



The Korean War and its Legacy

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

Online course, Week 1

Week 1 of the online programme focused on background issues relevant to the Korean War, particularly how the geography, culture or thought systems in Korea have been significant in Korean history. The Fellows studied Dr Jongwoo Han's fundamental text in this area: *Power, Place, and State-Society Relations in Korea: Neo-Confucian and Geomantic Reconstruction of Developmental State and Democratization*.

There was little doubt among the Fellows that Confucian thought has been a powerful force in Korean history, providing a foundation for much of Korea's culture and national identity. One of the main areas on which Han focused was the role of belief systems in explaining Korea's remarkable development after the Korean War:

- *Dr Han's work is his analysis of the cultural and spiritual influences of Confucianism/ NeoConfucianism on Korea's political development. He asserts that these religious beliefs have created a culture of values instrumental in both; 'legitimizing state power' but at the same time creating loyal opposition, 'heteronomical forces of dissent'. (Page 4) He argues that Korea has a long and strong tradition of dissent initially within the state hegemony that actually gave those in power legitimacy but eventually these same forces led to the people challenging those in power.*

Han is not the only scholar in this field of course. One of the Fellows pointed out that the eminent US scholar Bruce Cumings ascribes similar importance to thought systems and culture:

- *Cumings champions the view that the DPRK of Kim Il-sung represented a profound reassertion of native Korean political culture laced with Confucianist beliefs. Kim talked of "Chuch'e" self-reliance, the correct thought to determine correct action, which is also interpreted as what it means to be Korean. The focus of the DPRK on Kim as the omnipotent leader harks back to the concept of a great leader seen in the teachings 11th-century scholar Fan Tsu-yu: 'order and disorder in the world all depend on the heart and mind of the ruler.'*

Some of the Fellows went further in highlighting how this system of thought, combined with and creating a culture, had real world and practical manifestations:

- *It would also seem that South Koreans consent to, or are at least not really wary of, a state which is prepared to show its strength. For example, a recent survey showed that most South Koreans would be ready and willing to endorse a government-imposed wage freeze if it were for the good of the nation. This kind of trust was put down to cultural influences of Taoism and Confucianism which permeate Korean education and architecture.*

Other Fellows were struck by the ways in which Korea's history, especially in the second half of the 20th century, showed at least a degree of comparability with other states:

- *One of Dr Han's arguments is that state development needs to be looked at within the context of the local historical context – i.e. that grand unifying theories which are out of context are not necessarily all that useful. I'm not going to dispute that – but although I can see why the uniqueness of Korea's development is of particular interest to him, I do see a number of parallels with the development of post-WW2 West Germany with that of South Korea. The importance of major corporations, a general sense of collectivism within the population and the need for key economic actors to act in the national interest (as seen in the corporatism of the German system) as well as their historical parallels (Cold War divided states after a period of defeat) seem to really chime.*
- *The main parallel that I can draw here is with Medieval Christendom, where a deep sense of hierarchy was felt across society (in the Church and in the secular world through Feudalism). There is of course lots of historical debate about the extent of this sense of 'order', but the worldview of many inhabitants of Medieval Europe was also one that was driven, like Confucianism in Korea, through finding meaning and order in Nature. Often this came through faith and astrology (another parallel here that crops up in Dr Han's book) but it also relates to the desire of people in both places to find meaning and safety in a regulated society.*

One of the Fellows pointed to the geopolitical importance of Korea and the region which surrounded it:

- *I would start much earlier than Robinson (the 1910 establishment of the GGK) to understand how neighbours have shaped Korea. Japanese influence started not long after Meiji Restoration of the 1860s as they saw it as an opportunity for imperialism as well as an availability of cheap resources, labour and potential market for goods on their doorstep. China, languishing under western imperialism, desperately attempted to maintain order in their tributary state, putting down uprisings for the Chosen king in 1884 and 1894 which lead to the first Sino-Japanese War and the Treaty of Shimonoseki that transferred Korea from a Chinese to a Japanese protectorate. Look at a map and it is very easy to see why each country wanted influence over Korea, although motivated by different factors; proximity made Korea an easy target for each nation.*

So, armed with a working knowledge of geography, culture, tradition and belief the Fellows prepare to move on to the next topic in the online course, the outbreak of the Korean War itself.

Core resources

- Jongwoo Han, *Power, Place, and State-Society Relations in Korea: Neo-Confucian and Geomantic Reconstruction of Developmental State and Democratization*
- Overview of Korean War, Online Exhibition, National Army Museum: <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/korean-war>

Secondary sources

- Michael E. Robinson, "Chapter 5: Liberation, Civil War, and Division," *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey* (University of Hawaii Press, 2007)