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The Story Continues**

Kongdan Oh Hassig

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Kongdan Oh*

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization with which she is affiliated.

Korea's leaders have historically had a strong impact on the destiny of the Korean nation. On December 19, 2012, the Republic of Korea elected its first woman president, Ms. Park Geun-hye, who happens to be the daughter of former President Park Chung-hee, a former military dictator now also acknowledged as the architect of the Korean economic miracle. The December election was an important milestone in Korean politics for several reasons, not the least of which is that Ms. Park is a woman. Korea remains a male dominated society, and the last female ruler, Empress Jinsong, reigned about 1000 years ago. That Ms. Park was the daughter of a former President whose leadership in the 1960s and 1970s still arouses mixed emotions raises interesting questions about how Koreans view their country today.

On the one hand, the former President Park was a dedicated, sincere, and hard-working leader who pulled Korea out of poverty. On the other hand, he amended the constitution twice to prolong his power and it took an assassination to terminate his rule. For the last thirty years, President Park's extraordinary contribution to Korea's economic growth has been shadowed by his political ambition, and even today the Korean electorate remains divided about his legacy. Consequently, Ms. Park Geun-Hye's electoral victory tells us much about how the Korean people remember her father and how they now measure her abilities. Korea today does not need a president with a dramatic economic policy, but it very much needs a president and other elected leaders who are free of corruption. Koreans widely acknowledge that the first President Park was such a man, and Koreans elected his daughter because they believed that she also had this quality of honesty and devotion to the Korean nation. It is heartening that in a country that has so often looked to the past, Koreans did not view the Park family legacy as a stumbling bloc to the election of his daughter.

Korea today enjoys a relatively healthy economy, more than a decade of political stability, and a large measure of national security, even with a belligerent North Korea on its doorstep. Korea has taken its place in the international arena thanks not only to its economy but also to its "soft power" of talented Korean business leaders, singers, movie stars, sports men and women, and great cuisine. The question now is what Korea's chances are for continued success in the 21st century. Specifically, what lessons can be learned from Korea's past, and what national qualities must be cultivated to succeed in the uncertain future? What follows is a largely historical recounting of Korea's progress toward economic and political

maturity, with special attention to the lessons that Korea could learn from its trials and tribulations.

The Challenge of Korea's Geostrategic Situation

Koreans have used the analogy of a small shrimp among large whales to describe their geostrategic location. The whales are China, Japan, Russia, and more distantly, the United States. In light of its newfound prosperity, some years ago I suggested that Korea be classified as an agile dolphin, but so far as I know, this new metaphor has not gained any popularity.¹

During the last dynasty, the Chosun Dynasty from the 14th to the early 20th century, Korean political leaders were acutely aware of the powerful countries they were sandwiched between. The Korean king's court developed a complex ritual of mutual visits and exchanges of gifts with China, both to propitiate its powerful neighbor, and also to learn from it. To deal with Japan, Korean kings established trading ports to provide Japanese traders with a bridge to Korea and China. Koreans desired to avoid becoming involved in regional wars, but unlike the Swiss in Europe, who could shelter behind their mountains and stay out of the conflicts that raged throughout Europe for centuries, Korea's exposed location turned the peninsula into a battleground, usually between China and Japan.

It did not help Korea's fortunes that its ruling elite were often more concerned with disputes among themselves than in protecting the kingdom from outsiders. Many of these disputes involved interpretations of Neo-Confucianism and had nothing to do with the ultimate fate of the nation. Rulers and scholars hotly debated such questions as how many years the anointed crown prince should mourn at the King's grave, while Chinese and Japanese agents were plotting to spread their influence over the peninsula. Korea was a divided and weak country, easily imposed upon by its more powerful neighbors. Near the end of the 19th century, it was Japan, quicker to modernize than China (which suffered from the same backwardness as Korea), which took the initiative to pluck Korea like a ripe persimmon.

In order to limit its vulnerability, Korea needed to be unified at home and clever in dealing with its neighbors. It needed to keep up with the latest advances in politics, economics, and military technology. Neo-Confucianism, however it was interpreted, could not provide the kind of strength Koreans needed.

¹ Kongdan Oh, "South Korea's Foreign Policy: A Dolphin among Whales?" A paper presented to the 14th Annual Conference of the Council on US-Korean Security Studies, October 27-30, 1999, Arlington, Virginia.

Korean Isolationism as a Failed Strategy

The last king who had the opportunity to save Korea was King Kojong (1864-1907), who succeeded King Chojong at the age of twelve. King Kojong's father, Yi Ha-ung (1821-1898), known as *Taewongun* [Great Regent], actually ruled the country in his son's name. The royal court was filled with ambitious power seekers aligned with either the Chinese court or with Japan's Meiji Restoration officials. The Great Regent's solution to Korea's growing vulnerability was to close Korea's door to all foreigners and strengthen Korea from the inside. He worked to reinforce the king's power over domestic affairs and rebuild the financial health of the kingdom. He also devoted resources to improving Korea's defenses.²

The regent had modest success with his policies, but isolationism was no match for the rapidly changing forces that were raging outside Korea's door. Asia was awakening to an early form of globalization, spread from Europe and America. Military modernization had already been embraced by the Japanese, who had learned that opening their door to Western thought and technology was better than trying to keep it out. The Korean regent was especially eager to close Korea's door to those Japanese, who represented a new force in Asia.

