

19: EARLY MODERN KOREA CONVERGES TOWARD THE CHINESE PATTERN¹

a. What evidence is there that late Silla and Koryo Korea were going through and resolving a crisis of civilization? How and why did Korea's crisis and its resolution both resemble and differ from late Heian Japan's?

b. How and why did early Yi Korea's second stage high civilization differ from late Ashikaga Japan's? How and why did mid and late Yi's maturing second stage high civilization differ from Tokugawa Japan's? How did these differences affect Korea's 19th and 20th century history?

The hitherto parallel histories of Japan and Korea began to diverge between late Unified Silla and late Yi times in Korea and from late Heian to Tokugawa times in Japan. The explanation can be summarized simply, though the full explanation is more complex: it is that Japan went through a feudal process, but Korea did not.

The consequences of that difference were profound. In the 1590s, Japan could conquer but was not yet quite powerful enough to permanently occupy Korea. The divergence between the two countries' development continued thereafter and eventually made Japan the more powerful of these two daughter cultures of China when they once again confronted each other directly during the Meiji era.

Japan could go through all the stages of a feudal process because its insular geography kept it isolated from any sustained threats from the mainland. Korea, which also had something like a prefeudal breakdown during Koryo (10th-14th century) times, could not risk going on to feudalization. This was because its peninsular geography could not isolate it from sustained threats from its continental neighbors or even from Japan at the climax of Japan's centralized feudal stage during the 1590s.

The feudal process also encouraged

faster development of Japan's internal markets, so that by Tokugawa times it enjoyed an early industrial economy. Though its state's centralization was delayed, when it finally occurred it was more nearly congruent with the style of Japan's native culture, and hence the state was more powerful than it otherwise would have been.

To protect itself against enemies on its landward side, post-Silla Korea had to remain a close tributary of China. Frequent tribute missions to China brought back enough foreign luxury goods for the *yangban* aristocracy as to discourage the development of internal markets in Korea. Significant internal markets only appeared in Korea by mid-Yi times, at a time when Tokugawa Japan's economy was already early industrial.

The Korean state closely modeled itself on China. This made it less congruent with native Korean political impulses. The resulting conflict between Korean and Chinese patterns kept the Korean state less coherent at each stage of its development than it might otherwise have been.

Material determinists and their academic consensus fellow travelers cannot use the above argument. As far as the overt material determinists are concerned, Korea and Japan were both feudal, as was China. Ideational determinists can notice distinctions between Japan and Korea because their definition of a feudal process fits only Japan, but not either Korea or China during this period.

A. Late Silla and Koryo Korea's Crisis Of Civilization

1. Late Silla enters the crisis

Near the end of the Silla period Korea began to enter into the crisis of its first stage of high civilization.

One of the first clues that this crisis was beginning is provided by the tale of Chang Pogo. Chang, you may recall, was a Korean commoner who joined the Chinese army at the beginning of the 9th century. When mustered out, he used the money he had saved to go into business as an international merchant. Stimulated by competition with other Korean merchants, he gradually built up the biggest fleet in

Northeast Asian waters by specializing in the lucrative carrying trade linking China, Korea and Japan.

Eventually Chang became so rich and hence so powerful (since, using 9th century naval architecture, to have a big merchant fleet was also to have a big navy), that he concluded he deserved to enter his native land's ruling class. He decided, in effect, to buy his way into the bone-ranks by proposing to marry his daughter to the King of Silla. This would, in my jargon, have turned him into a plutocrat and an exceedingly powerful one.

The Silla king at that point needed the revenue such a connection would provide, and so was willing to go along. But the old bone-rank aristocrats could not accept such a dilution of the divine grounding of their authority. Their abiding sin (and virtue) as aristocrats—jealousy of outsiders muscling into the ruling class—obliged them to murder Chang.

That act determined that there was not going to be a plutocratic segment added to the still purely aristocratic Korean ruling class and suggests that the Earthly social order had outgrown the aristocracy's vision of the Heavenly order.

Though the bone-rank aristocrats had solved their immediate problem, they had done so only at the cost of slowly giving up Korea's hitherto dominant role in the international trade of Northeast Asia. Private Chinese maritime merchants, who were, to be sure, growing in number and wealth anyway by late Tang times, began to replace Koreans in the triangular trade between China, Korea and Japan.

The bone-rank aristocracy could not cope as easily with its own meritized fringe as it did with its incipient plutocracy. A small number of lesser members of the bone-ranks tried to rise at court above the ranks their family positions entitled them to by concentrating on a Chinese-style education in the Chinese language.

Some of these sinified lesser aristocrats reinforced that education by accompanying tribute missions to Tang China, and by carrying out Chinese-style bureaucratic tasks in the Silla central government upon their return.

The higher bone-ranks tended to spend most of their time on their own manors. Since the central authority remained important, the lesser men who served it remained important as well.

