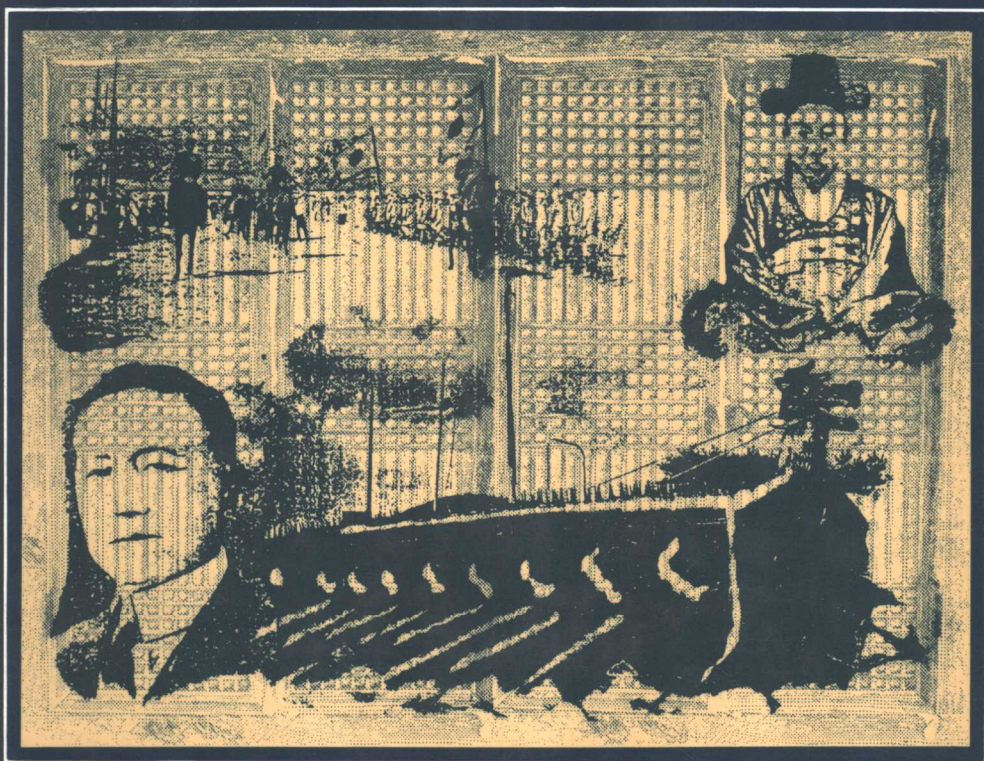


THE KOREANS

Contemporary Politics and Society

Donald Stone Macdonald



Westview Press

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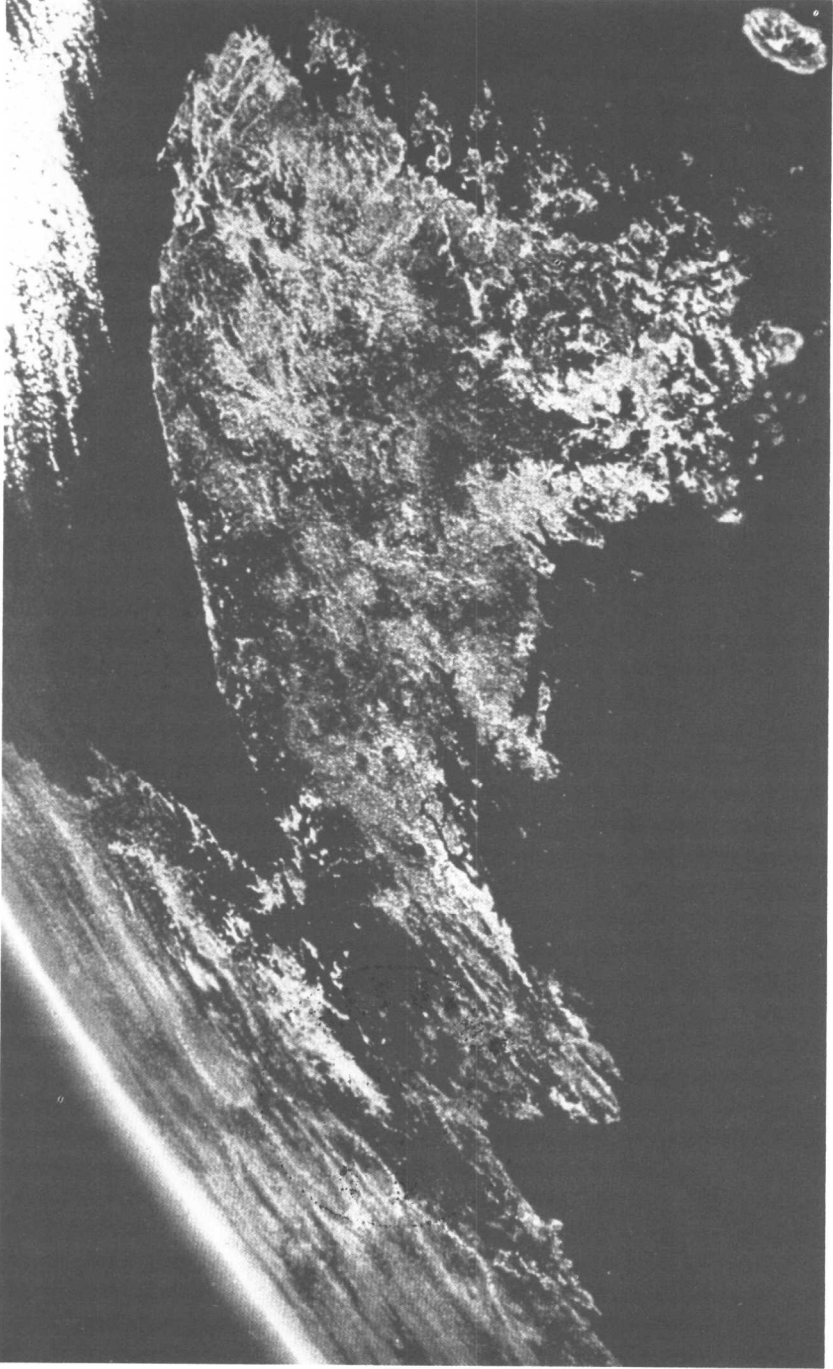
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Satellite view of the Korean Peninsula (photo courtesy of Korea Overseas Information Service)

