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*Culture and  
Customs of  
Korea*

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*Culture and  
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Korea*



Donald N. Clark

*Culture and Customs of Asia*  
*Hsiangho Lu, Series Editor*



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In Memory of Kim Jai-byun



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## Series Foreword

GEOGRAPHICALLY, Asia encompasses the vast area from Suez, the Bosphorus, and the Ural Mountains eastward to the Bering Sea and from this line southward to the Indonesian archipelago, an expanse that covers about 30 percent of our earth. Conventionally, and especially insofar as culture and customs are concerned, Asia refers primarily to the region east of Iran and south of Russia. This area can be divided in turn into subregions commonly known as South, Southeast, and East Asia, which are the main focus of this series.

The United States has vast interests in this region. In the twentieth century the United States fought three major wars in Asia (namely, the Pacific War of 1941–45, the Korean War of 1950–55, and the Vietnam War of 1965–75), and each had profound impact on life and politics in America. Today, America's major trading partners are in Asia, and in the foreseeable future the weight of Asia in American life will inevitably increase, for in Asia lie our great allies as well as our toughest competitors in virtually all areas of global interest. Domestically, the role of Asian immigrants is more visible than at any other time in our history. In spite of these connections with Asia, however, our knowledge about this crucial region is far from adequate. For various reasons, Asia remains for most of us a relatively unfamiliar, if not stereotypical or even mysterious, "Oriental" land.

There are compelling reasons for Americans to obtain some level of concrete knowledge about Asia. It is one of the world's richest reservoirs of culture and an ever-evolving museum of human heritage. Rhoads Murphy, a prominent Asiaist, once pointed out that in the part of Asia east of Afghanistan and south of Russia alone lies half the world. "Half of its people

and far more than half of its historical experience, for these are the oldest living civilized traditions." Prior to the modern era, with limited interaction and mutual influence between the East and the West, Asian civilizations developed largely independent from the West. In modern times, however, Asia and the West have come not only into close contact but also into frequent conflict. The result has been one of the most solemn and stirring dramas in world history. Today, integration and compromise are the trend in coping with cultural differences. The West—with some notable exceptions—has started to see Asian traditions, not as something to fear, but as something to be understood, appreciated, and even cherished. After all, Asian traditions are an indispensable part of the human legacy, a matter of global "common wealth" that few of us can afford to ignore.

As the result of Asia's enormous economic development since World War II, we can no longer neglect the study of this vibrant region. Japan's "economic miracle" of postwar development is no longer unique, but in various degrees has been matched by the booming economy of many other Asian countries and regions. The rise of the four "mini dragons" (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) suggests that there may be a common Asian pattern of development. At the same time, each economy in Asia has followed its own particular trajectory. Clearly, China is the next giant on the scene. Sweeping changes in China in the last two decades have already dramatically altered the world's economic map. Furthermore, growth has also been dramatic in much of Southeast Asia. Today war-devastated Vietnam shows great enthusiasm for joining the "club" of nations engaged in the world economy. And in South Asia, India, the world's largest democracy, is rediscovering its role as a champion of market capitalism. The economic development of Asia presents a challenge to Americans but also provides them with unprecedented opportunities. It is largely against this background that more and more people in the United States, in particular among the younger generation, have started to pursue careers dealing with Asia.

This series is designed to meet the need for knowledge of Asia among students and the general public. Each book is written in an accessible and lively style by an expert (or experts) in the field of Asian studies. Each book focuses on the culture and customs of a country or region. Each volume starts with an introduction to the land and people of a nation or region and includes a brief history and an overview of the economy. This is followed by chapters dealing with a variety of topics that piece together a cultural panorama, such as thought, religion, ethics, literature and art, architecture and housing, cuisine, traditional dress, gender, kinship and marriage, festivals and leisure activities, music and dance, and social customs and lifestyle. In this series,

we have chosen not to elaborate on elite life, ideology, or detailed questions of political structure and struggle, but instead to explore the world of common people: their sorrow and joy, their pattern of thinking, and their way of life. It is the culture and customs of the majority of the people (rather than just the rich and powerful elite) that we seek to understand. Without such understanding, it will be difficult for all of us to live peacefully and fruitfully with each other in this increasingly interdependent world.