Korea also closed its door to Europeans and Americans. Korean authorities instructed local forces to destroy any foreign vessels that tried to reach Korea. The regent also ordered the purge of Western religion in the form of Korean Catholicism, resulting in the murder of French priests. When the French Asiatic Squadron heard the stories told by a French missionary who had escaped from the purge, the French admiral entered Korean waters with seven warships, landing on Kanghwa Island near Seoul in 1866. The French seized the local administrative office and pillaged the island, but were soon defeated by Korean troops and forced to withdraw.³ Two months earlier, an American ship had also been intercepted. In this case, the trading ship *General Sherman* sailed up the Taedong River toward Pyongyang and was attacked and burned, with the death of all 24 of its crew.⁴ These small victories reinforced the belief that a closed-door policy might work, but the Koreans had no idea of how strong the foreign forces were.

In trying to combat foreign influence by adopting an isolationist policy, Korea was temporarily solving one problem by creating an even bigger problem. This is true for any nation at any time, including North Korea today. Without international relations and trade, Korea became ever weaker. Some years later it might have benefited from the good will of the United

² Carter J. Eckert and Ki-baik Lee and others, *Korea Old and New, A History* (Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers, 1990 with the Korea Institute, Harvard University), pp. 192-193.

³ Ibid. p. 195.

⁴ Ibid. p. 194.

States, but at that time the United States ignored Korea's interests in favor of Japan's. The closed-door policy benefited the interests of those in power, at least in the short term, but the country as a whole was bound to suffer. Fear and ignorance of the Korean elites in the late 19th century doomed Korea to years of servitude to the first nation that bothered to force Korea's doors open. This country was Japan.

Korea Challenged by Japanese Colonial Rule

The Japanese archipelago is a mountainous spine of islands prone to earthquakes. It is a beautiful land but lacking in the kind of mineral resources necessary to fuel a modern industrial state. It is also short of arable land to feed a large population. Korea, on the other hand, is largely free of earthquakes: an example of why it has been called "the land of the morning calm." The northern half of the country has plentiful mineral resources and the southern half has large plains suitable for agriculture. As Japan's population grew, and as the country began to adopt the industries that had made Europe and the United States strong, Japan needed the resources that neighboring Korea had in abundance. The only thing stopping the Japanese, apart from morality and respect for international territory (two values that have been notoriously lacking throughout the history of international relations) was Korea's closed-door policy. Once that door was opened and Korea's political and military weakness exposed, it was easy for the Japanese to move right in. Since the only other country with a strong interest in Korea was China, which despite its size was also weak, Korea's fate was sealed. After a series of political intrusions, in 1910 Korea was formally annexed by Japan and would remain so until the Japanese were defeated by a stronger nation.

Japan treated Korea as it had treated itself several decades earlier during the Meiji modernization period, except in this case Koreans had no political rights. Roads and railroads were built. The educational system was modernized to provide universal education for both boys and girls. In Seoul, Kyongsong Imperial University, the predecessor of Seoul National University, was opened. Many Korean historians have argued that Japan built a physical and social infrastructure in Korea not to benefit Koreans but to serve the needs of Japan. A parallel may be found in the colonial development and exploitation of Africa by Western nations during the same period. This was indeed Japan's motive, but nevertheless Japanese imperialism had some beneficial side effects, although not worth the price of Korea's political sovereignty.

Most Koreans today, who remember how Koreans were treated as second-rate citizens under Japan, how they were forced to use Japanese as their official language, how they lost Japanese sons to the wartime factories of Japan and sisters and daughters to Japanese military brothels, harbor bitter sentiments toward the Japanese. Whenever an issue arises between the two countries, such as the dispute over a few small rocky islands in the Eastern Sea, this bitter legacy of colonialism inflames passions and blows the dispute all out of proportion.

The Japanese colonization of Korea was a direct result of Korea's mistaken policies of the late 19th century, which in turn were rooted in long-standing Korean traditions. By the time Japan decided to make the effort to take Korea, it was too late for the Koreans to do anything about it. If Korea had opened itself to foreigners, perhaps the vested business interests of other countries, along with bilateral international treaties, might have kept the Japanese out of Korea. Friends are a blessing, even though they can sometimes be a nuisance. But Korea had no powerful friends.

Koreans Yet Korea learned yet another lesson from 40 years of subjugation to the Japanese. Despite Japan's attempts to turn Koreans into loyal and obedient Japanese subjects, Korean culture continued to live and the Korean people never lost pride in their identity. Japan underestimated Korean cultural nationalism. Korea suffered, but this suffering created a sense of Korean solidarity that was different than the worshipful solidarity of the Korean people under several thousands years of kings and queens. Koreans entered the colonial period as subjects and emerged as modern people.

