

OBSTACLES TO KOREA'S GLOBALIZATION IN THE MODERN**PERIOD: SOME REFLECTIONS****Wayne Patterson****St. Norbert College****DePere, Wisconsin****Korea's Long Road to Globalization in the 21st Century**

This paper seeks to look at the path that Korea has taken toward globalization during the past 150 years, and conclude with some observations about contemporary Korea at the beginning of the 21st century. It will argue that the path has been neither easy nor straightforward due to factors that will be explored in this paper. In this discussion, I am proceeding under the assumption that globalization is at its heart an increasing web of global interconnectedness. And while much of this interconnectedness has been unidirectional (that is, Western culture infiltrating non-Western societies), it has been by no means completely so.

At the dawn of the modern era, Korea consciously turned away from global interaction and adopted isolationism. Invaded by Japan in the 1590s and by the Manchus in the 1630s, the Korean reaction to these two invasions midway through the ChosOn dynasty (1392-1910) was to shut itself off from foreign contact as much as possible. Subsequent encounters demonstrated how rigidly Korea held to this doctrine. When Christianity made its appearance in the late 18th and early 19th century through the medium first of books from China and then later through missionaries from France, this new philosophy/religion was viewed as heterodox and was banned, as only Confucianism was seen as orthodox. Christian books were destroyed and missionaries were often martyred, although the effectiveness of these measures varied. Moreover, Koreans were forbidden to travel overseas without permission, as this might provide unwanted information on Korea to foreigners. As a consequence, Korea earned the sobriquet "Hermit Nation," based upon the title of a book written by William Elliot Griffis in 1882 (who coincidentally attended the same high school (Central) in Philadelphia as the author of this paper).

In addition to seclusion, a second factor that inhibited globalization in Korea at the beginning of the modern era was the practice of **sadae**. With the literal meaning of “Serving the Great,” this concept translated into a preference for things Chinese. While Korea had for centuries borrowed extensively from its larger neighbor, it took on an added official dimension at the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty such that China essentially became the sole source of knowledge. True, there were attempts to break this monopoly. The **Sirhak** [School of Practical Learning] movement that rose in the 17th century offered an alternative to the stranglehold of Chinese thought over Korea, but this school of thought was not embraced by the majority of the yangban in power and thus remained relegated to an undercurrent that never seriously challenged Chinese supremacy.

And since the Chinese believed in the superiority of their own culture, those who failed to acknowledge this superiority were deemed barbarians, whose cultural attributes were not worth studying. At one point in history it might have been true that Chinese civilization was the most advanced in the world. But by the 19th century, developments in other parts of the world, notably Europe, had propelled Western civilization to a point of, if not equality, then outright superiority in many respects. But as long as Korea remained focused on China as its sole inspiration, these developments elsewhere failed to register. It must be remembered in this context that it was only one hundred years ago that the Koreans ceased to send tribute to the Qing emperor and dared to declare that Korea was an empire (**cheguk**) rather than a kingdom (**wangguk**). In sum, this factor of **sadae** forced Korea into a unidirectional search for knowledge rather than casting a wider net to seek knowledge from all sources.

The first concerted effort to “open” Korea to Western/global influence came in 1866 when an American ship, the *General Sherman*, sailed up the Taedong River toward P’yŏngyang to demand a meeting with high officials and initiate trading relations. When this effort was rebuffed, the ship fired on the Koreans on shore. When the Koreans massed to retaliate, the ship tried to sail away but became mired in low tide, and the entire crew was massacred. Five years later in 1871, the Americans returned in the Low-Rodgers Expedition seeking an apology. Receiving none, they overran a Korean fort guarding the entryway to Seoul and killed more than four hundred Korean defenders before sailing away. This represented the highest body count of Asians killed at the hands of the Americans until the Philippine Insurrection three decades later. Because this series of events is generally regarded as the beginning of the Korean-American relationship, it might be appropriate to look more closely at it.

The leader of Korea at this time was the Taewŏn’gun, who was acting as a regent, for his son, King Kojong, was still a minor. His isolationist policy was popular with the Korean yangban elite, and the apparent “victories” over the two American “invasions” reinforced for him and them the correctness of his isolationist vision for Korea. This was in sharp contrast to Korea’s two closest neighbors, both of whom had been opened, albeit unwillingly – China, by the Opium War in 1842, and Japan, by Commodore Perry in 1853.

