A Tale of Two Countries

Some call it the "Hermit Kingdom." It is a place where

the outside world has been walled off. American pop

music is illegal here and you can get executed for

watching soap operas. This is not a make-believe world

in a science fiction novel. It's a 46,000 square mile

nation hanging off the east coast of China. It is one of

the poorest nations in the world and it is armed with

nuclear weapons. It is North Korea.

Immediately to the south lies a nation with one of the

world's richest economies. About one-third of all

phones and TVs are made here. The people of this

nation are among the world's most educated.

Unemployment is low, job security is high, and

workers in this nation enjoy the highest salaries in

Asia. It is South Korea. The people of this nation share

origins with their northern neighbor, but they have

since grown far apart.

The two Koreas went to war in 1950. The North

attacked and took over much of South Korea. But the

United States jumped in and pushed the North Koreans

back to the Chinese border. Then China got involved

and pushed the Americans and South Koreans back.

The nations agreed to a ceasefire. Millions of people

were dead and the living returned to their original

boundaries. The war never officially ended, though

combat has ceased for the most part.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (known to

Westerners as North Korea) was founded in 1945 after

World War II. Their neighbor at the end of the Korean

Peninsula, South Korea or the Republic of Korea, was

established at the same time. These two nations have an

unusual history. For one thing, they have technically

been at war since 1950.

After the war, South Korea was one of the poorest

nations in the world. In 1960 the average citizen made

$79 a year. The country did not have a lot of natural

resources to sell, but they did have many hardworking

people. During the 1960s, the country began

manufacturing labor-intensive products. Selling these

products to people in other nations made South Korea

rich. They now have one of the largest and most

thriving economies in the world. As of 2012, the

average South Korean citizen makes around $32,020 a

year.

Though they were born at the same time, these two

countries had different parents. The United States

supported South Korea in its infancy. China and the

Soviet Union supported North Korea. The U.S. and the

Soviet Union may have ended World War II as allies,

but they had different ways of organizing their

societies.

The U.S. is a capitalist country. That means that some

people are rich and some people are poor. Resources

are distributed unevenly. Business are owned by

private entities. The Soviet Union claimed to have a

communist system. That means that everybody

supposedly gets the same. Resources are distributed

more evenly. Business are owned in "common" by the

government. These two superpower nations raised

North and South Korea in their own images.

The economy of North Korea is dramatically different.

Since it's birth in the 1940s, North Korea has been one

of the most secluded countries in the world. They

promote an idea of self-reliance that they call Juche.

Under this idea, they do little to no trading with other

nations. Up until the 1980s, they received large cash

infusions from China and the Soviet Union. But the

Soviet Union fell apart in the 80s and became separate

capitalist countries, of which Russia is largest. Without

the Soviet contributions, North Korea entered a long

period of famine that lasted through the 90s. Food was

hard to come by and some estimate that millions of

people starved to death. Still, the country persisted

when much of the world thought that it would fall

apart. Not only did they survive, they managed to build

a nuclear arsenal during this time.

North Korea and South Korea share a border. Since

they are locked in state of perpetual war, it's not a

regular boarder with a simple checkpoint. The border

they share is known as a "demilitarized zone." A

demilitarized zone is supposed to be free from military

installations. Yet, the Korean Demilitarized Zone is the

most heavily militarized border in the world. Both

nations have their biggest guns lined-up on the divide

and pointed at the other side. It is literally the opposite

of what the phrase "demilitarized zone" implies.

Some day Korea may be unified again. It seems

unlikely now, but stranger things have happened. Yet,

even if they did unify, how could these very different

societies acclimate to one another? They have grown in

different directions. One country is among the

wealthiest, the other amongst the poorest. The average

North Korean male is estimated to be five-inches

shorter than a South Korean (some suspect because of

malnutrition). With such big differences, will they ever

be able to see eye to eye?