KOREA IN THE LATE 1950s, A PERSONAL VIEW*

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When Personnel Department of the then Foreign Office asked me to call in early April 1957 I had no idea of where they intended my first posting to be. "Korea" they said, "the Embassy in Seoul, as our first language student." My mind spun for a long moment. Could I cope? What kind of country was it? Where could I begin to make sense of such a completely new and unexpected chapter in my life? Who were the London experts on this distant land?

Answers were more difficult to find than questions. The truth was that – Britain's involvement in the recently ended Korean War apart – our connections with the so-called 'Hermit Kingdom' had been tenuous for many years. Since the Japanese occupation of the country in 1910, Korea had been perceived from London as a relatively unimportant province within the wider Japanese Empire. Personal contact had been largely confined to a small group of mainly Protestant missionaries. There were few direct economic links between Britain and Korea and specialists tended to view the peninsula through Japanese binoculars. Even after the partition of Korea into Soviet and American spheres of influence in 1945 it remained, to adapt Neville Chamberlain, speaking of 1938 Czechoslovakia, 'a far away country of which we know little'.

Predictably, I began my voyage of discovery into this new and fascinating world at the School of Oriental and African Studies where the late and much missed Dr Bill Skillend presided over a small Department of Korean Studies. I passed the summer term of 1957 as a member of a small group of fellow students from all over Europe who were also beginning to get to grips with a complex, and for us, exotic language. Bill's own knowledge of Korean had been painfully acquired, largely at second-hand, and he was the first to admit that his command of spoken Korean was far from colloquial. But he had a firm grasp of grammar and syntax and a deep determination to instil this in the minds of his students. So we left SOAS with a solid foundation for further study. By August 1957 I had also managed to find the one reasonably

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scholarly and up-to-date book then available in English on Korea's recent history, Cornelius Osgood's *The Koreans and their Culture*. This proved to be an excellent guide to this still traditional Asian society which was now beginning to move at lightning speed into the modern world.

Leaving Southampton on the Peninsular and Oriental's liner *Canton* in late September 1957, I arrived in Seoul via Singapore and Yokohama almost seven weeks later to find a bijou Embassy tucked away in a pleasant cul-de-sac behind the Anglican Cathedral in the very centre of the city. Tall trees surrounded two very respectable late Victorian houses in reddish brick, recently supplemented by a modest modern Chancery building. It was only a short walk to the then epicentre of Seoul night-life, the imposing, if ugly, Bando Hotel, reputedly owned by President Syngman Rhee's German-born wife. Not far from the Bando the former Japanese Governor's domed seat of power loomed over a city still only beginning to recover from the painful wounds of war. The streets hummed with rebuilt US jeeps and broken-down buses, while on their pavements legless veterans and recently orphaned children begged or stole to survive. A short distance from the centre, the presence of the US Eighth Army/United Nations Command Headquarters within the vast ex-Japanese Yongsan compound reminded Koreans that a terrible conflict had only just ended. Memories of war were indeed still strong and fear of a recurrence widespread. Military expenditure took up 70% of the national budget and even distant Britain still maintained a twelve-man contribution to the United Nations Honour Guard, symbolising the international community's continued determination to defend the Republic (the last British infantry battalion had left only in the spring of 1957).

A large and active American Embassy seemed to know everyone and everything about the country which was almost entirely dependent on American military strength and economic assistance for its survival. Yet despite this overwhelming presence, gratitude for American help during and after the War remained widespread and hope for a democratic future was largely invested in the idea of a continuing US/Korean partnership. The Japanese, once everywhere, had completely vanished and it was commonly asserted that if a Japanese dared to walk the streets of Seoul in a kimono she would rapidly be met with a barrage of stones.

Outside Seoul, Korea's mountainous countryside stretched away into the distance, the hills almost completely denuded of trees, the valleys full of verdant rice fields, nourished on human night soil. Korean traditional dress was still everywhere, cottages invariably thatched, with *ondol* (hot air-heated) floors. Paved roads – even between Seoul and Pusan – were a vision yet to come and petrol stations non-existent. Milk was almost unknown in rural areas and western food a rarity outside the big cities. In some villages only thirty miles from the capital the inhabitants seemed scarcely to know that they were residents of an entity known as 'Korea'; in regions where American or other foreign troops had not been in action during the Korean

War, or Christian missionaries had failed to penetrate, many people had never seen a foreigner.

But for a young (26-year-old) language student this was a warm and welcoming land, particularly since I came from a country – home of the mythical *Yunguk sinsa* ('English Gentleman') – which, unlike Japan, had been only a distant, and apparently largely benevolent, colonial power. I spent four hours every day with my language teacher, a student only a few years younger than myself, as I fought to get to grips with spoken and written Korean. In the absence of any kind of language school, and with a severe shortage of suitable English/Korean teaching materials, this was no easy task, but I persisted and as the months passed began to cross the language divide into another mental world within which I marvelled at the logic of *hangŭl*, the basic Korean alphabet which underpinned this highly sophisticated tongue. Meanwhile, I found time to make friends with Koreans of all kinds, particularly within the worlds of journalism and academe. Some are my good friends still.