Korea Divided by the Major Powers

The August 15, 1945 liberation brought exhilarating ecstasy to Koreans. Unfortunately, they were not prepared for the world into which they were freed, like pet fish released into the wild. They had lived for several thousand years under dynastic rulers, and then 40 years under a Japanese emperor. They may have become familiar with the concept of pluralistic politics, but they had not developed a viable political structure nor had they gained experience in working within such a structure. Anyone can become a loyal subject of an authoritarian government, but democracy and the institutionalization of the democratic process takes years of practice and experimentation. Korea hoped to take its place in the new international order, but it was not ready, nor did the major powers believe Korea was ready.

Besides, there was a new game in town—or a new version of the old game of international power politics. Now it was the communist bloc versus the democratic bloc, and given its geostrategic location, Korea had to join one or the other—or if divided, both. Korea was like a small stick thrown into a rushing river. In the early years of the century, weak Korea was swallowed whole by Japan. A half century later, weak Korea was bitten in two. As in the case of Japan's takeover of Korea in the early 20th century, it is difficult to imagine how politically weak Korea could have changed the course of events, given that Russian troops accepted the Japanese surrender in the northern half of the peninsula and American troops accepted it in the south. Korea was immediately occupied by new powers. In the north, Chinese communist- and Soviet Union-affiliated revolutionary cadres immediately began taking over the government with the support of Russian troops and advisors, while in the south a

Western democracy-affiliated educated elite returned from the United States to take control with the support of American troops and advisors.

From the year of independence of 1945 to 1948, when the southerners formed the Republic of Korea and the northerner's created the Democratic Republic of Korea, the Korean Peninsula was a politically chaotic and socially unstable place. This was especially so in the South, because it is more difficult to organize a democracy than a dictatorship. The United Nations watched the unfolding Korean saga and proposed making Korea a trusteeship until such time as it was ready to gain full independence, but this proposal was unacceptable to most Koreans and in any event failed to gain the consent of the Soviet Union.

At wartime meetings in Cairo, Yalta, and Potsdam, the major powers had given insufficient consideration to the fate of Japan's wartime possessions in Asia. In principle, the United Nations should have played leading role in this issue, but in practice, boots on the ground determined the fate of Korea. The Americans in the South installed the elderly Dr. Syngman Rhee as head of the southern government, and the Soviets appointed the young Kim Il-sung as the favored political figure in the north. Koreans, speaking with many voices, had little to say in the matter. South Korea underwent years of political turmoil while President Rhee inhabited the Blue House. North Korea was much more rapidly transformed into a highly structured political state—albeit one in which ordinary people had no say in their government. At least in this case, both Koreas had good friends to protect them and thus were able to maintain their (separate) independence.

The Tragedy of the Korean War

If Korea's "friends" had had their way, there would have been no Korean War. Russia had its hands full in Eastern Europe. China was trying to build a new communist society. The United States was primarily concerned about countering Soviet influence in Europe. But once again a strong Korean leader determined the fate of the nation. North Korea's Kim Il-sung became convinced that his skills and experience as a guerilla leader could achieve the unification of Korea through war. His reasoning was flawed. He overestimated the support he would receive from Communists (*Namrodang*: Southern Communist Party) in the south, and he underestimated the strength with which the United States and the international community would come to South Korea's assistance. How much he counted on assistance from the Soviet Union and China is hard to say; in any case, they agreed to let him attack the south, but without any enthusiasm. During the war, North Korea received relatively little military assistance from the Soviet Union (which even failed to prevent the United Nations from joining the battle), and the Chinese saved his skin only because they were concerned about their own country.

The three-year bloody war, which decided nothing but created tremendous hostility between the previously homogeneous Koreans living in the north and south, resulted in more than 2.5 million Korean casualties. The United States lost over 30,000 lives, with over 100,000 wounded, thus guaranteeing that Americans would support South Korea even more strongly than they had before the war. Moreover, about 10 million Koreans were dispersed and did not know if their families were alive or dead. Millions of families in the two Koreas continued for years to tell stories of personal tragedy, thus keeping alive mutual Korean hostility. Only in recent years have younger generations of South Koreans largely forgotten about the war.⁵ The impact of the Korean civil war was much greater than the impact of Germany's division, because unlike the two Germanys, who did not actually fight against each other, Koreans killed each other.

What started as a Korean division imposed by foreign powers thus became, thanks to the action of Koreans themselves (primarily Kim Il-sung), a long-lasting, self-imposed separation. As a result of the war, the two Koreas became separately unified and supported by strong allies, but the Korean nation as a whole was weakened by its lack of unity.