The isolationist stand of the Taewŏn’gun in the 1860s and 1870s is interesting for us to examine because of the differing ways he is viewed historically. South Korean and Western historiography generally casts the Taewŏn’gun in a negative light for pursuing a reactionary policy that resulted in Korea entering the world of international diplomatic intercourse unprepared for what it was about to face. By contrast, North

Korean historiography generally sees the TaewOn'gun in a positive light as a fighter for Korean independence against foreign imperialism. These two differing interpretations are not surprising given that South Korea has now, as we shall soon see, fully embraced globalization, while North Korea has pursued a policy of **juche**, or "self-reliance," for the past half century since it was first enunciated by Kim Il-sung in 1955. Kim's isolationist credentials are further embossed by the fact that his biographers claim that one of Kim's grandfathers was among those who fought against the *General Sherman* in 1866.

When the TaewOn'gun retired at the time of his son's reaching adulthood in the mid-1870s, Kojong showed an inclination to open Korea to Western and Japanese influence. To that end, he signed a treaty with Japan in 1876 that allowed Western ideas to enter Korea legitimately for the first time. This was a promising beginning, and missionaries from the US and elsewhere began arriving to teach and Koreans started going abroad, either to Japan or the west, to study Western things. Unfortunately, then as now, the forces of globalization were intertwined with international politics. In the late nineteenth century, the country that was most interested in Korea politically was Japan. At the same time, most Western learning in Korea was filtered through Japan because of Japan's successful modernization, because of its propinquity, and because of the relative ease in learning Japanese as a foreign language. But Japan also showed itself to be an imperialist power intent on taking over Korea. This created a situation in which to be global meant, in actuality, to be pro-Japanese. As Japan moved to absorb Korea at the beginning of the twentieth century then, globalization became inextricably tainted as collaboration with colonial oppression.

The colonial period (1910-1945), to be sure, ushered in a number of developments and currents of thought that could arguably be seen as contributing to globalization. These included developments in education, economics, transportation, and mass communication that in theory had the potential to bring Korea and Koreans closer to the outside world. And indeed, a small colonial bourgeois elite was created that did acquire the trappings of an increasingly global identity. But this small elite owed their position to cooperation with the Japanese colonial authorities. While some have labeled this elite as cultural nationalists because they saw independence as a long-term evolutionary process, others, particularly the radical nationalists who rejected cooperation with Japan and called for immediate independence, called them **yOkjOk** or traitors. Because globalization essentially meant cooperation with the Japanese colonial authorities during the colonial period then, it was ideologically tainted and discredited.

This leads to the observation that, at its heart, the phenomenon of nationalism runs counter to the requirements of globalization. That is, Koreans now were forced to look inward rather than outward, pondering how they had lost their independence. Koreans, in short, sought Korean independence rather than global interdependence. Many intellectual currents at the time sought to recapture the essence of a *Korean* culture that they thought would be lost forever, with renewed emphasis on the sources of Korean history and the Korean language rather than foreign learning. It was also during this period that millions of Koreans fled their country, creating a Korean diaspora of such a magnitude that fully one-sixth of all Koreans lived outside of Korea by the time of the Pacific War. While this diaspora would later figure prominently in Korea's more recent globalization, at that time this exodus deprived the nation of some of its best and brightest, many of whom had with them the germs of a global perspective, such as Christianity. (This does not suggest that non-Christians cannot be globally-oriented, only that it gave them connections with an organization with an extra-Korean locus.) In short,

the colonial period, with its nationalist response, did not materially advance the conditions for globalization in Korea.

While liberation in 1945 promised a brighter future for Korea and the forces of globalization, these hopes were soon dashed by the division of Korea by the United States and the Soviet Union. Moreover, the fratricidal Korean War in the early 1950s hardened the division. As a result, Koreans again were forced to turn inward, making it difficult to respond to the influences that encouraged looking outward. Korean nationalism, which had been anti-Japanese, now had as its focus unification of the country and the elimination of the regime in the other half of the peninsula. A neo-isolationist regime was established in the North while the South came increasingly under American influence.

