

Brief Introduction into Korean History

LECTURE 1: The Geographical Settings and Basic Issues of Korean History:

The name of “Korea” is derived from the name of Koryŏ Dynasty, which ruled the Peninsula from 936 to 1392 as the first truly unified Korean Kingdom. The first European account this name is mentioned was Marco Polo’s famous book on his travels in Asia (according to this book, Marco Polo reached the Chinese court around 1275). There are persisting doubts in recent scholarship on the subject of Marco Polo’s account’s authenticity, but even if, as the critics suggest, Marco Polo never actually reached China and received most of his information on East Asia from Persian and Arabian merchants, in relation to Korea it means only that it was already known to the Middle Eastern travelers and became known to the Europeans through the Muslim intermediaries (in fact, in Mongolian period Persia did act as the transmitter of Chinese knowledge to Europe). In any case, Korea’s name (as well as Japan’s) became known to the West relatively late, although Muslim merchants visited Korea as early as in the 7th or 8th C. It all bespeaks, in fact, relative “backwardness” of Europe in the Middle Age in terms of geographical knowledge.

Geographically, Korea lies adjacent to China and Japan, between 33° N. and 43° N. latitude. It primarily borders China in the north (natural border being formed by Yalu/Amnok and Tumen/Tuman rivers) and Japan in the south: only about two hundred kilometers separate the Peninsula from the Japanese Archipelago. As it was frequently pointed out before, this kind of geographical location means that Korea had to necessarily become a “transmitter” of Chinese (and broader, “continental”) culture to Japan, and, of course, had no choice but to be deeply influenced by the Chinese culture itself. This is basically right, and we can point out to the pioneering role of the Koreans in disseminating basic elements of common East Asian legacy - Buddhism, Confucianism, rice agriculture and the culture of iron - in the Japanese Islands. The fact that about 70-80% of Korean’s modern vocabulary is derived from Chinese bespeaks also the degree of persistent Chinese influence on Korean culture. But other things not to be overlooked are – first - the fact that Korea is bounded by seas from three sides: by the Yellow (“Western”) Sea to the west, the Sea of Japan (“Eastern”) to the East, and the Korean (Tsushima) Strait to the south. As the seas, in ancient as well as in modern times, have the tendency to unify the peoples rather than divide them, we can easily infer that, if not artificially forced to isolate itself, Korea as a maritime state has the “natural disposition” to wide international contacts and exchanges not necessarily limited to the Sinitic cultural circle. And, in fact, before the country devoted itself to relative isolation and Sinophilic policies in early 15th C. (mostly on ideological and political reasons), it used to be a part of all major international exchange networks: Continental (Northern) and Maritime (Southern) “Silk Roads”, Muslim trading network of the Indian Ocean, etc. In this context, today’s role of South Korea as the world’s 12th biggest trading power and a member of the USA-centered world economic system, as well as the policies of “internationalization” pursued by the South Korean regimes throughout the 1990th, seem to be only logical and natural in Korean geopolitical situation. Second, Korea’s northern border with China is a “natural” border – two countries are separated not only by the two rivers, but also by the wide and scarcely populated rugged terrain of dense forests. So, it comes as nothing surprising that, while heavily influenced by China in all aspects, Korea remained ethno-linguistically different – and usually politically independent from the Chinese “mainland”. As heavily loaded with the vocabulary of Chinese provenance as it is, Korean retained its basically Altaic grammar, totally different from that of Chinese. The

2

guaranteed, in fact, not only Chinese supremacy (usually almost undisputed), but also Korean internal autonomy. So, to summarize all important points on Korea's geopolitical location, I want to repeat that Korea, being indisputably an organic part of "China-Korea-Japan" triangle and deeply Sinified country, still was all times both willing and able to preserve its distinctively indigenous (non-Chinese) identity, and has the geographical location favorable for intensive contacts with non-Chinese world as well.

Korea's northern border is mainly with China, but it also has a 16-kilometer common border with Russia alongside the Tumen River. Russia's political presence in Korea's surroundings is incomparably less old than that of China or Japan: Russia forged first contacts with China in the 17th C. and acquired the territories adjacent to Korea ("Maritime Province") only in 1860. Still, Russia is the only non-East Asian country directly bordering on Korea, and the degree of its influence on Korea should not be overlooked. North Korea's very existence and South Korea's leftist movements of recent times are the most visible evidences of Russian presence in the Peninsula: but manifold Russian influences can be discovered in South Korean literature and art as well. Economically, South Korea's relationships with Russia are still insignificant, mainly due to the deep crisis and disorder in Russia. But in case the situation in Russia will normalize and Korea will unify, Korean Peninsula will swiftly become a "bridge" between Japan's capital/technology and Russia's resources.