As the world shrinks, modern technologies have made all nations on earth "virtual" neighbors. The expression "global village" not only reveals the nature and the scope of the world in which we live but also, more importantly, highlights the serious need for mutual understanding of all peoples on our planet. If this series serves to help the reader obtain a better understanding of the "half of the world" that is Asia, the authors and I will be well rewarded.

Manchao Lu  
Georgia Institute of Technology



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## Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK owes much to the advice and support of colleagues and friends during periods in Korea teaching at Yonsei University and doing research supported by grants from the Korean-American Educational (Fulbright) Commission and my home institution, Trinity University. Among the many mentors and friends who have contributed to my understanding of Korean history and society are builders of the Korean studies field such as Professors Edward Wagner of Harvard, Koh Byong-ik of Seoul National University, George Paik (Paik Nakchan) of Yonsei University, and Chun Hae-jong and Lee Kwang-jin of Sogang University, as well as numerous contemporaries in the field in various disciplines, in both Korea and the West. While their influence is everywhere in the book and I am indebted to all of them, I hasten to add that responsibility for the interpretations (and errors) is wholly my own.

The firsthand material about life in Pusan district was acquired during the year my wife and I spent there in the Peace Corps and on subsequent visits. Korean friends have given me a profound appreciation and respect for Korean life and culture over the years. I dedicate the book to the memory of the first of these, Kim Jai-hyup, whom I met in Seoul while when I was a student at Seoul Foreign School and he was attending Kyongbok High School, in 1960. Jai-hyup was the first to introduce me to Korean family life, the cultural richness of the city of Seoul, the fascinations of Korean markets and the delights of Korean restaurants, and the world of Korean ideas and thought. We kept in touch through college, graduate school, and our early years in academe and remained close friends until his early death from cancer in the 1980s. His passing took not only a personal friend but a productive scholar.

idea businessman, and finally, through the public affairs group that he co-founded, contributor to better understanding in U.S.-Korean relations.

I am grateful to Wendy Schnatter and Barbara Raeder of Greenwood Press for their patience, persistence, and constructive criticism over the many months of writing and production, and to series editor Hanchan Lu for his comments and support throughout the process. My wife Linda, always my best and most responsive critic, likewise deserves deep thanks. Many of the insights about life in Polson came through her access to village women, her memory, and the notes and records she kept during our time in the countryside.

In general I have used the McCune-Reischauer system for romanizing Korean throughout the book. I have made exceptions where certain names are known outside Korea by variant spellings as in the cases of Proclaimers Syngman Rhee (McCune-Reischauer Yi Sŏngman), Park Chung-hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi), and Kim Il-sung (Kim Il-sŏng), among others.



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## Chronology

- 2333 B.C. Traditional founding date for the earliest kingdom of Korea, founded by the legendary Tan'gun.
- 1122 B.C. Traditional date for the migration from China to Korea of the Chinese nobleman Kijs and his 5,000 followers, establishing the city of P'yŏngsŏng.
- 108 B.C. The Chinese Han dynasty establishes commanderies in Korea. The longest-lived one, Lolang, continues in existence as a virtual Chinese colony until A.D. 313.
- 57 B.C. Traditional founding date for the Korean kingdom of Silla, in southeastern Korea. Two other Korean states are included in the Korean Three Kingdoms: Koguryŏ (37 B.C.) and Paekche (18 B.C.).
- A.D. 372 Traditional date for the entry of Buddhism into Korea. In Koguryŏ, a Confucian school is founded.
- A.D. 668 The kingdom of Silla completes the unification of the Korean peninsula with Chinese help, overcoming first Paekche, in the southwest (A.D. 663), and then Koguryŏ, in the north (A.D. 668).
- A.D. 918 Founding date for the kingdom of Koryŏ. Koryŏ completes the reunification of Korea by accepting the surrender of the last Silla king in 935.