One of these American influences was educational. In South Korea, the educational system had been revamped by the American occupying forces along American lines. The proliferation of higher education institutions typically used American textbooks that contained Western/global values. Indeed, values such as democracy found fertile ground among students who increasingly saw the contrast between textbook democracy and the authoritarian regimes under which they lived. However, these values did not find their full expression until the middle class embraced them in the 1980s. Until that time, successive dictatorial rulers were able to withstand democratic pressures from both within and without.

Another American influence in South Korea that had the potential to contribute to globalization was an increasing interaction with American people and culture through the stationing of American soldiers in the South and the advent of television. But like democratic values, discussed above, these presented a view that was skewed and/or incomplete. For example, when I first went to Korea in the 1970s, when long hair was the dominant fashion statement among young American males, Koreans invariably asked "Migun saramimnikka or "Are you an American soldier"? That is, Koreans thought that *any* American on the streets of Seoul must be a soldier, since tourists or businessmen were few and far between. And I could not help but notice that not a few young Korean males seemed to wear their hair ala Charles Bronson. In fact, Westerners were rare enough that one could not walk down the street without being objects of interest.

Japanese culture was also subject to being placed at the margins of Korean society. This occurred because of the twin combination of dictatorship of the postwar period and lingering anti-Japanese sentiment. Thus, Japanese films, television shows, and magazines were either forbidden or severely circumscribed, a phenomenon that has eased only in the last few years.

In sum, fixation on one country, isolationism, nationalism, and dictatorship limited the options available for Koreans to look outward. While fixation on one country and isolationism was abandoned, except in the north, this meant that only two inhibiting factors remained in the south: nationalism and dictatorship. It is my contention that when dictatorship was toppled in the late 1980s, it opened the way for Koreans to have many more choices, many of them global in nature. A few examples will suffice.

For decades, the predominant image of Korea among Americans came from the popular television show M*A*S*H that showed Korea as a poor, war-torn country with

little to offer. The 1988 Olympics ushered in a contrasting view of Korea as advanced, prosperous, democratic, and peaceful. During the period of dictatorial rule, few Koreans could travel abroad as tourists and not many foreigners visited Korea. All that changed, as democratic demands included the right to travel abroad. Korean tourists can now be found throughout the world. As Koreans travel abroad as tourists, new niche markets are created, such as the one in Seoul that advertised a class on Western table manners with the final exam testing one's ability to negotiate a fancy French dinner. And more foreigners are visiting Korea. No longer do they encounter the stares they might have experienced in the 1960s or 1970s. And, now, Koreans know that most Americans or Westerners they encounter on the street are probably not soldiers.

Korea is also becoming more multi-cultural, as global forces continue to impinge. While tourism brings temporary visitors, others have come for the long term. Koreans have always seen themselves as a homogeneous society. However, as Korea has entered the ranks of the developed nations and most of its citizens have achieved middle class status, the same phenomenon that Japan saw occurring in the 1980s has come to Korea. That is, workers and their families, primarily from South Asia, have been drawn to Korea to occupy positions that are increasingly seen by Koreans as dirty, difficult, and dangerous. While there are attendant problems with increasing diversity, it represents a new chapter in the global experience of Korea.

One should also note that those who are coming to Korea for the long term may not be ethnically distinct. Just as **Nikkeijin** from Latin America have added to the multicultural landscape of Japan, overseas Koreans are now flocking to the "motherland." Some are Korean-Chinese, formerly loyal to the regime in the North, but now lured by economic opportunity in South Korea. Some are adoptees from North America and Europe who are coming to seek out their birth parents. Some are Korean Americans coming as teachers of English or taking advantage of job opportunities in Korean firms that are marketing their products worldwide. Some come as students. Beginning in the 1970s, summer programs at leading universities have catered to **haeoo kyop'o**, overseas Koreans, who return as college students to learn about their "roots." (The author has taught in such programs at Korea University in the late 1980s and YOnsei University in the late 1990s.)

