me?" Without thinking, I replied: "The president of Korea, of course." and added "perhaps". The impromptu response was of course just meant as banter but there was some point to it as well. In Korea at any rate it seems definitely to be the case that an underprivileged background can be an advantage.

The new President of Korea made a big impression by saying in his inauguration speech earlier this year that he was once "a boy from the countryside who could not even eat regular meals". Two of his immediate predecessors were also from remote parts of the

country and did not have a university education. Others who had been presidents during periods of authoritarian rule boasted that they had come from obscure backgrounds. The fact of the matter is that this is not limited to the top echelons of the government. It has on the contrary characteristic of Korea today.

To me, an old timer, what Korea is now seems nothing short of a miracle. Then how did the "miracle" happen?

The early memories of my life are almost entirely tied up with conflict, violence and chaos. My earliest memories include a family train trip to our farmland in accordance with the policy of the colonial government of Korea of dispersing the urban population to the countryside in expectation of American air raids towards the end of the war. I remember clearly the vapour trails of high flying American aeroplanes which Koreans looked up at with mixed feelings of wonder, fear and expectation.

My family lived through the last couple of years of the colonial period on the family farm where it was easier to find food.

Even there the general atmosphere was one of widespread disaffection. Hatred of the colonial Government was widespread, particularly because of the harsh policies adopted towards the peasants, wartime austerity policies, and requisition of almost anything, even household cooking utensils, to be used as scrap metal for weaponry, and, of course, harvested grains.

The country was desperately poor. Almost every year there was a regular famine, the so-called " Spring Distress (春窮)" when the harvests of the previous year had run out and barley was not yet ready for harvest. It remained basically the same up until the '60s. I remember the food crisis in the middle of the '60s when there was fear of large scale starvation following a crop failure.

After Liberation there came chaos. This has often been misrepresented simply as a "conflict between the left and the right". It was actually a combination of more complex phenomena: Age-old mistrust and antipathy toward government authorities, personal or family grudges and vendettas, as well as struggles among groups or personalities for power in the name of one political cause or another, were all mixed up with genuine political disputes. I think one of the most conspicuous phenomena of the post-Liberation period in Korea was the volcanic explosion of popular sentiments. Ideology of course played a role too, often without being fully understood by those acting in its name.

I think on the whole the left had the upper hand in the struggle: The communists in particular appeared to have the most logical analysis of the problems of the day as well as a clear plan for the future. They enjoyed a clear advantage in the struggle for moral and theoretical leadership as well as wide popular support. However, resistance from the right was also quite strong. I think the rightist camp drew their strength from the resistance of the people to the arrogance of the small group of leftist intellectuals who pursued exclusive power on their claimed monopoly of truth. The rightists could also

bank on traditional elements, religious groups and refugees from North Korea not to mention the support of the authorities.

At any rate I have a lot of sympathy for those early activists on the left who perished in the struggle, under the severe repression in the initial period after the Liberation.

My school days were lit by candle light and kerosene lamp, for North Korea cut off the supply of electricity to the South in 1948 after the establishment of two separate regimes in Korea.

The division of the country into two separate regimes was followed by the Korean War. After the War was over, each regime again went its own way trying to rebuild and seeking unification on their own terms.

Even in the midst of extreme poverty and authoritarianism, the South Koreans have always taken as their benchmark the most advanced countries and aimed at achieving world level development in economy, education, politics and culture.

In any case there now appears to be stark differences between North and South Korea not only in economy but also in politics and society. What accounts for these gaps between the two that emerged in such a short period of time. I do not believe that in terms of practical policies there was much difference between the two Governments of Korea: the regimes of Syngman Rhee and Kim Il-sung. Both were nationalists who had worked for the independence of Korea; both had very strong anti-Japanese views; both were statist who believed in building a strong and centralized state; both aimed at building basically self-sufficient economy; for both the most urgent priority was building a strong military as both of them thought of unification primarily as a military rather than a political task.