Whenever I had the chance I fled happily from overcrowded, noisy Seoul into the hinterland, and I recall days in one of the Embassy's Land Rovers on the dirt roads around Ch'unch'ŏn or along the almost empty beaches of the east coast. I frequently travelled with an Australian colleague who shared my fascination with everything we saw and felt. We found accommodation at traditional inns (*yŏgwan*) in small towns or managed to impose ourselves uninvited on the hospitality of an Irish or American missionary priest. Starved of foreign visitors in a distant rural parish these splendid men never failed to make us welcome. These were golden days, my strongest memory being that of the apple orchards around Taegu when trees laden with bright red fruit stood proud beneath the seemingly eternal high blue skies of the Korean autumn. "Et in Arcadia …"

And politics? Since the 1945 partition along the 38th Parallel the southern half of the peninsula had been dominated by President Rhee, a veteran of the independence struggle against Japan who had spent many years in the United States lobbying for Korean freedom. There could be no doubt of his patriotism or of his devotion to the cause to which he had given his life. But by 1957 many, perhaps most, educated Koreans, and Americans with an interest in Korean affairs, believed that he had been in power too long. Yet he was not easy to dislodge, given his control of the armed forces, National Assembly and the huge security machine. While liberal newspapers such as the redoubtable *Tonga Ilbo* waged verbal war against the ageing President and his stooges in government there was no clear sign of early change. Attempts to break the deadlock by the opposition Democratic and the small Progressive party, indirectly backed by Korea's influential Christian churches and by an increasingly irritated US administration, proved largely futile for most of 1958.

The beginning of the end for Rhee was, however, signalled by the notorious P'ohang (Yongil B) by-election in late September, 1958, where, after the close of

polling and in the presence of US and British observers, the Korean police were clearly seen stuffing ballot boxes with fresh voting papers endorsing the official candidate. (I vividly recollect my American colleague, a First Secretary in the US Embassy and later Ambassador to India, jumping up and down in frustration while shouting "*Hanguk Minchuchui … Hanguk Minchuchui*" ("Korean Democracy") at the top of his voice as he witnessed this depressing scene.) The political mood again worsened in December when a new National Security Law was passed during uproarious meetings of the National Assembly. This draconian Act enabled Rhee to do almost anything he wished in order to deal with his perceived enemies, who by now included not only the opposition political parties but also the bulk of an increasingly influential educated middle class. Perhaps most important of all, the US administration had by then completely lost faith in Rhee's ability to govern with any degree of legitimacy. By the time I left Korea in mid-July 1959, at the end of my first tour of duty – to be followed by another between 1962 and 1964 – the writing was clearly on the wall and it was no surprise to observers of the Korean political scene when Rhee was finally thrown out in late April 1960, in the face of massive popular unrest and widespread student rioting, initially in Masan. He left the country in an aircraft provided by the US CIA on 26 April to return to his original place of exile, Hawai'i, where he died on 19 July 1965.

After a brief and chaotic period of democratic rule under the leadership of the well-intentioned but politically inexperienced Catholic ex-Ambassador in Washington, Dr Chang Myŏn, Korea at last succumbed to the fate which awaited it as increasingly angry army officers, many of them Japanese-trained, saw the country descending into virtual anarchy. It was time for discipline and order and most Koreans were by then disinclined to persist with a regime which provided neither. In any event the leader of the military coup on 16 May, 1961, General Park Chŏnghŭi (Park Chung Hee), and his chief enforcer Kim Ch'ŏngpil, Director of the fearsome Korean Central Intelligence Agency, were determined to crush any nonsense about the need to return to discredited 'democracy'.

So by the time I returned to Seoul, now newly married, in November 1962, this time as Second Secretary (Political), the capital seemed to be a dead city, its nights curtailed by curfew, its newspapers muted, its parliamentarians almost silent, its universities controlled by the ubiquitous Korean CIA. Much of the pleasure of life had gone for me and, much more important, for the majority of Koreans. Meanwhile the United States, while evidently unhappy about this new state of affairs, was not prepared to do anything positive to try to shift the military from power. Years of rapid economic expansion and breakneck modernisation followed, with an average growth rate of eight per cent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The country was transformed as the Park regime continued to carry through its vast programme of export-led industrialisation. But at least until recent years there has always been little

gratitude in Korean politics, and Park Chung Hee's ultimate reward for his efforts to strengthen his country proved only to be his own assassination at the hands of a military colleague. But that is another story.