South Korea Drifts in the Post-War Era

In the years immediately following the Korean War, South Korea was miserably poor (as was the North). The major concern for many Koreans was getting enough to eat. The Americans sent in shipments of aid and provided some loans for infrastructure development, but it was up to Koreans to pull themselves out of poverty. Since the war ended with a truce rather than a peace agreement, no one could know whether North Korea might decide to renew its attack on the South. In any case, armed incursions from North Korea would occur for many years. President Syngman Rhee was in his late 70s and not the person who could vigorously lead Koreans in their rebuilding campaign. Ordinary Koreans worked hard, but the government lacked a strong plan that would help millions of people coordinate their economic efforts. President Rhee's government officials flattered him about how well he was doing his job, but he had no grand recovery strategy. Although the president could not help but be aware of Korea's poverty, his on-the-spot inspections were known as jokes. When he asked a woman at the market for the price of an egg, she was coerced by one of his officials to say that

⁵ Sources included Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987); Kim Chull Baum ed., *Hanguk Chonjaeng* (Seoul: Pyongminsa, 1989); and conversation with Ms. Lee Mi-Il, President of KWAFU, Spring 2011

it cost only 5 won. “Hmm,” he said, “I thought it cost more than that. That means you don’t have any problem with inflation.”⁶ In fact, Korea was poorer than many African countries.

South Korea adopted the American political system of three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial, but Korean democracy was called “democracy in a trash bin,” and the executive branch gained most of the power. Election day was a day of petty bribery and drinking. Rural voters, who were poor and poorly educated, were willing to sell their votes for a pair of rubber shoes, a carton of cigarettes, or a bottle of wine. Government party members stood next to voting booths and handed over these kinds of presents. Ballot boxes were stuffed. For example, a town of 700 people could produce 3000 votes for the government party.

Korean recovery was slow throughout the 1950s, and political unrest was widespread, with leftists and communists fighting conservatives. President Rhee, who had been born in 1875, was an authoritarian leader out of touch with the times. He ruled from the end of the war in 1953 until his government was toppled by a student revolution in 1960 and he was flown to safe haven in Hawaii, where he died five years later. At this point South Korea, poor and still facing a North Korean threat, was leaderless. For a people who had always needed a strong leader, this was bad indeed. At least Korea had made one strong friend: the United States. Some Koreans considered the Americans as occupiers, blaming them for propping up the authoritarian Rhee government, but in the 1950s Americans provided Korea with much-needed aid, and also with a model of democracy, even though in those early days that democracy was deeply flawed.

Korea Gets New Political and Economic Leadership

During the Korean War, Ethiopia, a very poor country, sent 6,037 soldiers to South Korea, also a poor country, as its contribution to the United Nations Forces. In 2008, Ethiopia was still poor, with a per capita income of only \$280, while Korea’s per capita income was \$19,000.⁷ In 2003, on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Korean War, the Korean government invited Ethiopian war veterans to be Korea’s national guests. The Ethiopians were amazed at how far Korea had come since they had last seen the country. Clearly, Korea had done something right.

⁶ Conversation with Professor Chungdo Oh and the author in 1988, Santa Monica, California regarding the first republic under President Syngman Rhee. Professor Oh was the advisor to an opposition party presidential candidate during President Rhee’s era.

⁷ Park Chang-seok, “Mr. President—A Kingpin in Nation Building” in Eung-kyuk Park and Chang-seok Park Eds. *Korea from Rags to Riches* (Seoul: The Korea Institute of Public Administration, 2010), p. 19.

Korean strategic culture has always treasured the heroic, charismatic leader. The Korean presidential system has been one of the strongest in the democratic world. In 1960, in the wake of fierce student-led demonstrations and violent confrontations with the national police, Korea could not find its footing. This situation particularly alarmed the United States, which was worried that North Korea might take advantage of South Korea's weakened situation.

By law, Korea's leadership fell to Prime Minister Chang Myon, a rather weak and meek man who had been educated in the United States and served as vice president under Rhee, before Korea's presidential system was changed, temporarily, to a parliamentary system. Premier Chang was younger than President Rhee but not up to the job of running the country. His short tenure as premier began in March 1960 and ended in May 1961 when a group of military officers staged a coup against the civilian government. Brigadier General Park Chung-hee was the architect of this coup and became the head of the ruling military junta. General Park promised swift and prompt resumption of stability. He further promised that he would put Korea on its economic feet, treasure Korea's alliance with the United States, and work to improve Korea's relations with its neighbors.

Washington was relieved to see that Korea had a new, pro-American leader, even though Americans do not in principle favor military coups against democratic governments. The junta government established its headquarters next door to the American embassy in Seoul, a symbolic gesture promising that Korea would remain firm friends with the United States. General Park eventually shed his military uniform and became president in 1963.

At the time of the coup in 1961, Korea's per capita income was \$72, lagging behind North Korea's. As the seventh child of family of modest means growing up in the countryside, President Park was familiar with poverty. He was also a bright and dedicated worker. Equally important, he was not a greedy man. He did not procure expensive foreign food for his table, like the leaders of North Korea. He did not build large country mansions or hide money in Swiss bank accounts. He drank *makkolli* with Korean farmers, and he worked hard, like most successful Koreans. And he had great confidence in his ability and in the potential of Korea.