A decisive difference was in their respective world outlooks. Rhee aimed at developing his country according to what may be called the mainstream model of development, liberal democracy, an open market system together with a pro-Western foreign policy. This does not mean that he was a model practitioner of democracy, anything but! Rhee was extremely authoritarian. However, he pleaded for a moratorium in view of the unpreparedness of the country for democratic politics and of the threats posed by the communists. This became a sort of model for subsequent authoritarian regimes of South Korea until democratization in the '90s.

### World Discovers Korea

With the Korean War, or the "Mini World War", as I call it, the world discovered Korea in 1950. It was probably the first time in the long history of Korea that it found itself at the center stage of world politics. Churchill complained when things were not going well in Korea that he had never even heard of this "bloody" place until he was 70 years old. The War between the two rival regimes in a remote corner of the world virtually split the world overnight into two and became a global civil war. People, mostly

ignorant about Korea let alone about the War itself, had their own interpretation of what happened and sided with one or the other of the belligerents.

Almost all the big powers of the world came to participate in the War. But nobody admitted it. On the Western side the participants declared they were participating in UN police action. The Chinese soldiers were supposed to be only volunteers. The Soviets who had been involved in the War more than any other country since even before the start of the hostilities simply denied taking any part in it.

There have been various interpretations of the War.

We have now a much clearer picture of what happened as a result of more sources coming to light, including official documents, particularly those of the former Soviet Union.

I believe that the Korean War belongs to a pattern of armed conflict peculiar to Cold War times. One of the unique characteristics of the Cold War is that it was also a period of long peace for countries in the center of world politics.

However this does not apply to the countries in the periphery where war could still serve as a means of policy.

The major elements in the pattern of conflict to which the Korean War belongs are:

1. There is a sponsor country and a local client actor; 2. The former provides the latter with logistic and other support;
3. The two share the same objectives in the war. However their perspectives are different as the former's includes wider, global purposes while the latter's is limited to its own locality;
4. When and if things go wrong, it is the client actor which mostly suffers the consequences. The sponsor country remains relatively exempt from the resulting costs.

I believe that the Korean War belongs in this sense to the same pattern of conflicts as those which happened in Albania earlier and Cuba later. Only that in these cases the sponsor country was the other superpower.

What was a limited war for the great powers was a total war for Korea. It was also a civil war between the very people who had just experienced a bitter fratricidal struggle. Non-combatants were engaged in conflict behind the frontlines and exposed to violence and perpetual danger. The major belligerent parties outside Korea still maintained their normal, if cold, relations with each other, debating in the UN and going to receptions. In Korea violence was raging on a scale never experienced before, destroying not only houses and buildings but also men, women and children.

One of the lingering memories of the War was the violence committed against and even among the non-combatants. The war created a basic situation of violence. And the people had ample opportunities, both official or private, freely to commit wanton

violence against anybody they chose to. Atrocities were committed by both sides. But there was also violence committed among private persons in the name of, or under the pretext of, official or ideological reasons. When one side withdrew from an area and the other side took over, and some sort of order and peace were restored, people busied themselves looking for missing members of their families. It was an agonizing experience to watch people feverishly wandering around the scene of a massacre in the hope of finding the remains of ones dear to them. When they succeeded in identifying what they had been looking for they were seized with intense grief. However this was nothing compared to the misery of failing to find even the remains.

When I was working for the Government in the '90s, I always insisted on sending back the remains of North Korean commando agents intact, for they quite often killed themselves when they were about to be captured. It is difficult in any sphere of life to be completely free of politics. However, I thought and still think that dealing with human remains should, as far as possible, be free from political considerations. Whatever they had done, they were once people with family and friends, and people need to ascertain with their own eyes the death of their loved ones and bury the remains together with the past.