- 1392–1910 Korea is ruled by a succession of twenty-seven kings from the Yi clan of Ch'ônju. They call the kingdom Chosôn, usually translated as "Land of the Morning Calm."
- 1446 King Sejong (r. 1418–50) announces the invention of the Korean phonetic alphabet known as *hangeul*.
- 1592–98 Korea suffers an invasion by Japanese armies sent by the warlord Hideyoshi on an expedition to conquer Ming China. The invasion is halted by a combined Sino-Korean force and a long stalemate follows. The Korean admiral Yi Sunsin develops a metal-clad warship known as the Turtle Ship, to harry Japanese supply lines. Eventually, after Hideyoshi's death, the Japanese withdraw from Korea, leaving the peninsula in disarray.
- 1700s *Sich'ok*, the Korean school of "practical learning," takes shape, involving the "investigation of things" and proposals for social and institutional reform. Korea also produces important new works of art and literature such as the genre paintings of Kim Hongdo and Shin Yunbok, and new-style novels in *hangeul* are written by women of the royal court. Eventually, certain *sich'ok* scholars establish a Korean branch of the Catholic Church.
- 1876 Korea, sometimes called the "Hermit Kingdom" for its policy of seclusion from foreign contact, is "opened" when a Japanese naval expedition forces the Koreans to sign a modern treaty for trade and diplomatic contact.
- 1882 Korea and the United States sign a treaty, Korea's first with a Western country.
- 1890s A Korean religious movement called the "Religion of the Heavenly Way" (*Ch'ûndokkyô*) is behind a peasant movement known as the Tonghak ("Eastern Learning") Movement. Korea requests Chinese assistance to put down the rebellion. Japan intervenes to block the Chinese, and the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 results. After the war, Korea loses its status as a tributary state of China and the king of Korea declares his country an "empire," the Empire of T'achan.

- 1904–5 Russia and Japan go to war over their rivalry for hegemony in northeast Asia. After difficult fighting on land in northern Korea and Manchuria, the Japanese succeed in sinking the main Russian fleet on the sea. The war is mediated by President Theodore Roosevelt, and Russia is eliminated as a contender for influence in Korea. In November 1905, Japan forces Korea to sign a protectorate treaty, turning over Korea's foreign affairs and defense to Imperial Japan.
- 1910 Japan annexes Korea and makes it a colony. The Korean government is forced to sign a treaty giving their country to Japan, and Japan rewards important Korean officials with titles and cash grants.
- 1919 The Korean population rises in protest against harsh Japanese rule during funeral observances for the former Korean king. Japanese colonial authorities are caught by surprise and react with great violence. Over the course of the "March First Independence Movement," as it is known, an estimated 7,000 Koreans lose their lives.
- 1920s The Japanese soften their colonial policy in Korea, assigning a relatively liberal navy admiral to govern the country. His "cultural policy" permits the Koreans to publish newspapers and enjoy limited freedom of expression. Korean Communists join with other nationalists in a political organization that is allowed to flourish briefly, but it comes apart because of the internal conflicts between the Communists and other Koreans.
- 1930s Japanese rule resumes its military discipline as Korea is turned into a staging area for the Japanese war in China (1937) and eventually mobilized for the all-out Pacific War. Koreans are drafted as laborers and then as soldiers in the Japanese military.
- 1943 In Cairo, Allied leaders Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Chiang Kai-shek agree that after Japan's defeat in the war, "in due course" Korea should be free and independent. However, no concrete plans are laid to move Korea from colonialism to self-determination. Instead, the Roosevelt administration thinks in terms of placing Korea under an international trusteeship.

