INTRODUCTION

Korea: Land and People

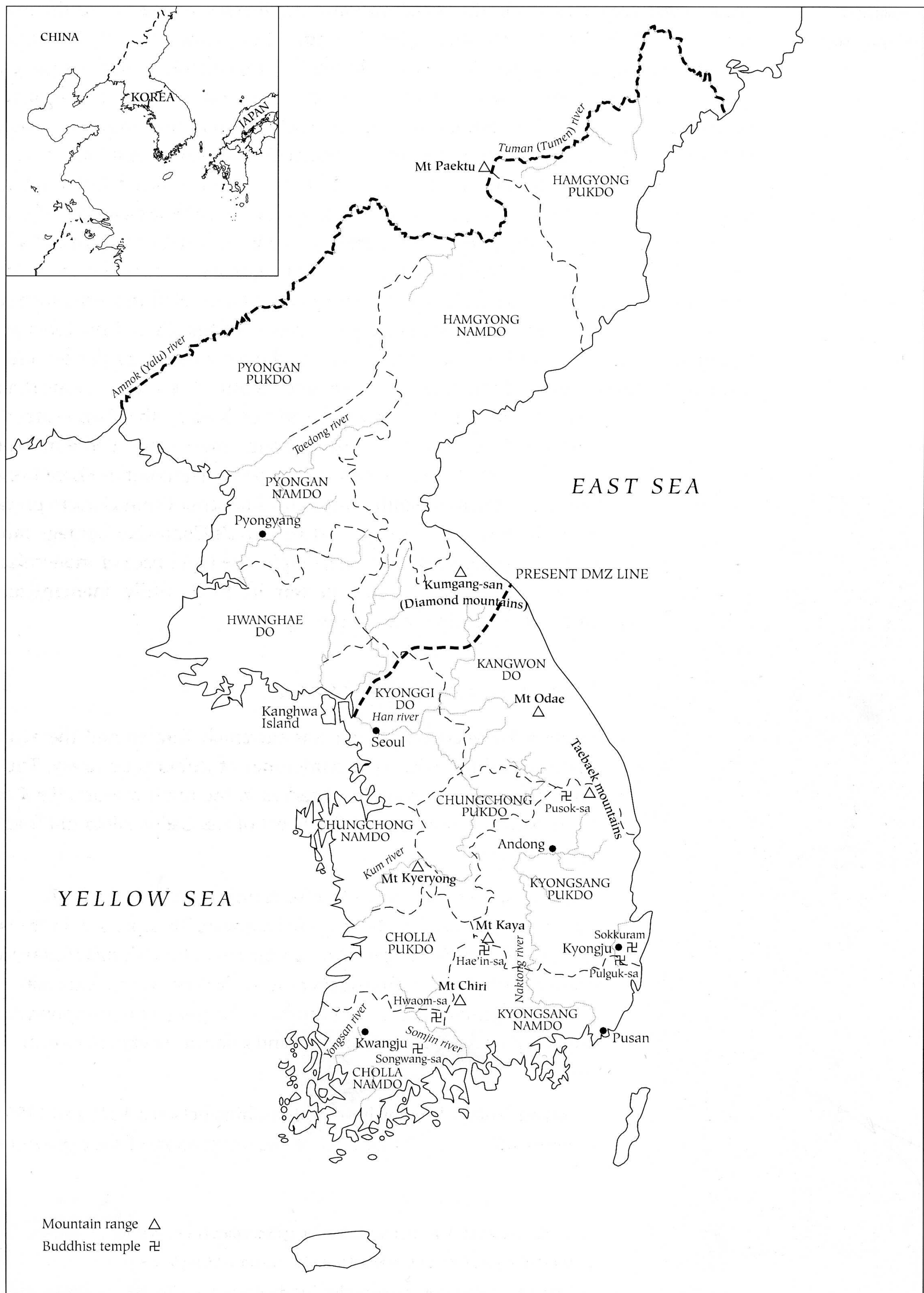
The Korean peninsula occupies a pivotal position in East Asia, geographically, politically and culturally. It is attached to the continent of Asia at the point where China meets Russia, and stretches south for some 1000 km (620 miles), reaching towards the Japanese islands. Perhaps because of its location between these three important powers, its history has been dominated by invasions, from China, Mongolia and Japan. However, Korea has remained a remarkably homogenous nation of people who have continued to live in the same geographical area, remaining relatively unaffected by such invasions or by immigration (map 1, p. 10).