President Park took a hands-on approach to building the economy. He commuted from the Blue House to the Economic Planning Board (EPB) almost daily to monitor Korea's progress in trade, foreign investment, and infrastructure building. Although he was not a trained economist, he was a quick study. He took a special interest in global financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and sent his best diplomats and cabinet members to persuade such organizations to extend loans to Korea. He was a relentless merchant of good will and good persuasion.

President Park hired the best people he could find. Economists from Sogang University, led by Dr. Nam Duck-woo, along with many other able economists, joined his cabinet. It is highly symbolic that the chairman overseeing the November 2010 G20 Summit was Dr. Sagong Il, who had served as President Park's economic advisor.

Not only did the president hire the best people, he looked abroad for the best models and technologies. Having received some of his military training in Japan, he was well aware that Japan was the most developed nation in Asia and he decided that Korea should adopt the important aspects of the Japanese developmental model, which included close links between government and business, a competent and corrupt-free bureaucracy, a well-educated workforce, political stability, and a labor force uninfluenced by labor unions. To gain Japanese investment in Korea, Park's first diplomatic goal was to normalize diplomatic relations with Japan.

Although the United States had reservations about President Park's dictatorial political style, because he kept South Korea firmly in the anti-communist camp and provided political stability to South Korea, Washington continued to support him. Thus, during the 1960s Korea had a powerful foreign friend and an open door to the international economy. President Park's economic plans were also aided in two specific ways by the United States. First, the American military presence in Korea saved the Koreans from having to devote a large share of their budget to defense against the ever-present North Korean threat, and the continued US-UN presence endowed Korea with an aura of national security that was important for domestic and foreign investors. Korea was thus able to escape from the political turmoil and international threats of the 1950s and concentrate on building a strong economy. Second, the United States provided an important market for Korean goods and a vital source of foreign capital and technology. As the world economy expanded in the 1960s, the Korean economy expanded along with it.⁸

President Park's confidence in his leadership abilities blinded him, as is the case with so many leaders, to the fact that in a democracy he could only be the temporary caretaker of the country. Like President Rhee before him, he extended his presidency by fiddling with the constitution, and also like his predecessor, his tenure was ended not by an election but by force. In this case, he was assassinated by one of his own officials in October 1979. The political measures that President Park considered necessary to achieve his goals for Korea (not his personal selfish goals) left a bad taste in the mouths of many Koreans, who could not agree that

⁸ Park's economic achievement and factors behind his success is largely taken from the previous paper by the author, "At the Creation: Strong Government, Strong Economy" A paper submitted to International Conference of the Korea Institute of Public Administration to celebrate the G20 Summit in October 2010, Seoul, 21 October 2010, pp. 3-6.

the means justified the end. But the end was a great success for Korea, giving rise to the accolade, "Miracle of Han River."

The Korean Work Ethic Is Unleashed

Thus ends the story of Korea's economic victory. Since the 1960s, the Korean economy has continued to grow. In 1996 Korea became a member of the OECD group of wealthy developed countries. Korean conglomerates are known throughout the world. Korea survived the 1997 economic crisis in good shape. Like every country, Korea has many economic problems, and not all Koreans share equally in the country's wealth. But the story of Korea's economy is without question a success story. Much of the credit must go to Korea's political and business leaders, but behind the Korean economic miracle were the millions of Korean workers whose efforts were focused and harnessed by effective economic plans. In newly built factories and offices, young laborers entered a humming economy. During Korea's growth period, these laborers were not unionized due to strict control by a government that did not want labor unrest to interfere with the pursuit of national economic goal. Factory owners often took advantage of their government-granted power by abusing workers. But for the most part, the young labor force were willing to accept employment in return for setting aside some of their human rights as workers. A portion of the salaries that many workers received in factories went back to their hometowns in the countryside, helping to boost Korea's rural development as well.

In Japan, "karoshi," which means "death by overworking," has been an unfortunate side effect of the Japanese economic miracle. Koreans worked just as hard. Most Korean officials and company men worked overtime without overtime pay. White-collar salaried employees often did not receive any overtime pay, although at the end of the year they received substantial bonuses if the company had done well. Company presidents might wear the same uniform as their workers and eat in the company dining halls. They might earn 30 times more than their workers, but did not enjoy the astronomical salaries and bonuses that many American business leaders received.

This widespread and prodigious work ethic is difficult to analyze. Some countries have it and others do not. It is motivated by personal ambition, concern for family, national confidence and pride, and national culture. Along with good leadership, it is a necessary ingredient for national success. From the dark days of the Japanese colonial era, Koreans learned that they had this national strength. During the 1997 financial crisis, many Koreans even donated their personal gold jewelry to help the country, demonstrating an all-for-one community spirit. When Koreans were finally able to enjoy national security, and when they finally found able leaders, this work ethic was the force that pushed Korea forward.

