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Modern Korean History

27 November 2020

North Korea's Past, Present, and Future

In the contemporary United States, Americans are often quick to make conclusions about North Korea—that North Korea represents the 'evil' of communism, a nation in which citizens feign love for their country out of fear or whose devotion to Kim Jong Un is a byproduct of limitless propaganda and brainwashing. While there is some truth to such conclusions, one must first understand Korea's history to accurately assess the present nature of North Korea and its future.

The construction of the North Korean state is predominantly a result of Japanese and United States imperialism. Indeed, as Cummings describes in *Korea's Place in the Sun*, North Korean media frequently references Japanese imperialism in national propaganda such that it seems as if World War II "had just ended" (Cummings, *Korea's Place*[1], 728). As a guerilla fighter during Japan's colonization of Korea, Kim Il Sung was able to position himself as the savior of the North Korean people and became the chairman of the North Korean Interim People's Committee in 1946, an opportunity that allowed Kim Il Sung to cement power both for himself and his lineage (746). While North Korea's anti-Japanese attitude may be extreme, 20th century Japanese colonialism has also created lasting scars in South Korea. In his work on Mun P'ilgi and Pak Duri, survivors of the Japanese 'comfort women' program who spent their free lives protesting Japan's refusal to recognize the program's existence (Pilzer, "Hearts of Pine,"

[1] References to *Korea's Place in the Sun* refer to the eBook version.

28), Pilzer reveals that up to 200,000 women across Asia were "tricked, coerced, or abducted" (5) into prostitution on behalf of Japanese soldiers, including thousands abducted from the Korean peninsula (5). And in her own memoir, Mun P'ilgi details the danger, sexual abuse, and depression she endured at the Japanese comfort station and the lasting psychological effects of these experiences (Mun, "I So Much Wanted to Study," 84). North Koreans perceive the United States similarly. While North Koreans' deep-rooted hatred for the United States can be attributed to the Korean War, a legacy of "'horrible things committed by the American forces[2]'" during and after the Korean War (Cummings, *Korea's Place*, 521), including the destruction of an essential North Korean dam after American troops retreated from the 38th Parallel (521), have and will be engrained in North Korea's national memory for many years to come.

From a historical lens, North Korea's government becomes more logical. The pre-modern Choson dynasty's Confucianist principles are prevalent in contemporary North Korea (Cummings, *Korea's Place*, 748), and these principles conflict with espoused communist ideals for social equality. Although North Korean leaders professed an end to class differences and inequality after the Korean War, contemporary North Korea is in practice a conservative corporatist state (730) that strives to maintain a traditional Confucianist social order of hierarchy and the nuclear family (730). In addition to emphasizing traditional Confucian values, including the expectation that women obey the orders of men and those of lower social status obey those of higher status, North Korean corporatism also provides for the worshipping of a 'father' figure in the Kim family (733). Moreover, Kim Jong Un's ascension to dictator is similar to the transfer of power from yangban[3] fathers to their sons in Confucianist Choson Korea (752).

[2] According to Tibor Meray, a Hungarian reporter.
[3] The land-owning elite of Choson-era Korea (Cummings, *Korea's Place*, 752)

For Koreans in the north, the opportunity to create a communist state was a chance to build a brighter future. When the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea ended, North Korea passed the Gender Equality Law of 1946 (Kim, "Marriage, Family, and Sexuality in North Korea," 263), which professed that "women have equal rights to men economically, culturally, socially, and politically in all areas of life of the nation" (263). North Korean women perceived new opportunities to learn and earn wages; both the number of women workers and women's salaries did increase during Kim Il Sung's rule (Cummings, *Korea's Place*, 769). After the DPRK's famine and environmental crises in the 1990s, too, North Korean women became breadwinners through black market activities and services such as providing haircuts (Kim, "Marriage, Family," 271). In South Korea, conversely, many men and women became frustrated with capitalism and disillusioned by growing economic inequality (Kim, "Five Bandits," 400). In "Five Bandits," Kim Chiha asserts that business moguls, politicians, generals, and prosecutors were to blame for colluding in suppressing wages for the masses to create greater profits for the elite (402). South Korea, like its northern counterpart, was not a bastion of free speech and imprisoned Kim for almost a decade (401). Despite promises that women would enjoy equality in communist North Korea, however, women are in practice debarred from receiving abortions and expressing queerness[4], and women cannot divorce their husbands in most cases (Kim, "Marriage, Family," 267-270). Since the Gender Equality Law of 1946 did not forbid the practice of Confucianism, Confucianist family values have thereby influenced gender dynamics in North Korea and have prevented progress in women's rights (268).

For North Koreans and many South Koreans after World War II, the north's equity-driven economy promised an end to the second-class citizenship Koreans had experienced under

[4] Both North Korean men and women are forbidden from engaging in queer relationships (Kim, "Marriage, Family," 270).

