

History of Korea - part 9

Michael Downey
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I had several questions the other day. What drives your pursuit of Korean history?

I went to Korea with the expressed intention to find the root of the Unification Church. Along the way I found that it was intertwined with the History of Korea. In the 21 years I lived in Korea, I fell in love with the Korean language, music, and people.

Are you filling in the information on Korean history recently made available by the church headquarters?

I firmly believe that if you start out with the end in mind, it isn't history, it's propaganda. They decided to point to Han Hak Ja as the Original Begotten Daughter by saying the Han lineage is special. I am not filling in anything. I began with a question in mind and have gone where it has led me.

From part 1: I would like to know who the Korean people are, where they come from, and how and why they came. Many Koreans today, that I've talked to believe that they are a people of destiny, a chosen people. Surely the belief that all things Korean are best is a common Korean point of view. I'm looking to find out why.



The final days of the Joseon Dynasty were filled with chaos. Koreans often describe their history as the story of a small righteous nation trapped between several huge hungry tigers. This describes Korea's circumstances at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth. The two tigers were China and Japan. Both countries had a history of preying on weak or foolish neighbors. Korea may have been both. As a younger brother to the behemoth China, Korea was still in a tributary relationship. Japan was on a roll, defeating China in the Sino Japanese war and Russia in the Russo Japanese war. The defeat of a big player filled Japan with bravado. She set her eyes on the rest of Asia in her Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere construction. Her main adversary was China. They both had the same ambitions. China had always considered itself the middle kingdom and surrounding nations owed allegiance and tribute. Japan, fresh off the defeat of a major European power, was ready to step into the exalted place of the European countries, colonizing Asia. The first target was Korea .

Japan had long cast covetous eyes on its nearby neighborhood. The Yomato shogunate traded with, borrowed from, and then stole from the early Gaya Confederacy. They later claimed it as a colony. As the tumultuous political situation evolved in Japan, Korea was attacked many times by Japanese pirates known as Waeko. They had to be combated again and again by both the Koryeo and Joseon Dynasties. In 1592 a Japanese Army invaded Korea. They were eventually driven off with help from Ming dynasty forces. Korea being a younger brother tributary nation, China was obligated to help and became accustomed to this role. It became more convenient to permanently station troops in Korea. When Japan launched another invasion in 1596, Korea was better prepared and with the help of the Chinese troops already there, quickly drove off the Japanese in this second Imjin war. Japanese ambition to conquer China always involved first taking Korea to serve as a land bridge.

When the forces of the Tonghak rebellion put pressure on Seoul in 1894, the Qing Dynasty was called on, and they sent 2,500 troops. The Japanese were angry that they were not informed and sent their own troops. Landing in the city of Incheon in 1895, 8,000 Japanese troops marched on Seoul and captured the Emperor Gojong and set up a pro-Japanese government. The Japanese Army and Navy, modernized under the Meiji reforms, dealt successive blows to the Qing forces. The Qing sued for peace and had to sign a

treaty releasing Korea and paying a huge indemnity to Japan. Japan was then the new power in East Asia and had the inside track to control Korea. During the early to mid-20th century, and several other times throughout history the Japanese Imperial House used the idea that Minama, the Gaya Confederacy, was a colony of the Yamato shogunate and that the Japanese and Koreans came from a common ancestry to establish legitimacy in their Imperial conquest of the Korean Peninsula. The Korean emperor Gojong and his wife Min were trapped by the Japanese. Gojong maneuvered to get Chinese assistance and Queen Min looked to Russia. To balance Japanese influence, Queen Min invited Russian advisors and investment. This became an obstacle to Japanese ambitions, so they decided to eliminate her.

Organized by the Japanese ambassador, a plot was hatched and the Queen was assassinated. Gojong was put in his place and the Japanese consolidated their position. Japan's victory against Russia further established Japan as the master of Korea. The Eulsa treaty established Korea as a protectorate of Japan. Many governmental, economic, and diplomatic functions were turned over to the Japanese. It led directly to the abdication of the emperor Gojong in 1907 and the annexation of Korea as a colony in 1910.

The colonization of Korea deeply impacted the Korean people. Some results are still visible in South Korea today. People all reacted in different ways. The emperor and his wife were both dead. The emperor Gojong was first imprisoned in the palace. More than once he tried to escape and start a government in exile. He died in 1919 under suspicious circumstances. His death inspired the March 1st independence movement where religious and civil leaders got together and published a document that demanded independence from Japan. The document was read publicly around the country sparking peaceful demonstrations where folks raised their hands and shouted Mansei meaning 10,000 years or long life to the Korean Monarch.

The demonstrations were nonviolent but the Japanese response was not. Police and troops cracked down and demonstrators were beaten and then shot. Martyrs were created, the most famous being a 16 year old girl named Yu Gwan Sun. She became the icon of the independence movement, was arrested, tortured, and died in the Seodaemun prison in Seoul. Although the movement was put down, it made the Korean insistence that they were independent from Japan known around the world. It also became the inspiration to Gandhi in his nonviolent movement and Martin Luther King's movement in America.

The resistance movement grew and a government in exile was set up in Shanghai. Previously, a Korean resistance fighter named An Jung-geun assassinated the Japanese Governor General Ito Hirobumi. He was raised as a sincere Korean patriot, a devout Catholic, and a filial son. His act of political violence assured his fate to be executed. He was executed somewhere in Japanese occupied China.