Life as a school child in a land in which a savage war was raging must, one would suppose, have been miserable. The living conditions were indeed awful, difficult even to imagine today. There was also a constant threat to security. But we were all cheerful and full of spirit, which still is beyond my understanding when I look back on my youthful self. Schools were open everywhere, in make-shift structures sometimes but for the most part in a tent or an open space. Mine was on an open hill as we had to turn buildings over to military use. On a slope we each dug a small hole which served as our chair. And we carried a portable easel with a string to hang it around the back of our neck which served as our desk. In the mornings the teacher came with a blackboard which he hung on a tree. There was a large number of boys in the class, refugees from the North who must have seen worse times than us southerners. But I do not remember anybody particularly unhappy or even depressed. We were all as merry as any school children living under normal circumstances, playing games, eating whatever we could lay our hands on and among other things scuffling, horse playing and fighting, dueling.

One painful memory of the wartime was nearly total absence of cultural stimulus. We had heard of TV but it existed in a land of make believe. Cinema was very rarely accessible. Books were hard to find, but they offered wonderful worlds of excitement and imagination, and I would brave long distances to get a book somebody had promised to lend me.

Perhaps it was because of these experiences as a child that I always sympathized strongly with those suffering from cultural or intellectual deprivations imposed by their governments which is not less painful physical deprivation..

If the War had been started for the purpose of unifying the country, it resulted in the complete opposite. During the War both sides had opportunities of occupying parts previously governed by the other side with the consequence of deepening further mutual distrust and hatred. The division of the country became consolidated and heavily militarized too. The presence of American troops became a permanent feature of the peninsula.

However, one of the most unfortunate consequences in the political field was that the War effectively eliminated any possibility of progressive politics for a long time to come. The two regimes and the attitudes of people in both parts of Korea became hardened toward one another. On the human level, some of the tragic problems caused by the War such as the separated families and those forcibly removed still remain unresolved.

On the other hand, through the war Korea became inseparably bound up with the world. Korea was no longer a backwater of world politics and no longer just a buffer to protect Japan from the communist threat. It became an important stake in the war of ideology too. Korea was no longer at the margin of world politics. The West -and particularly the US- could not afford to lose Korea. It was no longer outside the perimeter of the US defence commitment.

It was also during the War that boys from the rural areas were mobilized into a modern army where a large number of them learned how to read and write, the basics of modern technology and most of all how to work in an organized unit. They would prove to be a good army of modern industrial workers in the course of time when opportunities presented themselves. The War may have been one of the hidden factors which contributed later to the fast modernization of Korea.

### Korea Discovers the World

Hosting the Olympics in 1988 forced Korea to recognize the world in which it has to live. In one competition, Korean spectators cheered the Russians competing against the Americans. Some Americans complained about this later. But there was nothing ideological or even political in this. Koreans were just coming into contact for the first time with the whole world, not just the Free World.

The Japanese delegation also drew thunderous applause as it marched into the Olympic stadium with their national flag held up high, a flag which was for a long time the hated symbol of a colonial oppressor.

That Korea was able to host the Summer Olympics of '88 at all was thanks to its rapid economic development since the end of the War. After the two previous games crippled by boycotts, first by the Americans and then by the Soviets, the Seoul Olympics were attended by all except North Korea and Cuba.

If the War had prompted hardening of cold war, the Seoul Olympics contributed to

resolving it.

However, the real contribution the Games made to the dissolution of the Cold War was that it effectively put an end to the age-old ideological controversy between capitalism and communism, at least on the level of ordinary people. The relative superiority of the South Korean economy over that of the North had been known to official circles in the Eastern bloc countries for some time. But it had been kept largely from the public. With the Olympics this was no longer possible. People I met afterwards, who belonged to the elite group in the former socialist countries, told me that they had lost all confidence in their ideology after '88 and thought that a radical change in their system was inevitable.