- 1945 When Japan suddenly surrenders in August 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union decide to draw a line across the peninsula at the 38th parallel and to occupy Korea in two zones, the Soviets in the north and the Americans in the south. The two powers then take charge of the Japanese, and serve as "trustees" over Korea until a national government can be formed. Koreans protest the trusteeship idea. In the north, the Soviets quickly create a left-wing government under Korean Communists. In the south, the Americans are slower to abandon the trusteeship idea.
- 1947-48 After fruitless talks between the United States and the Soviet Union over how to constitute a unified Korean government, the United States turns the Korean "problem" over to the United Nations. The United Nations organizes elections in Korea that actually take place only in the southern zone. The representatives who are elected draft a constitution and elect a president, the American-educated Syngman Rhee (Yi Sangman). To answer the newly established "Republic of Korea" (ROK) in the south, the Communists in the north establish the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (DPRK).
- 1949 American occupation forces withdraw from South Korea, but remain nearby in Japan. The last Russian forces withdraw but remain nearby in coastal Siberia near Vladivostok. In China, the Chinese Communists defeat the Nationalists in a civil war and establish the "People's Republic of China" (PRC) with its government in Peking (Beijing).
- 1950-53 In June 1950, after several years of trying to undermine the conservative political leadership in South Korea, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung launches a full military invasion to reunify the Korean peninsula under DPRK control. The Americans, who appear to have renounced any further role in Korean affairs, decide to answer the invasion by re-introducing troops. They organize an international peace-keeping force under a specially created United Nations Command (actually commanded by an American general), with American and South Korean forces as the main ele-

ments along with Great Britain and many others). This force halts the North Korean invasion and eventually turns the tables with a counterinvasion of the north. Fearing that the DPRK, a Communist ally, will be completely destroyed and that the Americans might actually invade China itself, the Chinese Communists intervene in November 1950, forcing a disorderly retreat on the United Nations Command. After heavy fighting, the war settles down on a line across the middle of Korea. Peace negotiations begin in the spring of 1953 and drag on in an atmosphere of frustration and enmity for more than two years. On July 27, 1953, the shooting is stopped by an armistice agreement that establishes a four-kilometer-wide Demilitarized Zone across the entire peninsula very close to the original boundary of the 38th parallel. The two Korean republics begin the laborious process of reconstruction after suffering terrible physical destruction and the loss of more than 2 million citizens on both sides. Chinese losses are in the hundreds of thousands. Americans suffer 34,000 battle deaths and 20,000 more non-combat fatalities, and the British Commonwealth suffers the loss of 1,263.

- 1952-60 In South Korea, President Syngman Rhee is elected and reelected president. The 1960 election turns out to be so corrupt that the citizenry erupt in massive demonstrations that succeed in ousting him from power. A constitutional change and a new civilian government follow but are not able to make much headway against South Korea's intractable economic problems.
- 1961 Elements of the SOK Army take power in South Korea in a military coup. They suspend the constitution and rule by martial law. In 1963, they turn the government back over to civilian leadership, but having retired from the army themselves and having run in the elections, the military men retain control of the South Korean political system and economy.
- 1963 The South Korean government launches an aggressive program of export-led economic development, seeking loans from Japan and other countries to finance its projects.