The land of Korea, over 70 per cent of which is formed of mountains, possesses a unique and relatively unknown beauty. The Taebaek mountain range forms a spine down the long eastern coast of the peninsula, rising as high as 1571 m (5152 ft), while the lower west coast is characterized by many bays and small peninsulas. The contrast between the two coastlines is paralleled by that between the mountains and the rice-paddy valleys (fig. 1). Sometimes likened to the outline of a rabbit or a tiger, the Korean peninsula is about the same size as mainland Britain. Its northern frontier with China is formed by the Amnok and Tuman rivers, which rise on the slopes of Mt Paektu, 2744m (9000 ft) high (pp. 4–5), while the distance south across the sea to Japan is only 206 km (128 miles).

The Korean climate consists of a very cold winter and a very hot summer, with relatively short spring and autumn seasons. The extreme cold of Korean winters was remarked upon by the Jesuit priest, Gregorio de Cespedes, who went to Korea with the Japanese invasion in the late sixteenth century. He noted in the winter of 1594–5: 'The cold in Korea is very severe and without comparison with that of Japan. All day long my limbs are half benumbed and in the morning I can hardly move my hands to say mass.'[1] The measurement of rain in Korea began as early as 1442 under King Sejong and precipitation data are available from that date until the present day, interrupted only by the period during and after the Japanese and Manchu invasions. Although reached by monsoons, Korea has no active volcanoes and experiences very few earthquakes.

Part of the Altaic race, the Koreans are of the Tungusic group of Manchuria and Siberia. In common with Mongolian and Turkic, the Korean spoken language belongs to the Tungusic branch of the Altaic language group. Korean also displays some similarities with Japanese, and both languages employ a considerable proportion of loan words from Chinese, the dominant language and script of the area. In fact, Chinese was used as the written word in Korea until Korean songs started to be written down in the sixth century using Chinese characters as sounds only (known as the Idu system). Although a foreign language to the mass of Koreans, written

1. The contrast between mountains and fertile rice-paddy valleys is an enduring feature of the Korean landscape.


CHINA
KOREA
JAPAN
Tuman (Tumen) river
Mt Paektu
HAMGYONG PUKDO
HAMGYONG NAMDO
Amnok (Yalu) river
PYONGAN PUKDO
Taedong river
PYONGAN NAMDO
EAST SEA
Pyongyang
Kumgang-san
(Diamond mountains)
PRESENT DMZ LINE
HWANGHAE DO
KANGWON DO
KYONGGI DO
Han river
Mt Odae
Kanghwa Island
Seoul
Taeback mountains
CHUNGCHONG PUKDO
Pusok-sa
CHUNGCHONG NAMDO
Andong
Kum river
Mt Kyeryong
KYONGSANG PUKDO
YELLOW SEA
Mt Kaya
CHOLLA PUKDO
Sokkuram
Kyongju
Hae'in-sa
Naktong river
Pulguk-sa
Mt Chiri
Hwaom-sa
KYONGSANG NAMDO
Yongsan river
Somjin river
Kwangju
Pusan
Songwang-sa
CHOLLA NAMDO
Mountain range
Buddhist temple

Map 1. Position of the Korean peninsula within Asia.

Chinese was employed in all official, educational and literary spheres up to the modern period. The Korean script, invented in the fifteenth century, was originally intended as a way of helping ordinary people to read Chinese.[2] A remarkably logical and scientific system of twenty-eight (now twenty-four) graphic signs representing consonants and vowels, *han'gul* was at first resisted by Confucian scholars and not until the eighteenth century did it begin to flourish in the form of vernacular literature. Opinions are divided currently about the virtues of using a han'gul-only script or a mixed Chinese-han'gul script where the more complicated concepts are written with Chinese characters (fig. 2).

The Altaic origins of the Korean people are reflected in their native religion, which was a kind of shamanism similar to that practised in Siberia. It shared as well some animistic features with Japanese Shinto, such as worshipping gods of natural phenomena such as the sun, moon and mountains. The antler-like gold crowns of the Three Kingdoms period (*c.* fifth–sixth centuries) in Korea (see fig. 33) recall Siberian antler head-dresses and suggest that the Korean kings of that time may have been identified as a type of state shaman. With the adoption of Buddhism from China by the sixth century and later Confucianism, shamanism became more associated with women and the lower classes.[3] Buddhism reached a highpoint in Korea from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries, while strict Confucianism prevailed from the fifteenth century. Modern Korea's Confucian heritage can still be seen in many aspects of life, despite the rapid pace of modernization since the end of the Korean war in 1953, while shamanism and Buddhism are still practised (see fig. 78).[4]

2. The Korean script, *han'gul*, invented in the 15th century, is a source of great national pride. Here the original text of the *Hunmin Chong'um* is copied by the modern master calligrapher Soh Hwi-hwan, 1995. Ht: 1 m.