A Chinese woman journalist wrote recently in an organ of the Party youths corps: "In 1988 I was a middle school student. On the day of the opening ceremony of the Seoul Olympic Games the school was closed for the students to watch the scene on TV at home. We knew that there was a country called South Korea. But we did not know that such a beautiful country was near China. We all marveled at the scenes of Seoul, the beautiful Han river, green trees lining the streets, and the modern apartments in Youido which served as the return point for the marathoners. In a word, the streets of Seoul were like a fantasy and the lively people were also impressive."

The Olympics was also an opportunity for Korea to act on what it called its Northern Politics - normalizing diplomatic relations with socialist countries including China and ultimately the Soviet Union.

So what then were the forces that brought about rapid modernization in Korea? Personally I had never been an optimist about the prospect of rapid economic development in Korea. Partly this was because I did not like the authoritarian regime and its way of modernizing the country.

Working on the official documents at places like Kew Gardens or National Archives much later, I found that the West had shared the same pessimism about the future of Korea, too. One British diplomat, who had better remain nameless, recommended in 1950 that Korea be given back to Japan and that there would be no hope for the country otherwise.

When the War was over the Korean immigrant community in Hawaii donated 20 thousand dollars to be used for the reconstruction of the country. Syngman Rhee used the money to found an engineering college which now is Inha University. A British diplomat stationed in Seoul was harshly critical of this and called it an act of sheer vanity, because Korea would never become an industrial country. The money would have been better used, he contended, improving rice crops. I remember also a report in the Times in the fifties saying that it would be like expecting roses blossoming in a waste dump to hope for democracy in Korea.

As late as the '80s most of the so-called Korean experts in the West were pessimistic about the prospect of democratization in Korea. I hope I will be forgiven for indulging in some personal reminiscences as I turn to the progress of democratization in Korea.

I hope I will be forgiven for indulging in some personal reminiscences as I turn to the progress of democratization in Korea. When Kim Dae-jung lost the '92 election and announced his retirement from politics as he had promised, I thought that it was a mistake as it would end any hope of a change of government in the near future, perpetuating one party rule under the banner of democracy. So I called on him at his private residence and urged him to return to politics not just as a leader of a party in Korea but as a leader of the Asian region where his leadership could serve some good purposes too. I recommended Cambridge as a place where he could spend a little time abroad for rest and recovery, though that may seem an odd idea to those of you now in the middle of a busy term!

During his several months as a visiting fellow at Clare Hall he worked, among other things, on his idea of a sunshine policy towards North Korea. I participated together with others in the discussions. I was all for sunshine policy. I thought of the unification of Korea as not so much a political as a human agenda. Instead of aiming at creating a strong unified country, we should consider as our primary concerns the human needs of the entire population of the Korean peninsula, such as improvement on their standard of living and enhancement of moral standard. To me at least, sunshine policy was and is not a strategic concept of taking coat off from North Korea. If we focus on looking after human agenda the unification would come almost as a natural consequence of this policy in due course of time. If the ultimate purpose of unification was to build a powerful country whatever the human cost we would be repeating some of the unfortunate precedents of the past history.

The campaign for the presidency 5 years later was a tough one fighting against tremendous odds. However, we won the election and this was really the first time in Korean history that there had been a peaceful change of government through an election.

I participated in the government in various capacities after the election. For me it was a new and a good experience to work inside government.

One of the noteworthy developments during the Kim Dae-jung Presidency was the implementation of the so-called sunshine policy toward North Korea. The policy of engaging North Korea did not of course start with him. All of his predecessors had tried engaging North Korea in one way or another, particularly as the balance of economic development began tilting in favour of the South. However it was Kim Dae-jung who carried out the policy and never wavered in the path with a firm conviction through all the difficulties and sometimes stiff opposition from different quarters.

To foreigners, who were skeptical and even suspicious sometimes, I used to explain it in terms of a marriage which could happen through mutual miscommunication but still bring about a happy end. The policy of engaging North Korea continued by the next Government, though under the rather unimaginative name of Peace and Prosperity Policy. Over the years it has worked big changes on both sides and of course in the

relations between the two parts of Korea.