- 1965 South Korea settles its differences with Japan arising from the colonial period and accepts financial help. Japanese companies enter into joint ventures with South Korean companies, some of which eventually evolve into the *chaebol* conglomerates called *chaebol*. Although many Koreans worry about Japan's possibly taking over their economy, the government under President Park Chung-hee contains their objections and pushes his plans through. Through government control of the banking industry Park ensures that certain selected Korean companies will receive favorable financing to help them grow.
- 1966 South Korea contributes two army divisions to the American war in Vietnam. Koreans take this as repayment of their debt to the United States for saving their republic from Communist takeover in the 1950-53 war with the north. The United States pays all costs of the Korean troop deployment in Vietnam and awards lucrative construction contracts to Korean companies, greatly increasing the flow of valuable international currency into the Korean economy. Korea begins to enjoy a "Vietnam Boom."
- 1969 President Park Chung-hee runs through the national legislature an amendment to the South Korean constitution that will enable him to run for president for an unlimited number of terms.
- 1971-72 After nearly losing the presidential election to his rival Kim Dae-jung, and after having been shaken by U.S. President Richard Nixon's sudden change of policy toward Communist China and the apparent American debacle in Vietnam, President Park Chung-hee declares a state of national emergency and assumes the authority to rule South Korea by decree. He decrees an end to criticism of himself or his government. People who object or oppose him are arrested and some serve long prison terms.
- 1970s The South Korean economy racks up an impressive record of progress and growth. Korean companies are weaned away from foreign management and financing and begin thriving on their own. South Koreans enjoy an unprec-

denote standard of living, while in North Korea, where recovery from the war was better than in the south during the 1960s, the state-controlled Soviet-style economy begins to lag.

- 1979 After a wave of labor unrest as South Korean workers demand a fairer share of the country's increasing wealth, President Park is assassinated in an attempted "palace coup" between factions of his own administration. The South Korean army launches an investigation, and in December the general heading the investigation, Maj. Gen. Chun Doo-hwan, forcibly takes control of the South Korean military and makes himself the strongman. The civilian government can do little to stop him.
- 1980 In May, after weeks of demonstrations against Chun's grab for power, an outbreak of protests in Kwangju, in south-western Korea, leads to massive army intervention and the death of hundreds of civilians. Although General Chun succeeds in suppressing the Kwangju uprising, South Korean citizens in general are outraged. Though he engineers his own selection as president of the next civilian government later in the year, he never recovers legitimacy as a national leader.
- 1980s South Korea continues its march to economic prosperity. The International Olympic Committee awards the 1988 Summer Olympic Games to Seoul. In 1987, after years of endemic but illegal student protests against the Chun regime, the Korean people rise up to demand free and democratic elections at the end of the year. The Chun government capitulates; however, Chun's handpicked successor wins the election nevertheless when opposition candidates split the majority vote between them.
- 1990 President Roh Tae-woo, General Chun's chosen successor, uses his power to launch a policy of "Nordpolitik," opening Korea's doors to trade with the socialist countries. In developments that are astonishing to people accustomed to the barriers of the Cold War, South Korea begins diplomatic and trade relations with the Soviet Union and

- China. The North Koreans feel betrayed by their Soviet and Chinese allies, but they can do little to change the situation.
- 1991 South and North Korea both are admitted to the United Nations as regular members. In October, the United States announces that it has withdrawn all its tactical nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula. In December, North and South Korea sign a nonaggression agreement and a promise to resolve their differences through dialogue. They also agree that the Korean peninsula should be freed of nuclear weapons.
- 1991–95 The West discovers that North Korea is building a structure that is probably a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons. Through several years of tense political jockeying and delicate diplomatic negotiations, an agreement is concluded in October 1994 whereby the United States will lead in solving North Korea's need for nuclear power by organizing a financing consortium to build two new nuclear power plants powered by reactors that are not as likely to produce weapons-grade nuclear fuel. The cost is borne mostly by South Korea and Japan, and the consortium is called the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). Construction begins at a coastal site in northeastern Korea. The agreement is to follow a series of steps whereby North Korea freezes construction on its reprocessing facility, submits to continuous monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), abandons construction of its relatively unsafe nuclear reactors, and accounts for all its spent nuclear fuel to show that it has not built any atomic bombs. The last step in the program is to be the installation of the core elements of the two new reactors, but only after North Korea's full accounting for all elements of its existing nuclear program and the establishment of "transparency" or assent to the effectiveness of international safeguards.
- 1992 In South Korea, Kim Young-sam is elected president, the first nonmilitary chief executive in thirty years.



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