PREFACE

Among its foreign residents, Korea is known as “the best-kept secret” because living there is so much better than they had expected. This gap between expectation and reality is only one of many indications that the West—particularly the United States—does not know Korea. Such ignorance is grossly out of proportion to the real importance of Korea to the rest of the world. It also overlooks the fascinating history of the Korean people, who have preserved their own distinctive identity and culture despite hundreds of invasions over the centuries by their neighbors.

Since World War II, Korea has undergone a dramatic transformation from a sleepy and poverty-stricken nation of landlord-ridden peasants to become a vital, expanding modern economy. Tragically divided since 1945 by ideology, superpower rivalry, and civil war, both Koreas have nevertheless led the developing world in economic progress. In fierce competition with each other, the two Korean states have become major factors in the security, stability, and progress of East Asia.

This book is intended as an attack upon Western ignorance about Korea. In brief summary form, it endeavors to explain why Korea is important—strategically, economically, and culturally. It traces the historical roots of the Korean people, the development of their culture as a blend of native heritage and foreign influence, and the problems of national development under the conflicting pressures of Confucian tradition, U.S. democratic capitalism, and Soviet communism. It tries to convey something of the fascination that Korea has for people who, like the author, have studied its problems and sought to understand its delightful but fractious people.

Korea should be understood as a single nation, even though it was divided into two states by superpower rivalry and ideological differences. (To emphasize the point, *north* and *south* are not capitalized in this book when referring to the two halves of Korea.) The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (north Korea) deserves full attention, along with the Republic of Korea (south Korea). Yet I have given north Korea far less space than south Korea. The reason is that reliable detailed information about the north is exceedingly difficult to obtain because of the self-isolation and secretiveness of its government and the virtual absence of relations between that government

and the United States. In the future, perhaps, the doors to the north may be further opened to outside inquiry and knowledge.

It is my hope that this introductory survey will help to stimulate much-needed general awareness and understanding of Korea. One test of its usefulness will be the interest it creates in reading the growing number of English-language books available on various aspects of Korean affairs. Appendix C has suggestions for further reading.

Most Western readers have difficulty with East Asian names and terms. This is due partly to the strangeness of the foreign words. A glossary (Appendix A) is provided to assist the reader in dealing with Korean terms. In addition, it is difficult to write the East Asian languages phonetically in Latin letters (a difficulty that applies to Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese words, but not Japanese). The Koreans have one of the world's best alphabets for their own language, but few non-Koreans can read it.

There is no really satisfactory way of writing Korean words in the Latin alphabet. The best available system, devised in 1939 by George M. McCune and Edwin O. Reischauer along the lines of the Wade-Giles system for romanizing Chinese, has been adopted by the U.S. government and most English-speaking scholars. It recently became the official romanization system of the Republic of Korea (south Korea). North Korea uses a somewhat different system, apparently modeled after the pinyin romanization system for Chinese, which was developed by the People's Republic of China.

The McCune-Reischauer system is used in this book for all pre-1945 Korean names, places, and terms and for those of post-1945 south Korea (except that the diacritical marks over "o" and "u" that distinguish certain vowel sounds are omitted to facilitate printing). However, where other spellings are preferred by individuals or in common use, they have been used here (the city of Seoul, for example would be *Soul* in McCune-Reischauer spelling). The north Korean spellings, insofar as known, are used for post-1945 north Korean names, places, and terms. A few facts about the Korean language and the McCune-Reischauer system are presented in Appendix B.