So much for the advantages and disadvantages of Korea's geographical position. Now, let's turn our look to the Peninsula's geological and climatic settings. It is easily noticeable that the T'aebaek Mountain Range which originates in the mountainous massifs on the Chinese-Korean border and then runs to the south paralleling the east coast constitutes the natural "backbone" of the Peninsula and drainage divide between its eastern and western parts. Beautiful and gorgeous as it is, it also gravely hampers the communications between the two parts of the country. Its southernmost part, the Sobaek Range, constitutes the natural divide between the two most important regions of the southern Korea, Honam (Ch'olla Provinces) and Y'ongnam (Ky'ongsang Provinces). It used to greatly hinder the exchanges between the two regions in the traditional times, thus somehow contributing to the development of the famed particularist sentiments in both Honam and Y'ongnam which are widely utilized in modern South Korean politics. On the whole, the mountains and hills (mostly the offshoots of the great T'aebaek Range) account for the astounding 70 % of all Korean territory leaving only around 30 % of the land for housing and farming. Of course, Korea has exceptionally fertile alluvial soils in the valleys of its bigger rivers – typical example is the Han River valley where the modern South Korean capital stays – but those fertile plots simply could not satisfied the needs of the disproportionately big populace. In the flatland regions out of the immediate proximity to the river basins, soils are mostly strongly leached, with large granite content and low humus levels, so their fertility level is low without irrigation and artificial fertilizing. In highlands, podzol (ash-gray forest) soils unsuitable to the rice cultivation, dominate. Today South Korea's population density rate is approximately 450 people for 1 sq. km., but, the mountainous areas excluded, the ratio of the people to arable land would be much higher. So, by virtue (or, rather, demerit) of its geological settings, Korea is a country deeply partitioned into the multitude of small and chronically overpopulated arable (but not always fertile) valleys locked by the mighty and vast mountainous ranges and thus blocked from the frequent mutual communication, given the technical level of the pre-modern period. One, social, consequence of this kind of natural disposition is the permanent thread of the "land hunger" – and, of course, literal hunger in case of the harvest failure – heavily aggravated also by the vast disparities in the land holding in traditional period. Fatal shortage of land – of course, combined with the chronic absence of social justice – built a tradition of tenants' discontent and unrest, as well as that of emigration abroad for Korea. In this context, the number of ethnic

the North Korea (built essentially on the tradition of popular anti-elite revolts of landless peasants), should not surprise an observer.

In the predominantly rural country where the size of arable land and its fertility are severely limited by the Nature, the only way to solve the permanent eco-demographical crisis other than emigration (or mass hunger death of the "excess" population) was the technical improvement of the agriculture, i.e., first and foremost, irrigation. The acute need for the artificial management of hydraulic resources was also exacerbated by such peculiar feature of Korea's monsoon climate as the heavy concentration of rainfall in summer rainy season. Rainy season precipitation constitutes more than a half of the annual average, while winter rainfall/snowfall amount is only 10%. The rivers, usually too shallow to provide enough water to wet the paddy fields during the sowing season, are so swollen by the torrential rainstorms of June-July that riverbank villages and fields unprotected by the dams are sure to be severely damaged. In such circumstances, the artificial hydraulic management - building and constant maintenance of dikes, reservoirs, and dams - is more of necessity than luxury, and it comes as no surprise that from the times of state formation on the Peninsula (4-6th C.) those tasks were usually undertaken by the state - the strongest social organism of unrivaled capabilities. The maintenance of hydraulic order used to be as important state function in traditional Korea as the preservation of normal socio-political order. It is also hardly surprising that, for building and maintaining the huge dams and artificial lakes, the state had to mobilize the local commoners (as it used to be in the case of war), and they did not have any grounds to protest this sort of corvée labor, for it was benefiting them ultimately. In this way, the tradition of state intervention into economy, as well as the habit of popular acceptance of state-led mobilizations for presumably "common good" causes, was formed. So, when today South Korean state administers the restructuring of conglomerates or banks (even after acknowledging that too much of state intervention in past was the root cause of the economic troubles), or North Korean state mobilizes annually students of almost all levels for "helping the countryside with the sowing/harvest" (i.e. for unpaid collective labor in the state farms), we should see this as continuation - however anachronistic in its appearance - of time-honored traditions and customs conditioned by the natural settings of the country.