Democracy Comes to Korea

It could be said that Korea has three ultimate goals. First, economic security. Second political maturity. Third, national unity in the form of reunification. By the end of the 1960s Koreans were well on the road to achieving the first goal. Achievement of the second goal did not come until the late 1980s. The third goal remains elusive.

The year 1988 proved to be a political turning point. Korea successfully staged the Seoul Summer Olympics, thus demonstrating its economic progress and national competence. The Games success also demonstrated Korea's achievement of national security in the face of North Korean attempts to disrupt the Games (through the bombing of a Korean Airlines flight the previous year). A sense of globalization (openness to the world) was spreading among Koreans. Economic growth stimulated a desire to pursue other important things in life, including the freedom that comes from living in a democracy. The man who presided over the Seoul Olympics was President Roh Tae-woo, who like his two presidential predecessors was a former army general. Although President Roh's path to the presidency had been paved by his predecessor, Roh pledged that Korean politics would become democratic and open. True to his word, the president opened politics so that, at the end of his term in 1993, two Korean opposition leaders became the front-runners for the presidency. Kim Young-sam won the election over Kim Dae-jung, and Korea had its first civilian leader in thirty years, and the first leader in Korea's entire history to be elected by truly popular vote.

Recalling the fate of Premier Chang, President Kim Young-sam reined in Korea's powerful military. Most notably, President Kim dismantled "Hanahoe" [one solidarity club], the leading military association. Bright new graduates from the Korean military academy would be invited to join this club, whose senior leaders groomed them to be loyal members of the officers corps headed up by the leading generals. By dismantling this shadow military organization, President Kim brought the military under the full control of the president, as provided for in the constitution. President Kim also granted amnesty to many political prisoners who had been arrested during the Kwangju incident of 1980 and other political movements against the government. These initiatives helped to unify the Korean nation.

In the 1997 presidential election, Korea's other prominent dissident, Kim Dae-jung, was chosen by the people. His election was applauded by most American and Asian leaders, who were aware of his life-long struggle for democracy. During "DJ's" term, Korea continued to become a more liberal society. The media became much more free of censorship, and Kim made an attempt to achieve Korea's third ultimate goal by launching his "Sunshine" engagement initiative toward North Korea. The United States had already engaged North Korea by negotiating the 1994 Agreed Framework to freeze the North's nuclear program, so Kim's initiative was initially welcomed. In 2000, Kim achieved the first inter-Korean summit

meeting with his North Korean counterpart, Kim Jong-il. Unfortunately, the North Korean regime could not afford to open and liberalize its society in the same way that South Korea had for fear of ending the reign of the Kim dynasty, so the goal of unification receded from view. Also, South Korea's engagement with the North and liberalization of South Korean society meant that North Korean sympathizers were able to establish themselves in South Korea, thereby weakening the unity of South Korea's united front toward the North.

By the time President Kim Dae-jung completed his five-year term in 2003, Korea's per capita income had reached \$12,000. Korea's press bloomed so freely that citizens were beginning to complain about shoddy media standards. And democratic politics was firmly established in Korea, along with a resilient market economy.

Korea in the 21st Century: The Road Ahead

In a little over a century Korea has progressed from being a closed kingdom to a modern nation. During that century Koreans endured many hardships and the nation suffered painful reverses in its progress. In the future Korea will surely face more serious challenges. How can the lessons from the past be incorporated into Korea's national culture to provide a value system to successfully navigate the 21st century?

Strength and Unity of the Korean People

Korea is a homogeneous cultural society, although there exists the obvious political division between South and North. Minorities can be a valuable source for enriching a society and culture, as in the case of the United States, but unless a country's political system is strong, diversity can also lead to division. If one looks at countries in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, one can see how ethnic diversity can be a source of conflict.

Within Korea's homogeneous society, strong family ties and social bonds have traditionally provided people with a sense of unity—the kind of society that sociologists have called *Gemeinschaft* or community. This kind of close-knit community can sometimes hinder creativity and independence because social unity becomes the norm. On the other hand, community feeling provides strength to its members, who can work in harmony rather than compete for individual and group control of society's resources.

It is unfortunate that as Korea has become a wealthier and more urban country, people have neglected the bonds of community. Urban Koreans tend to be self-centered and egotistical in pursuing their individual agendas. The traditional custom of helping neighbors is disappearing. Older Koreans are more likely to note this change than the younger generation, both because they can recall former times and also because they are more likely to need the

assistance of the young. Even the young can suffer from individualism: Korea's suicide rate is relatively high.

Like most agrarian societies, Korea had a strong tradition of sharing. Community spirit in the form of a "hometown code" (*Hyangak*) provided guidelines for social decorum and morality. When a family member died, the community donated cash, labor, and food to provide an honorable funeral. When a couple got married, the community pitched in with cash, food, and wine to help the newlyweds to launch their new life. During the rice-planting season, farmers helped each other plant the seedlings. At harvest time they did the same.