In fact, education is feeling the impact of globalization. In the 1960s and 1970s, people emigrated due to economic hardship or, if they were highly educated, for better job prospects abroad, creating a brain drain. Now, many people emigrate because of education. Because of the heavy emphasis on education combined with limited resources, Korean students have to spend 15 to 18 hours a day in school and in after-school **hakwOn** to compete for seats at a few of the top-tier universities. Because of the immense pressure on students, many parents are sending their children to school overseas in the US, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Sometimes the mother goes with the child, leaving the father, nicknamed wild goose or **girOgi**, behind in Korea to support the family. Other parents have taken to hiring English-language tutors for their children, sometimes beginning at age three, so they grow up fluent in English.

In part because of this phenomenon, the leading private university in Korea – YOnsei University – opened this past March the first college where undergraduate instruction is conducted entirely in English. While it already had a graduate program that was conducted entirely in English, this is the first time the concept has been extended to an undergraduate program. Founded by a Presbyterian missionary from the United

States in 1885, the university is hoping to offer a liberal arts education similar to what one would receive at a quality undergraduate college in the United States. And while this is obviously aimed primarily at Korean students who are at home in using English, the university also hopes to attract, at least initially, a small but significant number of students from other parts of Asia, with China being mentioned most frequently as having the greatest potential. It will also try to deviate from the traditional educational structure which involved rote memorization, as students grapple with major problems facing societies and debate and discuss the issues rather than receiving wisdom from an authoritarian professor on high. The faculty in this Underwood International College within YOnsei University (of which the writer of this paper was one) all have PhDs from major American universities.

While most of the discussion has so far been focused on the ability of Korea to absorb global concepts, the phenomenon is not unidirectional. One can point to economic indicators such as trade in automobiles or stereo equipment. But it can also be found in the realm of culture. What had earlier been a trickle of Korean entertainers abroad, such as the Chung family who had mastered Western musical forms, has now become a flood. The appearance of **hallyu**, or the Korean Wave, can be seen in pop culture where it has reached nearly cult proportions in much of Asia, including Japan where Yon-sama is an icon and middle-aged women make pilgrimages to the setting of Winter Sonata. Korean soap operas are also wildly popular in China, even reaching the west coast of the United States, where such programming reaches audiences that are by no means all Korean. Young people, Japanese in particular, are attracted to the punk rock scene as can be demonstrated on any given night in the haunts of Hongdae.

Freer societies are more likely to interact globally than societies that labor under political and cultural restrictions. North Korea is an obvious case in point. In the South, globalization was "officially endorsed" when the Kim Young-sam regime (1993-1998) proclaimed **seggyehwa** [globalization] as one of its policy goals. In the North, however, **juche** has inhibited globalization. For example, South Korea is one of the most computer "connected" societies in the world. The contrast with North Korea is striking. When one meets a North Korean and exchanges **myOngham**, or business cards, one rarely finds an e-mail address on the card of the North Korean. North Korea exports little, while South Korea is an exporting giant. While the North Koreans deride the South Koreans of knuckling under to a modern-day version of **sadaejuUi**, or flunkeyism, it is clear that the South Koreans are not looking back.

Nonetheless, the long road to globalization has not been a straight one. While isolationism and dictatorship have been discarded in the South, nationalism still remains. Even now, there is a (recently enlarged) quota of foreign films in place so that Korean films get full play. Economically, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 hit Korea hard. Large corporations were required to become more transparent and jobs for life were no longer promised. The IMF bailout ruefully became known as "I aM Fired." The joblessness and the harsh requirements of the conditions laid down by the IMF led to an anti-foreign backlash. Foreign goods were removed from store shelves as items such as cigarettes and automobiles were subject to boycotts or vandalism.

In sum, isolationism, over-reliance on one country, nationalism, and dictatorship all directly affected, and continue to affect, the ability of Korean society in the modern era to respond completely and successfully to global impulses. While the South has moved beyond a fixation on one country, isolationism and dictatorship, it must still

contend with strong nationalist sentiment as it confronts globalizing impulses. That is, the South has only one of these four inhibiting factors. The North will have a longer way to go because it still possesses all or part of all four of these inhibiting factors: reliance on China, an isolationist policy (**juche**), nationalist sentiment, and dictatorship.