So, to summarize our observations on Korea's natural disposition, we should say, that however advantageously the Peninsula is located for the exchanges with both the Continent (formerly China only, now China and Russia) and the Maritime world (formerly Japan only, now the USA-centered world system as a whole), it is bound to face the permanent eco-demographical crisis due to the traditionally unfavorable ratio of the populace to the size of arable land. In traditional society where the options of industrialization were hardly imaginable the only way to resolve this crisis was through state-led agro-technical development (primarily in the form of state-organized irrigation). This contributed to making Korea a heavily etatist society where the state used to be perceived as "the savior" and "benefactor" of the ruled, and duties of the subject to the state usually were put ahead his/her personal rights and needs. Korean tendency to emphasize the state's duty and trust its ability to "feed the multitudes" of the populace played essentially positive role in building the popular consensus over the issue of state-led economic development in South Korea in the past, but it also seriously hampers the introduction of knowledge-based postindustrial free market economy now.

Now, I want to add several remarks on the main physico-geographical and climatic zones the country is divided into with its mighty mountainous ranges. Also it is useful to familiarize ourselves with the basics of Korea's administrative geography on this occasion. The North of Korea, generally speaking, is divided by the T'aeback Range into the North-Western and North-Eastern parts. In the North-West, the flatlands dominate, the

4

than 2,500 years – even now the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, is situated there. For today, the main North-Western arable river valley (that of Taedong River, with its tributaries), totaling appr. 1000 sq. km. of fertile soil, basically feeds the rest of the country with rice, maize, and vegetables. The region has large deposits of coal and high-grade iron ore, the former being especially needed by the North Korea's dominating military industry. The average temperature there is around 8 C., the climate, with relatively long and harsh winter, being something of a mixture between Siberian cold and North-East Asia moderate monsoon zone. Administratively, the North-Western region consists of P'yongan and Hwanghae Provinces, and nicknamed "the granary of the country". In old times, the assignment to Pyongyang district in the Taedong valley was considered a great advancement for a magistrate, for in this fertile and relatively affluent region there were so many opportunities to squeeze money from the richer people and to enrich oneself. At the same, this district is also known as the center of modern Korea's Christianity, for the richer farmers, small and medium landlords and traders of this burgeoning region were the first to adopt modern Western forms of life, as soon as the opportunity was offered.

Compared to the resplendence of the North-Western economy, the North-East looks quite poor. It does not possess much of the fertile land, for the mountains there often drop abruptly to the sea (Sea of Japan). The climate there, with the temperatures averaging 6 C., is the harshest in the country, sometimes strongly resembling that of neighboring Siberia (the thermometer's mercury drops to -20-25 regularly in winter, the lowest recorded temperature being -43 C. in mountains, and the weather is extremely windy). It is no accident that relatively poor elites of this area were usually alienated from the state power; even if an ambitious native of this place could establish a dynasty or establish his standing serving new dynasty (that is what happened in 1392, when the family hailing from the North-East founded new Chosŏn Dynasty, or after 1945, when North-Eastern natives, as Kim Il-sung guerrilla comrades, came to power en masse), they never could develop their power base in this poor area. This constant state of socio-politic frustration – along with acute "land-hunger" – explains to some degree the fact that the North-Eastern people constituted the backbone of the groups fleeing to Russian maritime Province after 1860. Still, the region and surrounding mountains have probably the richest magnesite (magnesium carbonate) deposits in the world and also reach in gold. Administratively, that is Hamgyŏng Province.