One of the unintended consequences of rapid economic development, industrialization, and urbanization under President Park Chung-hee (despite the attention paid to improving the lives of rural communities) was a loss of traditional community values. Industrial development uprooted families, leaving older parents and grandparents on their own in their hometowns while the younger people went to the cities and devoted their lives to competition. In high-rise condominiums and apartment blocks neighbors ignored each other rather than establishing new communities to make up for the ones they had left behind.

Another example of the lack of community that is frequently been reported by the Korean media is the modern wedding. In Korea, weddings can be tremendously expensive and extravagant. Many guests are invited, and they are expected to contribute financial gifts. Wealthy and famous people now invite hundreds of people to their wedding, which becomes a big, showy production. Company employees joke that 365 days a year they are bombarded with weddings, funerals, and birthday celebrations, each requiring the donation of money. To combat this trend, a leading newspaper, the *Chosun Daily*, has begun a campaign to encourage people to have modest weddings: register at city hall and gather together with family members and close friends. Such a wedding cements relationships and does not drive a wedge in society between the rich and the poor, for all can afford the same kind of wedding.

Big weddings are but one example of how Korea's newfound wealth can be misused. Along with wealth comes the responsibility to use it wisely for the benefit of self, family, and society. This practice promotes national unity, which is necessary for national survival. As Korea's history has demonstrated, another necessity for national survival is international friends. In recent years Koreans have begun to help less fortunate peoples. President Lee Myung-bak established "World Friends Korea" in 2009 to combine several government international charities into Korea's version of the Peace Corps. The program, which has sent

some 20,000 volunteers abroad to provide aid in fields such as agriculture and medicine, promotes the virtues of charity at home while promoting good will for Korea abroad.⁹

Infrastructure to Support the Economy and Unify the People

Until the Japanese took Korea as a colony, its basic infrastructure was poor. Electricity was in short supply, especially in the countryside. Public drinking water systems were lacking and until the 1980s sewage drained into *sigungchang*, open or partially covered sewage ditches that ran along the streets and dumped their waste into rivers and streams. Roads were unpaved, hence the necessity of owning a good pair of rubber boots. The author has a vivid memory of the unpaved road from the Sinchon Rotary to the gates of Sogang University. When President Park Chung-hee's daughter (the current president) enrolled at Sogang, her father arranged for a special present to the college: overnight paving of the street. Korea's first expressway was not completed until 1970, linking Seoul with Pusan. This was the same year that Seoul got its fourth bridge over the Han River (it now has more than 20). Buses were so crowded that people had to stampede to get on them, and small children were sometimes forced to exit through an open window.

It was President Park Chung-hee who enlisted Korea's major conglomerates, such as Hyundai, Kumho, SsangYong, Daewoo, and Samsung, to build for the government the infrastructure that Korea needed to sustain a modern economy and provide for the welfare of its people. In the early 21st century, Korea now boasts bullet trains linking major cities, punctual and well-managed subways, breath-taking new airports, highways, bridges, dams, public parks, and resort areas. The comparison with North Korea's lack of this infrastructure is stunning. In the last 20 years, Korea's public schools have come to match the importance that Korea has always placed on education.

The dramatic upgrade in Korea's physical infrastructure has been made possible by Korea's wealth, the government's concern for its citizens, and Korea's excellent management skills. As a source of national unity, a solid infrastructure complements a vibrant economy and an open and fair political system as a source of national pride and satisfaction. Unlike many North Koreans, most South Koreans are happy with their country and do not wish to leave it.

Human Resources as a Substitute for Natural Resources

The Korean peninsula, taken as a whole, is not badly endowed with natural resources: arable land in the South and forests, rivers, and minerals in the north. As a divided nation, however, South Korea lacks many of the raw materials that are necessary for the construction of physical infrastructure and the manufacture of commodities. South Korea has neither oil nor

⁹ Kongdan Oh, "From Poverty to Philanthropy" in *Korea from Rags to Riches*, pp. 421-428.

gas, and not single uranium or coal mine. In this respect, South Korea is similar to Japan, and like the Japanese, Koreans have been forced to rely on their human skills to make up for what nature has failed to provide. Hence the importance of education and the development of management expertise. In Asia a famous story that teaches the importance of education describes how Mencius' widowed mother, after moving her household next to a marketplace, noticed that her son was imitating the merchants' behavior with his little friends by pretending to buy and sell stones. Then she moved near an army base and little Mencius began to play war games with his new friends, as they poked each other with bamboo sticks. Finally, the wise mother moved their household near a school, so the young Mencius could learn to read and write. This story gave rise to the famous four-character Chinese phrase, "Mencius' mother; three moves," that Korean treasure to this day.

"Education, education, and education" has become the mantra of Korean mothers, and Korea has become famous worldwide for its high educational standards. Even so, Korea is also famous for its "goose father," that is, a father who stays behind in Korea while his wife takes the children abroad so they can pursue their education, including learning to speak the international language of English. Recently in the news was the tragic story of a successful dentist who committed suicide from loneliness while his wife and two children were staying in the United States. Interestingly, a popular response to this story was to blame the father for being too sentimental and weak, rather than to question the practice of going abroad to get one's education.