During Kim Dae-jung's term of office I was appointed ambassador in London. There were no urgent tasks to be addressed so I tried to find ways to create challenges. When somebody asked me what my main challenges were in London, I would answer that it was creating one.

One evening I invited the Ambassadors from Japan and China over to my residence together with their spouses and we agreed to have regular dinner meetings. These expanded later to include senior members of the embassies, and a further outcome was closer contacts between the expatriate communities of Japan, China and Korea living in London. They organized among other things football and golf games. By the time I was due to relinquish my post, the first North Korean ambassador in London was about to arrive and I urged my colleagues to induct him to the meeting, but sadly these meetings came to an end shortly afterwards.

Roh Moo-hyun who succeeded Kim Dae-jung called me back to Seoul to serve him as his foreign and security policy adviser. After a year of work at the Blue House I was sent to Tokyo. One advantage of serving in Tokyo was that there was, unlike in London, no shortage of challenges. Almost everyday there were problems to be dealt with - some of which were rather thorny.

There is one aspect of my service in Japan which may be worth mentioning here. There is a rather large Korean immigrant community in Japan originating mostly from colonial times. The division of the nation on the peninsula had been extended to Japan with the consequence that there were two Korean communities - one pro-South and the other pro-North Korea. Each had their own separate organizations. The relations between the two organizations reflected the state of division at home.

There was rivalry and even hostility between the two even when there no longer remained any ideological or political reasons to fight on. However, ordinary members did mingle and socialize with one another. Somehow the two organizations agreed one day to make up with one another. The leaders of the two organizations duly met, embraced each other and promised to leave the unhappy past behind them and to cooperate with one another. It was widely reported in the media a historic event.

However the reconciliation did not in the end prove to be a lasting one. On the side of the pro-North organization there was no problem demonstrating unity and cohesion behind the leadership. The problem, rather, was on the side of the pro-South organization, for the leadership was roundly criticised and the leaders were ostracized from the organization.

It was distressing to watch the first serious attempt at reconciliation between the two groups collapsing so easily. However, I took this as more of a first successful attempt than a failure at historical reconciliation.

Once while in Tokyo, I invited a group of young people to my residence for dinner. I

did not know it at that time: but among the group were a son of an important man in the pro-North Korean organization and a daughter of a prominent musician of Korea, who had fled from North Korea during the War. The two decided much later to be wedded and invited me to preside over their wedding. I said in my congratulatory message that it was like a small unification too.

### Dynamics of the Adversarial Duo

I should like to spend the remaining minutes of this lecture on the situation of Korea today. As you all know, Korea remains divided with both sides heavily armed. Despite small changes over the past years, North Korea remains basically closed to the outside world.

A well known scholar, mostly critical of South Korea, had this to say about the rapid development of Korea: "Korea began the 20th century near the bottom of the scale of modernity and begins the 21st century near the top.... No capitalists, no Protestants, no merchants, no money, no market, no resources, no get-up-and go, let alone any discernible history of commerce, foreign trade, or industrial development, so on and so forth - and yet there it is."

When liberated from Japan in 1945, the illiteracy rate was 78%; primary School enrollment around 50%. Infant mortality stood at 10.7%. Now it is 0.5% which is lower than that of US. Illiteracy is no longer even mentioned now. Korea enjoys the highest rate of enrollment in the world in education, particularly in higher education.

What is more, in social and political life the legacy of the so-called Confucian tradition of hierarchical culture has largely given way to more liberal and open values and attitudes. Much progress has been made, too, in the fields of human rights and the penal system. No executions have been carried out for more than 10 years now and Amnesty International reckons Korea a virtually free of capital punishment. A Japanese minister of jurisprudence was once most impressed by the living conditions in prisons in Korea. He told me later that he was impressed in particular to see that inmates could even communicate with the outside world through internet chatting. He asked the official in charge how he had managed to obtain such a generous budget for his prison. "It is quite simple", the answer came. "The members of parliament are always very generous with the prison budget because they never know when they will have to spend some time inside themselves!"