Armed resistance flourished in Manchuria and China and Koreans got a chance to fight back against Japan, but not at home. After the March 1st movement, the Japanese government saw the need to tighten control. The goal of the Japanese government was to assimilate Korea and the Korean people. That means they wanted to make them Japanese. They embarked on policies to ban the Korean language and the use of Korean surnames and forced Koreans to adopt Japanese names. The relationship between the Christian churches and the occupiers was complex. The main line churches, protestant and Catholic, for the most part were led by foreign missionaries. Their teachings were pro-western and so viewed by the Japanese as anti-Japanese. They took steps to control the churches, dictating what they could teach. The old testament was considered anti-Japanese due to its emphasis on the liberation of the Jewish people after long suffering. Some ministers were arrested and some churches burned.

Many Christians joined the ranks of the resistance but a lot of leaders thought it best to cooperate with the occupation forces. The Japanese also, as a part of their assimilation efforts, forced Koreans to worship at Sinto shrines. By 1925, all elementary school students were required to bow at shinto altars. In 1935 University students were also required to bow at shinto altars. Many Koreans cooperated, having no choice but many others resisted. Many Koreans turned to Christianity as a result. The leadership tried their best to not bring down the wrath of the occupiers by not promoting disobedience. Some devout Christians were intent on resisting the Japanese and went into the mountains and remote places. There they encountered the remnants of Shamanism. As happened over and over again in history, they synchronized beliefs and practices. What resulted was a quasi-Christian movement with unique beliefs and practices that were declared heretical. In general, it appears that the basis of all these religions is native animism, overlaid with Taoist developments and topped by a messianic theory that varies from group to group and person to person. Formal practices, ethical concepts, and ascetic theories from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity in varying degrees typify the various organized groups.

One loosely affiliated group was called the Jesus Church movement. They believed that the Messiah would come again born as a man. That man would be born in Korea. The fall of man was sexual in nature and to reverse that fall required sexual rites be performed. Of course believing such things, they were declared heretics by the established churches. After the war, branches flourished in both North and South Korea. The Israel Monastery of Kim Baek moon was well known. Moon Sun Myung was a member of this group and was a disciple of Kim. They traveled together to Pyonang to meet other Jesus movement people in 1948. Moon remained until the outbreak of the 1950 Korean war.

During World War II Japan forced many Koreans to contribute to the war effort by working in factories and mines under harsh conditions. More than 110,000 men were conscripted and another 100,000 volunteered to fight for Japan. Their casualty rate was high and more than 50,000 were killed. American Marines met them on islands throughout the Pacific and killed them like any other Japanese soldier. The Japanese also hired, kidnapped, and forced Korean women and girls to serve as prostitutes in military brothels, mostly in China. In these brothels the women had to service 30 or more men a day. A few of these grannies are still alive today, live in a house outside of Seoul, and demonstrate weekly outside the Japanese Embassy.

The Japanese Army also committed mass executions of Korean civilians in Manchuria, Japan, and Korea. The Japanese government took measures to downplay these incidents and until today deny they ever happened.

When the Americans forced the end of the war by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule. The liberation day is celebrated on August 15th every year. The Korean people did not forget their treatment under the Japanese and they didn't forget who resisted, who collaborated, who favored the return of the monarchy and who favored revolution, who lived and who died. The post war years was to be shaped by these memories.

World political conditions played a nasty trick on the Koreans. The United States accepted the Japanese surrender below the 38th parallel and the Soviet Union above that parallel. The Japanese laid down their arms and returned to their home land.

The U.S. military was largely unprepared for the challenge of administering the country, arriving with no knowledge of the language or political situation. Thus, many of their policies had unintended, destabilizing effects. The policy of retaining the Japanese officials who had governed the country in official positions and on advisory boards caused much resentment and hard feelings. The Americans refused to recognize the Provisional Government of Korea which was the government in exile organized in Shanghai by Kim Ku and others. They also disbanded the hugely popular People's Republic of Korea which was a leftist leaning organization. In addition, waves of refugees from the Soviet zone (estimated at 400,000) and returnees from abroad caused further turmoil. The finger pointing and accusations started by October 1945. The main accusation was having collaborated with the occupation forces. The left took up the ideology of Marx and Lenin. On the right, they were in favor not only of the monarch but the regime and system of privilege for the Yang ban and landowning classes.

Under the United States military government there was not much hope to sort it out, dispense justice, make everyone happy and establish a nationwide government. The problem was turned over to the United Nations and their commission on Korea called for a nationwide election to choose a government. The Kim IL Sung in the Soviet zone in the North refused to participate. Under the supervision of the United Nations and with the security of the United States Army elections were held throughout the South. It was the first time Koreans were allowed to vote and there was a reported 95% turn out. Some popular leaders such as Kim Ku opposed the election because they said it would lead to the division of the peninsula. Folks on Jeju agreed and boycotted the election. A constitutional assembly was elected. The assembly became the national Assembly. In August they meet and established 대한민국 the Republic of Korea. In the north, Kim IL Sung with Soviet support held elections, and established the People's Republic of Korea. They claimed jurisdiction over the entire peninsula. The division was carved in stone and the future looked dark.