To the south of the hills and flatlands of Hwanghae Province, lays the valley of Han River, traditional center of economical and social life on the Peninsula from the time immemorial. The region was populated already in the Early Neolithic Age (5000 years before Christian era). Relatively good soils and mild climate, resulting in high fertility, together with its central location in the middle of the Peninsula, all made the region strategically important, hotly contested place even in the time of early kingdoms (3-5th C. A.D.). So, it is no wonder that here was situated the capital city of Chosŏn Kingdom (1392-1910) and Japanese colony of Chosen (1910-1945), as well as today's South Korea's capital, Seoul (which means plainly "capital city" in Korean). The region – now main industrial, scientific, and administrative center of South Korea – is even more overpopulated and over-polluted that the rest of the country, with more than 20 million people crowded in the area of roughly 10,000 sq. km (large part of this area consists of the hills unsuitable for settlement). With Kimp'o International Airport and Inch'ŏn Sea Port (the Yellow Sea), the region is the gateway to the country for the foreigners; as the most developed and well-connected part of the land, it is also the home to the most of its non-Korean populace, highly visible in uniquely homogeneous Korea (traditional Chinese minority in Inch'ŏn, Asian workers in industrial suburbs of Seoul, American military camps, etc.). Administratively, the central region is known as Kyŏnggi ("Capital") Province.

3

Kūm (in the north) and Yōng (in the south), falling into the Yellow Sea. Both of them were homes to the agriculture-based traditional policies in the formative period of Korean history (1-5th C.), but the latter is especially famed for its warm and humid climate (annual average is 11-13 C., normal summer temperatures are in the range of 30 C., and winter temperatures are usually 0-2 C.) and fertile soil. Home to mighty and refined landlords in traditional times, the region (especially the extreme south-west of Korea) was strongly disadvantaged politically in modern period, for the dictatorial ruling elites of South Korea before 1990th were hailing mostly from the rival South-East (Yōngnam region), and very much disliked the South-West as the home land of the famed anti-governmental dissidents (today's President Kim Daejung is among them). As a result, the area remained mainly agricultural, with poor infrastructure and little industry, many young people being forced to migrate to Seoul to work as manual laborers there. Resulting discontent and permanent social tension is one of the worst problems inherited by the Kim Daejung government from its predecessors. Administratively, the northern part of the region (highland and a part of Kūm River valley) is Ch'ungch'ōng Province, and the southernmost part of Korea is comprised by Chōlla Province (Honam).

Honam's more successful traditional rival to the other side of Sobaek Range, Kyōngsang Province in the south-eastern part of the Peninsula, is mostly mountainous area with only one big river (Naktong) making more fertile the small plots of flatland around it. It is nothing strange, consequently, that, unlike Honam landlords, the south-eastern elites preferred traditionally pursuing a bureaucratic career in Seoul to running their plantation themselves, thus establishing the tradition of bureaucratic success for the natives of the region, which is alive even in our days. Still, economically, the predominance of Kyōngsang Province – and consequent decline of Honam – dates back mostly to the days of Japanese colonialism, when the port of Pusan (previously a small township) – an ideal point for communicating with Japan – was industrially developed, and Seoul-Pusan railway was laid giving great stimulus to the development of the whole area. The trend set in motion by the Japanese continued after the Liberation, Pusan now being a burgeoning conurbation of 4 mln., second only to Seoul in importance. Still, with the decline of Kyōngsang-based military ruling elites and advent of formal democracy in the 1990th, the disparity between Kyōngsang and Honam is being gradually righted.

Two remaining areas of the country are better known for their beautiful landscapes that for their commercial or bureaucratic prowess. Kangwōn, mountainous province to the north from Kyōngsang, was once a coal-mining district, but now pins most hopes on the development of tourism. Subtropical Cheju Island to the south of the Peninsula – also a separate province administratively – is a normal destination for honeymoon couples and is developing itself now into an international tourist attraction.

Summarizing all said now about Korea's regions, I should conclude that Korea – extremely small as it is – is a rare example of regional diversity, natives of, say, Hamgyōng and Chōlla Provinces speaking each a different dialect and having distinctive regional identity. In this sense traditional Korea – where the communications were badly developed and T'aebaek or Sobaek Ranges constituted serious hindrances for travelers – was a real museum of the multitude of local cultures, every small valley and district having the linguistic peculiarities, food culture, preferred clothes and favorite annual customs and rites of its own. Culturally, traditional society exhibited rare pluralism – of course, tempered with the predominance of state-centered bureaucratic ideology. Now, when most of the economical and cultural life is concentrated in giant conurbations of Seoul and Pusan, much of this “traditional pluralism” is gone – fashions, customs, modes of life and thinking are much more uniform than before, also very much due to the unique ethnic homogeneity of the country. So, we have the case of economical and social progress at the expense of much of the cultural diversity