

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

A CAPITAL FOR THE AGES

The mighty walls of Korea's modern capital rose in 1394, when King Taejo, founder of the Joseon dynasty, settled the government seat in the valley of Hanyang – later to become Seoul. Nature decreed its locale: the Han River supplied Yin force and access to the sea, and the Bukhan mountain range supplied Yang energy and protection from the north.

At the new city's centre, ensconced by mountains, King Taejo built Gyeongbokgung, the Palace of Shining Happiness. The social geography of the Korean capital has changed little over the past 600 years. The seat of power – Cheongwadae (the Blue House) – rests behind Gyeongbokgung, with Seoul's central axis (now Sejongno) spread before it. Pedestrians still teem down Jongno (Bell St), but the great bronze bell, once struck each morning and evening to signal the opening and closing of the city's gates, is only rung to welcome the new year.

Korea had been unified just prior to Joseon, in AD 918 with the start of the Goryeo dynasty (from which we get the name 'Korea'). The unification would persevere – with Seoul at the centre – until the country's division following WWII, solidified by the Korean War.

INVASION AND CONQUEST

Since recorded time, external forces have cast designs upon Korea, a small peninsula among giants – Japan to the east, China and Mongolia to the west. Korea has long been caught in the middle of competing powers, with Seoul at the centre of the maelstrom. Brutal invasions – many lasting and painful – comprise the fabric of Korean history.

None weighs as heavily on the Korean psyche as the annexation by Japan just after the turn of the 20th century. Japan long had its sights on the strategic peninsula, and sought to emulate the Western powers' 'opening up' of Asian nations – a fate that had befallen Japan just decades prior. So when a large-scale peasant rebellion raged uncontrollably in Korea in 1894, Japan stepped in to 'help'. One year later, Japanese assassins would fatally stab Queen Min; King Gojong would abdicate in 1907; and in 1910 the cession would be complete.

This period marked the subjugation, and attempted eradication, of Korean identity. Locals were made to take Japanese names and were forbidden to speak their national tongue. As Japan exploited Korea's resources, only 20% of Koreans were able to even start elementary school. Though some Koreans collaborated with their colonial rulers and reaped great profit, most were unable to rise above second-class citizenship in their own land. Japanese views of this period run the spectrum, with the more politically liberal expressing regret and the more conservative pointing only to Japan's hand in Korea's modernisation – the same line among some in Korea, as well. However, for the majority of Koreans, after centuries of staving off foreign designs on their small tract of earth, this period was the ultimate humiliation.

It thus comes as no surprise that the (wary) US tolerance of the dictatorial governments that ruled the South following the Korean War yielded feelings of resentment towards the USA.

AD 1394

King Taejo employs geomancy, or *feng shui* (*pungsu* in Korean) to select Hanyang (Seoul) as the capital of the new kingdom of Joseon.

1592

Seoul falls to Japan during the Imjin War. Korean forces use metal-covered 'turtle boats' to win several decisive naval battles in the eventually successful quest to expel the invaders.

1910

After gradually increasing its power and forcing King Gojong to abdicate to the Russian legation three years prior, Japan annexes Korea, beginning 35 years of colonial rule.

Some of this resentment remains, especially among college students – it was not the first time that Koreans have felt a foreign power trying to call the shots.

WHEN BROTHER FOUGHT BROTHER

While external powers continued to knock on Korea's door, there was no shortage of internal conflict, either. The Three Kingdoms period, preceding the Goryeo dynasty, was marked by continual feuds, and peasant rebellions were commonplace throughout the Joseon era.

The Korean War, while unique to recent historical memory, represents another such conflict along internally-riven lines – for the more agrarian South had always resented the wealthier North, and vice versa.

When the nation was at last returned to Korea with the Allied victory in 1945, the decision to divide the country into protectorates, the north overseen by the USSR and the south by the US, soon led to rival republics. On 25 June 1950, under the cover of night, North Korea marched over the mountains that rim Seoul, marking the start of the brutal civil war.

Seoul's sudden fall to the North caught the populace by surprise; the government of President Syngman Rhee fled southward, destroying the only Han River highway bridge and abandoning the remaining population to face the communists. During their 90-day occupation of the city, North Korea arrested and shot many who had supported the Rhee government.

In September 1950, UN forces led by US and South Korean troops mounted a counterattack. After an amphibious landing at Incheon, they fought their way back into Seoul. During a series of bloody battles, whole districts of the capital were bombed

and burned in the effort to dislodge Kim II Sung's Korean People's Army. When at last the UN forces succeeded in reclaiming the city, much of it lay in smouldering ruins.

Later that year, as UN forces pushed northward, the Chinese Army entered the war on the North Korean side and pushed back down into Seoul. This time the invaders found a nearly empty city. Even after the UN regained control in March 1951, only a fraction of Seoul's population returned during the two years of war that raged along the battlefield until the armistice in July 1953. Instead, they holed up in rural villages and miserable camps, slowly trickling back into the shattered capital that was once their home. Most would never hear from their northern relatives again, whether living or lost to the war.

top picks

BOOKS ON SEOUL

- *The Dawn of Modern Korea* by Andrew Lankov – A fascinating, accessible look at early-20th-century Seoul and the cultural and social impacts of Westernisation as King Gojong tried to modernise his tradition-bound hermit kingdom.
- *Korea's Place in the Sun* by Bruce Cumings – This (somewhat Leftist) look at modern Korea tackles the whole country's history, but most of the action takes place in the capital.
- *Who Ate Up the Singa?* by Pak Wan-so – The famed writer's autobiography, recounting her childhood in Seoul under Japanese rule.
- *A Single Spark* – The collected diary writings of Chun Tae-il, the father of Seoul's 1970s labour rights movement. Chun immolated himself in a final act of protest.
- *Korea Bug* by J Scott Burgeson – A Seoul 'zine turned book, featuring interviews with a fascinating set of Seoul characters, including a shaman, a *gisaeng* (similar to a Japanese geisha), artists and directors.

1945

With Allied victory in WWII, Korea is liberated from Japan and divided into two protectorates – the Soviets handling the North and the US the South.

1948

The Republic of Korea is founded in the southern part of the peninsula, with Seoul designated the capital city. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) is also founded.

1950–53

Using Soviet tanks and artillery, North Korea stages a surprise invasion, triggering the Korean War. Only an armistice – still in place – brings a tenuous peace.