Donald S. Macdonald

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D.S.M.

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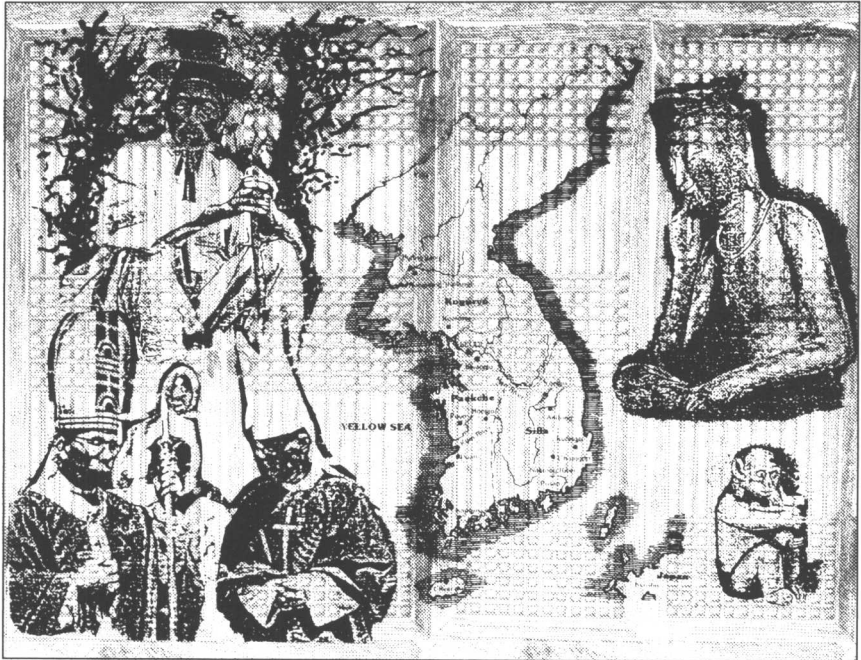
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1 INTRODUCTION: LAND, PEOPLE, PROBLEMS



Storm Center of East Asia

Korea is fated by geography and history to be the storm center of East Asia. For centuries, it has been both bridge and battleground among its neighbors. Three of the world's greatest nations—the Soviet Union, China, and Japan—surround Korea. Each of them considers the country to be of major importance to its own security and each, in the past century, has sought to dominate it. Since 1945, the United States has also developed a major security interest in Korea. Thus, far more than most of the U.S. and European public realize, Korea is of vital importance to the peace and progress of this dynamic region.

The Korean people have virtually no record of aggressive ambition outside their peninsula. More than a thousand years ago, Korea was a major, but wholly peaceful, influence on the growth of Japanese culture. Yet the peninsula

has endured nine hundred invasions, great and small, in its two thousand years of recorded history.¹ It has suffered five major occupations by foreign powers. Four wars in the past hundred years were fought in and around Korea.

Despite these trials, Korea had a history of well over a millennium as a unified, autonomous nation until Japan took it as a colony in 1910. The victors in World War II, who drove out the Japanese, divided the country for military convenience in 1945. The Soviet and U.S. occupiers, withdrawing three years later, left two hostile states in the peninsula, reflecting the Cold War confrontation of their sponsors. The resulting three-year Korean War, with its enormous human and material toll, has never formally ended. Today one and one-half million soldiers (including forty thousand from the United States) still face each other, armed to the teeth, along the 1953 armistice line, while an armistice commission—now approaching its five-hundredth meeting—offers a forum for endless repetition of charges and countercharges.

Traditional East Asian rivalries are thus eclipsed by the Soviet-U.S. confrontation, which has shaped the attitudes of the superpowers' respective Korean allies. The Koreans' own aspiration for reunification intensifies the confrontation and heightens the risk of renewed hostilities to achieve it. The stakes are high. If reunified, Korea would be among the twenty most populous countries in the world, as well as having one of the most talented and energetic peoples.

Even in their tense and divided conditions, both Korean states have made impressive progress toward the realization of a modern industrial society. However, there is another confrontation in Korea: the clash between modernity and tradition, between a new urban industrialized society and an old rural agrarian one, between the new demands for political participation and social justice and the old hierarchical, authoritarian order. To understand this problem in all its complexity, as well as to appreciate Korea's progress, requires some knowledge of Korean history and social and political background.

This introductory chapter briefly reviews the geography, resources, and people of the Korean peninsula. It then touches upon the problems arising out of Korean history, culture, politics, economics, and international relations—topics that are examined in greater detail in the rest of the book.

Basic Geographic Facts

The Korean peninsula juts southward from the Eurasian land mass between Soviet Siberia and Chinese Manchuria. As nineteenth-century strategists used to say, it points "like a dagger at the heart of Japan" (Fig. 1.1). The national territory, now as for many centuries past, includes a slice of the



FIGURE 1.1 Korea and its Northeast Asian setting (reprinted with permission from the American Map Corporation, New York)