There has been a steady improvement in the position of women in society, although activists in the gender-equality movement will no doubt argue, and with good reason, that there still remain many areas for improvement. The percentage of women members has considerably risen and is expected to continue to do so in politics as well as in other professional fields. The standard of professional ethics has progressed so rapidly that what was regarded as a condonable practice a short while ago now constitutes moral hazards.

One important factor underlying the recent history of South Korea is what I call the culture of discontent as distinguished from that of contentment in the North.

Koreans in the South, it seems to me, are never able to rest in peace and to be satisfied with what they have in terms of politics, society, economics, living conditions and most of all the state of division on the peninsula.

As I mentioned earlier, from the beginning South Korea aimed high, seeking to reach a level of development reached only by the most advanced countries. So in South Korea we are bound to be dissatisfied with anything we have.

Another motivating factor has been the division of the country which the Koreans could neither accept as a reality nor do anything effectively about. The Koreans will probably not be able to rest assured in peace and security until this problem is resolved to their satisfaction, which is sadly not in sight any time soon. Or perhaps, even after all their aspirations have been achieved, Koreans may find other causes to be restless about as a kind of habit of heart.

As Martha Graham once said about art: "No artist is pleased .... (there is) no satisfaction whatever at anytime. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others."

In some senses, then, I believe that the constant threat posed by North Korea was a kind of blessing in disguise for South Korea. I suspect that there was always the shadow of North Korea in each and every step of development South Korea achieved.

For example, I doubt if the land reform at the beginning of the Republic would have been possible without the threat of communism. I remember my father, himself a big landowner, telling people around him that the landowning classes would go to their graves clutching the earth they owned unless there was an early land reform.

Again, it is pretty clear that behind the decision to go all out into heavy chemical industry in the '70s lay the sense of threat from North Korea in the wake of the fall of Saigon. Park Chung-hee probably thought that without taking this risk South Korea could not meet the security threat from North Korea, let alone be a worthy rival in terms of legitimacy.

Likewise, South Korea owes its rapid development in democratization at least partly to the presence of North. In the '80s people were rapidly becoming disaffected and this became fertile ground for indigenous radicalism including Marxism and even pro-North Korean sympathies. Security and economic development, the two arguments which provided the traditional rationale for the authoritarian regime, no longer worked as they had. The only way of securing legitimacy for the government was through liberal democratic reforms. I suspect that many politicians of the new generation now active in politics might have become revolutionary activists if the authoritarian regime had persisted in clinging to power without yielding to public pressure.

It goes without saying that the transition to democracy brought with it a new look at the past. There had been admittedly many misdeeds committed in the struggle for survival, as the government sought to consolidate the state against the perennial threats from the North and drove a policy of rapid modernization. These misdeeds had not been fully accounted for, let alone redressed. Successive governments, and especially Roh Moo-hun's, were able to take a new look at the recent past and dissent from the official and hitherto prevailing view. This kind of reappraisal of the past had earlier been limited mostly to the academic world or civic movements. The last Government was perhaps the first fully to take up the task.

The culture of discontent together with the division of the country will keep the Korean people always alert and wakeful. They will probably never cease to be critical, to grumble and to hit the streets with candles in their hands, as recent events have shown, until they are satisfied, and when is any nation ever fully satisfied? Now again "crisis" is the talk of the town. Crisis in the economy, in relations with North Korea and in social anomie. However I am not overly worried for it is in the nature of Koreans to be dissatisfied. I trust that we will always be able to turn any challenge we encounter into a blessing in disguise. The contemporary Koreans are not deferential people. They are irreverent of any authority or power. My compatriots remind me of Mark Twain's famous retort to Matthew Arnold, who once said that he was vexed by the lack of reverence for superiority in America. Mark Twain replied: "A discriminating irreverence is the creator and protector of liberty."