Western knowledge of Korea

Western knowledge of Korea was extremely limited and the accounts that reached the West were sometimes of dubious accuracy. The first inklings arrived through Arab traders in the ninth century. Ibn Khordhbeh, who was employed at the Court of the Caliph Motamid from 870 to 892, wrote:

> What lies on the other side of China is unknown land. But high mountains rise up densely across from Kantu. These lie over in the land of Sila, which is rich in gold. Mohammedans who visit this country are often persuaded by its fine qualities to settle down there. Ghorraib [probably ginseng], kino resin [probably lacquer], aloe, camphor, nails, saddles, porcelain, atlas, cinnamon and galanga are exported from there.[5]

Marco Polo, who may have visited China between 1271 and 1295, also mentions Korea in the context of the annexation of four provinces by

China under Kublai Khan. But it was not until Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592 that news of Korea reached the West, through Jesuit missionaries to Japan and China, such as Matteo Ricci. On European maps of this period, Korea is sometimes shown as an island and sometimes as a peninsula. It appears correctly on the atlas of the Jesuit M. Martini, published in 1653, together with a written geographical outline.[6] However, it is the account of the Dutchman Hendrik Hamel, whose ship *Sparrow Hawk* was stranded on the island of Cheju, south of the Korean peninsula, in the same year and who lived for thirteen years in captivity in Korea, that constitutes the first Western eye-witness report of Korea. The next one was not to appear for another 250 years, because until 1880 foreigners were forbidden, on pain of death, to set foot in the country. It was this exclusion policy that led to Korea's being known in the West as the 'Hermit Kingdom'.

Hamel's *Description of the Kingdom of Corea* (1668) (fig. 3) was a fairly objective account of Korea at a time when it was nearing the cultural highpoint of the eighteenth century. Hamel was impressed at the Korean respect for education: 'The Nobility, and all Free-men in general, take great care of the Education of their children, and put them very young to learn to read and write, to which that Nation is much addicted.'[7] This could be true today and is an accurate reflection of the Confucian literati preoccupation with the written word. Hamel described the difference between the houses of the nobility and those of the poor and the fact that the right to a tiled roof was limited to the nobility, with the majority using thatch. He also said:

> Houses are built with Wooden Posts or Pillars, with the Interval betwixt them fill'd up with Stone up to the first Story, the rest of the Structure is all Wood daubed without and cover'd on the inside with Whitepaper glew'd on. The floors are all vaulted, and in Winter they make a fire underneath, so that they are always as warm as a Stove. The floor is covered with Oil'd Paper.[8]

This is a good observation of a traditional Korean house with *ondol* heating system.

The opening of Korea to the West followed the Treaty of Kanghwa, signed with the Japanese in 1876. This was Korea's first modern treaty, signed under foreign pressure. It was unequal and paved the way for the Korean-American Treaty in 1882 and subsequent treaties with Britain, Germany, Italy, Russia, France and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Korean-French Treaty contained a clause permitting the propagation of Christianity in Korea and it was this that led to an influx of Western missionaries, some of whom were to write descriptive books about life in Korea. The opening also led to the establishment of Chemulpo (Inchon), west of the capital Seoul, as a treaty port and to the arrival of consular and customs officials, who also produced accounts of Korea. A large number of travel accounts were written after 1880, many of which were superficial and inaccurate. The volume of writing is borne out by the fact that Horace Underwood, one of the earliest missionaries in Korea, lists in his bibliography 152 publications on Korea in Western languages for the period 1595–1880 as opposed to 2730 for the period 1881–1931.[9]

One of the first comprehensive works on the history and ethnology of Korea, by W.E. Griffis, was written around 1880 while he was working in Tokyo and had never actually set foot in Korea. It was totally based on Japanese sources.[10] The eye-witness accounts can be divided into three categories: those written by missionaries, such as Horace Underwood, James Gale, Horace Allen, Homer Hulbert and Lilias Underwood;[11] those written by

poſant, à peine d'amende, & autres peines y portées, ainſi qu'il eſt plus amplement porté audit Privilege.

Ledit Iolly a fait part de ſondit Privilege à Simon Benard, pour en joüyr ſuivant l'accord fait entr'eux.

Regiſtré ſur le Livre de la Communauté, ſuivant l'Arreſt de Parlement du 8. Octobre 1653. *Signé*, ANDRE SOUBRON, *Syndic.*

RELA

1

RELATION
DU
NAUFRAGE
D'UN VAISSEAU HOLANDOIS,
Sur la Coſte de l'Iſle de Quelpaerts:

AVEC LA DESCRIPTION du Royaume de Corée.