The burden of giving children the best possible education weighs heavily on many families. Not everyone is suited to become a college graduate, even though Korean society increasingly puts pressure on people to send their children to college. Side effects of this pressure for education include plagiarism and fabrication of college degrees on job resumes. As Korean society continues to evolve, the importance of education will have to be balanced with considerations of what kind of education can best to develop the Korean nation and suit individuals.

Making the Best of a Tough Neighborhood

As noted at the beginning of this paper, Korea's geostrategic location has historically made it a shrimp among whales. Unfortunately, a nation cannot be moved the way a household can, so the best way to cope with a challenging geostrategic location is to minimize the disadvantages and maximize the advantages of the location.¹⁰ South Korea is at the same time a gateway to the Asian mainland and a doormat for those who move to and from the

¹⁰ Kongdan Oh, "Neighbors" *Inside Japan, Harvard's Japan Journal*, Vol. 3. No. 1 (Winter 1992/93).

mainland. Historically, Korea has been trampled on by Chinese and Japanese armies, but it has also been an important transit point for Chinese culture and Japanese trade. Korea is fortunate to be situated close to China, destined to be the world's greatest economic power. Korea is also close to Japan and shares many traits with that advanced and industrious nation. Russia is close by with many natural resources and may some day develop its Asian region into a prospering economic zone. Not to mention the island of Taiwan, a political orphan with an advanced economy. Although East Asia is today a mix of political systems, the trend is for all countries to move toward democracy and a market economy.

The blot on the northeast Asian landscape is North Korea under the Kim regime, which shows no signs of wanting to move toward democracy, although its people have introduced a rudimentary form of unregulated capitalism that is more or less tolerated by the regime. However, sooner or later, the North Korean people will stand against their leaders and demand the same opportunities as their neighbors enjoy. The challenge and opportunity for South Koreans is to open the minds of their fellow Koreans in the North so they become aware of what they are missing, and to assist them to make friends in the international community. In the process, the Korean nation will regain its unity and greatly strengthen itself.

Summing Up: The Ideal Korea

Until only the last few decades of Korea's long history (and continuing even today in North Korea), people deferred to their leaders. When the leaders were good, this obedience served the people well, but sooner or later the leader would be wrong and then the entire nation suffered. Koreans today have great freedom to make their own decisions, and through voting and speaking out, they can govern themselves and influence their elected leaders. This is a good thing—as long as the people take an interest in the political process and let their opinions be shaped by good values.

Korea has a long and rich history, filled with good and bad experiences. Both kinds of experiences can provide important lessons, but people are more likely to learn from the bad than from the good. That is, they first try to avoid making mistakes, and then try to improve their lives. In the foregoing paragraphs I have suggested lessons that Korea could learn from its bad experiences. To me, the most important lessons have to do with the need to remain open to the world in order to accept new ideas and make friends, the need to adopt new ways of doing things even while respecting tradition, the need to share with one another to keep society strong and happy, and the ultimate need for national unity to provide strength.

Openness. Korea has come a long way in the last century. No longer is it a backward hermit kingdom, but rather one of the world's leading countries in terms of its economic and political systems. But history never stops, and as the international situation changes, Korea

must be smart enough to avoid the kinds of tragedies it has encountered in the past and take advantage of new opportunities that open up in the future. Koreans must be open to new ideas and new ways of looking at things. Within Korean society, organizations need to be as transparent as possible so people know what is going on.

Friendship. Not only do Koreans need to be open to new experiences and ideas, but also to new people: people living in other countries, people visiting Korea, and people from other places who are now living in Korea (including those who have come from North Korea). These “strangers” are a valuable asset to Korean life. Equally important, they are a source of strength in a world that is increasingly interdependent.

Flexibility. The present is complicated. The future is largely unknown. Koreans need to be ready for anything, especially when they are surrounded by nations more powerful than they are. Tradition is something to be proud of, but when it holds people back or closes their minds, it is a threat. Businesses already know this principle when it comes to dealing with the competition and an ever-changing marketplace. The entire Korean nation, especially its leaders, need to exhibit flexibility to keep Korea successful no matter what the future brings.

Sharing. It can be difficult to deny oneself something and give it to others. Humans are naturally selfish. But a nation of selfish people is a weak nation, easily destroyed from within. Some people will always have more than others by dint of hard work or pure chance, but no one in the community should lack the basic requirements of a decent human life. Whenever possible, sharing should also be extended to help other countries. The national use of “soft power,” which can include charity and cultural products (food, entertainment, art) wins friends and makes no enemies.

And finally, Unity. Korea has often suffered because it lacked national unity. Today the unification of the entire Korean people remains an unfinished job but one that must be tackled intelligently and carefully in order to avoid serious injury to both Korean societies. Unity comes naturally from the foregoing values. An open, friendly, flexible, sharing people will treasure their nation and be united against foreign threats.

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