Japanese rule and the gross economic inequalities of both Confucianist Choson-era Korea and American-style capitalism in the south. In “Our Modern Socialist Countryside,” a propaganda pamphlet, the DPRK exhibits the country that North Koreans aspired to build: A nation in which men and women learned to farm with modern technology and work in factories; children could attend classes; and families lived in respectable, modern homes (“Our Modern Socialist Countryside”). The goal of the featured community was to exemplify self-sufficiency through cooperative farming (“Our Modern Socialist Countryside”). While North Koreans’ lives may not have lived up to the standards set by the pamphlet, the photos demonstrate the aspirations of the North Korean people nevertheless—their belief that communism would bring them out of poverty and into a modern world. Perhaps the combination of North Korean propaganda and memories of this period of hope extenuate the North Korean people’s faith in Kim Jong Un, even during times of extreme economic hardship.

While South Korea’s living standards have outpaced those of North Korea in recent decades, disillusionment with capitalism has driven many South Koreans to join self-sufficient communities and movements that provide members with a sense of autonomy and independence from the capitalist machine (Paik, “Self Help is Political,” 78). North Korea’s quest to become a successful communist state may have failed, but elements of North Korea’s economic and social system have deeply resonated with South Koreans, who feel underserved and overlooked by their nation. Whereas Kim Il Sung’s desire for the North Korean people was that “everyone lived in a tiled-roof home” (Cummings, *Korea’s Place*, 727), South Korean leaders prioritized the economy at great expense, including evicting residents of Seoul from their homes to build the Olympic stadium (Davis, “International Events and Mass Evictions,” 591). These Koreans eventually inhabited dugout caves on the side of the road (591), left to fend for themselves.

North Korea's drive for self-reliance and autonomy is partially rooted in Japanese colonialism. After WWII, Japanese colonizers abandoned industrial factories they had constructed in the north, and these factories were quickly harnessed on behalf of North Korea (Cummings, *Korea's Place*, 730). Perhaps the factories and natural resources the DPRK found itself endowed with at the end of the Korean War (766) led Kim Il Sung to believe he could create a self-reliant nation. In his creation of the North Korean state, Kim Il Sung professed Juche, a self-reliance and independence from foreign powers (739). Kim Il Sung's Juche emphasized industrial manufacturing, high-tech farming, and energy production to avoid the vulnerabilities arising from international trade partnerships (778). Yet, as Kim and Fortier posit in their work, North Korea's emphasis on manufacturing and fertilizers created a chain reaction in which chemicals degraded soil, resulting in deforestation for more farmland, erosion, and flooding (Kim and Fortier, "The Politics of Environmental History in North Korea," 4), galvanizing North Korea to pay attention to climate change and environmental conservation efforts in the present and future (Stone, "Seeking Cures for North Korea's Environmental Ills," 1425-26).

While Americans may perceive North Korea as an isolationist 'hermit kingdom,' the DPRK has established diplomatic ties with most nations, excluding the United States, and even reached "diplomatic parity" with South Korea in 1975 (Agov, "Inter-Korean Relations," 373), although North Korea's influence in contemporary world politics is arguably weaker than that of South Korea. In addition, in the decades following the Korean War, Kim Il Sung and the DPRK repeatedly approached South Korea and the United States in the hopes of signing a peace treaty, but President Park's firm anti-communist stance and the United States' refusal to omit South Korea from negotiations prevented significant change (375). Progress regarding North and South

Korean relations has varied widely depending on American and South Korean administrations, with particularly poor relations during President Bush's terms (Lecture Week 14; Agov, "Inter-Korean Relations," 382).

North Korea's survival may hinge on the efficacy of its propaganda and its ability to adapt to a changing world. According to Cummings, Kim Il Sung believed that the collapse of the USSR could be attributed to its "failure to indoctrinate the young" (Cummings, *Korea's Place*, 742). Since Kim Il Sung's reign, consequently, North Korean leaders Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un have continued to utilize propaganda and indoctrination to propagate Confucianist values and corporatist concepts within the North Korean population (730, 733). Such indoctrination in contemporary North Korea provides for the populace's worship of Kim Jong Un, ensuring his retention of power and—from his perspective—the resurrection and preservation of the Choson-period Korean values that Japanese colonizers maliciously suppressed until 1945. North Korea has not been renowned for economic growth or reform in recent decades, but the DPRK may be able to extenuate its existence by adapting to an ever-changing landscape of global superpowers (779-780). After witnessing collapses and reforms of socialist and communist countries' economies, North Korea created new laws and regulations designed to attract business from abroad and make domestic markets more accessible (780). These regulations may marginally increase North Koreans' living standards, which would further strengthen the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un's rule. In the future, North Korea may have increasing opportunities to grow economically without partnering with the United States or South Korea, including strengthening alliances with an increasingly fascist and powerful Asia. If North Korean leadership can reverse the trend of economic decline and stagnation in the coming years, reunification of the Korean peninsula may be an even more remote possibility.