Nous partîmes du Texel ſur le ſoir du 10. de Janvier de l'année 1653. avec un fort bon vent, & apres avoir eſſuyé beaucoup de tempeſtes & de mauvais temps, nous moüillâmes le 1. Juin à la rade de Batavie. Comme nous nous fûmes rafraîchis là pen-

Ianvier 1653.

Iuin.

A

3. Frontispiece of the 1670 French edition of the Dutchman Hendrik Hamel's account of his shipwreck off Korea in 1653. Quelpart was the old Western name for Cheju island. 17.3 × 15.4 cm.

diplomats or officials, such as W.R. Carles and W.G. Aston;[12] and those written by independent travellers. Of the latter category, Isabella Bird Bishop's *Korea and Her Neighbours* (1898) has become a classic of its type and, although she was not a true anthropologist, her book comes nearer to an anthropological study than any other. She made four trips to Korea between 1894 and 1897 and described the political events of this unsettled period as well as discussing shamanism in some depth and describing life amongst the Buddhist monks of Kumgangsan.[13] William Franklin Sands was one of the most 'integrated' of the Westerners in Korea at that time. An American diplomat, he later became an independent advisor to King Kojong and wrote *Undiplomatic Memories*.[14] Unusually for a foreigner, he was right in the thick of events both amongst the diplomats and at Court. He also understood the rules of a highly stratified society, reflected in its language:

> Each grade in Korean society is indicated by the verbal forms used in conversation. You change your verbal endings according to the social position of the person with whom you are speaking, and it is very important to give exactly the right shade. If you miss it, either for a degree too high or a degree too low, you brand yourself as being unused to Court life, a rustic and not a man of the world.[15]

Subjects such as religion and folklore could lead foreigners to misinterpretations of what they saw, especially in long, elaborate rituals. They were also, on the whole, predisposed to disapprove of non-Christian beliefs as superstitions. They tended to be at their most disparaging when talking of religion. Inaccuracies also arose from straightforward ignorance, reflecting the lack of Western scholars of Korea at that time. For instance, Carles accurately described Bronze Age dolmens (see fig. 13), but claimed that 'though it must have cost immense labour to place these stones in position, no legend was current to account for their existence, except one which connected them with the Japanese invasion at the end of the sixteenth century, when invaders were said to have erected them to suppress the influences of the earth.'[16] Happily, Hulbert, writing in 1906, had a more informed approach: 'I incline strongly to the opinion that they are very ancient graves, in spite of the fact that no bones are found.'[17]

The Korea described by these travellers and residents was a rapidly changing one. The period from the opening to the West in the 1880s until the Japanese occupation in 1910 saw such innovations as the introduction of railways, a postal system, a customs system, Western-style newspapers, including one in English, and Western medicine practised by missionary doctors. The value of the foreigners' accounts lies in the fact that they chronicled a fixed period of time. After 1910, Korea was not as open to the West and was greatly under the influence of Japan, with the result that the study of Korea in Japan far outstripped that in the West. Although they are circumscribed by the prejudices and ignorance of their authors, the eye-witness accounts, together with the valuable prints and photographs which illustrate them (fig. 4), introduced the West to a country of which it was largely ignorant, despite the earlier account by Hamel. Unfortunately, the West became aware of Korea during one of the low points in its cultural history, at the end of a long-declining dynasty. This inevitably affected the Western view of Korea, which was not a very positive one at that moment, with a general perception of Korea as a backward, unmodernized country.

4. *The Scholar*, 1921, colour woodcut by the Scottish artist Elizabeth Keith (1887–1956), who visited Korea in 1919.

Growth of Western knowledge and collecting of Korean art

The general ignorance about Korean art in the late nineteenth century in the West is shown in Stephen Bushell's pronouncement in 1899 in a major work on oriental ceramics, that 'Korea has been thoroughly explored during the last few years and it is now known that no artistic pottery is produced there in the present day, and no indisputable evidence of any skill in former times has been discovered'.[18]

There was actually a scattering of scholars who had a considerable knowledge of Korea at that time, although it tended to be as an offshoot of Japanese studies. The British Foreign Office staffed its Korean consulate-general from its Japanese embassy. W.G. Aston, for example, a Japanologist and Britain's first consul-general in Seoul after diplomatic relations were established in 1883, was also quite an expert on Korea and had published a highly praised article in 1879 in the journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, comparing the Japanese and Korean languages.[19] He also built up a fine library of books on Korea and a collection of Korean ceramics, of which the whereabouts is now unknown, although he donated one vase to the British Museum, its first Korean acquisition, in 1888.

Another scholar of Korean ceramics at this time was William Gowland, ARSM, FCS,