When the sinified fringe got out of

¹ 1st dr. 11/87; 5th rev. 9/99. By Edward H. Kaplan.

hand, the higher bone-ranks could cut them off at the pockets, by making sure that tax revenues were not forwarded from their estates to the central government. Such tactics at least kept these sinified lesser aristocrats from running away with the central government.

By hunkering down in the provinces the upper bone-ranks were also beginning a kind of progressive localization of power. At first blush, this should look to you, now that you have studied the Japanese feudal process's prefeudal breakdown stage, something like the precursor to a Korean feudal process.

In fact, however, this turned out not to be the case. Korea's crisis of civilization was destined to take a rather different form. Korea weathered its crisis of the first stage of high civilization without going beyond an incipient prefeudal breakdown stage.

2. Wang Kon's Koryo begins to resolve the crisis

One of the more important of the early 10th century meritized aristocrats in the Silla court was Wang Kon. Some of his ancestors on his mother's side had been merchants. However, his mercantile ancestors were not so proud as Chang Pogo was. They did not attempt to go right to the top. They were content to marry into more junior aristocratic families rather than into the royal house itself. Eventually, however, the Wangs made such a connection. Wang Kon married a daughter into the Silla royal house, but only after the status of Silla had much declined during the century after Chang Pogo's misadventure. Also, Wang Kon's ancestors and he himself had finally risked marrying daughters into the high aristocracy to pave the way for the more decisive move.

Wang Kon was always prudent. He made the appropriate compromises with the higher bone-rank aristocrats so that when the right time came he could muscle aside the moribund Silla ruling house with the aristocrats' blessing.

Wang did not become a strong patron of Confucianism, as you might have expected of a meritizing, sinifying junior aristocrat of that time. To do so would have endeared him to his fellow junior meritized aristocrats, but not to the bone-ranks whom Wang had to appease.

Anyway, in China itself, Confucian-

ism had not yet by the 10th century become significantly enough influenced by Buddhism so as to displace that Indian religion even within the ruling classes. The Song Neo-Confucians only began to work out such a synthesis with Buddhism during the 11th and 12th centuries. It was, therefore, perfectly reasonable sinophilic thing to do for Wang Kon to remain an ardent patron of Buddhism, and thereby buy still more acceptance for himself with the old aristocracy.

In self-consciously working out such strategies, Wang was what 17th century Frenchmen would have called a *politique*—a politician. A *politique* would get along by going along with things as they already were, if this would allow him to gain his ends later on. In Wang's case, this would be to gradually displace and then replace the Sillan kings.

Once on the throne, Wang did make some changes. He moved the capital up from the old Silla capital in the southeast at Kyongju all the way up to Kaesong, at the western end of the Han River valley right on the 38th Parallel. This helped begin the process of cutting the central government loose from the old aristocracy by setting up a new base somewhat removed from the old aristocracy's Silla homeland.

The more northerly location of the new capital also helped. Wang began the process, continued under his successors, of moving the northern boundary of the Korean state from the line established by Unified Silla during the 7th century along the Taedong River at the narrow waist of northern Korea much further to the north.

The new Koryo Dynasty gradually campaigned up toward what would eventually be perceived as Korea's "natural" borders, the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Wang and his successors were, however, too shrewd to expand territorially too far, too fast.

During his own lifetime, Wang Kon was content to establish the Wangs as the new ruling family. Since his family was by then at least related by marriage to the old royal house, the bone-rank aristocrats could be kept from feeling that too drastic a change had occurred.

Wang's new dynasty adopted the state name of Koryo, echoing the name of ancient Korean Three Kingdoms era Koguryo, which had ruled in the north.

Koryo had replaced Silla in Korea, the new rulers implied, just as Song had re-

placed Tang in China. The Wangs were careful to remain loyal to the new Song tributary overlord, or at least as loyal as seemed prudent at any given time.

3. Koryo continues the transition

Wang Kon's successors carefully kept up the tribute relationship with Song. As Song Neo-Confucians crystallized out various permutations of a syncretism between Buddhism and Confucianism during the 11th and 12th centuries, Koryo imported their books along with the other gifts received by their tribute missions.

They also imported the institution of private schools from Song China, and linked them to an official examination system. However, Koryo's examinations more nearly resembled the old Tang aristocrat-dominated exams than the new and more meritocratic Song system. The Song system came close to allowing virtually anyone in China (except the son of a slave or a member of the disreputable classes) to sit for the examinations. The old Tang system initially allowed only aristocrats to do so. The Koryo exam system had to be more like the latter if the aristocracy's prerogatives were to be preserved.

Still, even these modest innovations were enough to gradually fade into irrelevance the ancient prerogatives of the bone-rank aristocracy.

The very label bone-rank gradually disappears from the written sources in the course of Koryo times, though many of the ancient bone-rank families remained important. Even these, however, began to use a new label to classify themselves—*yangban*—a Sino-Korean word that literally means the "two categories." These two categories were the basic functional divisions of any meritocracy—the civilian and military categories of official. This linguistic change suggests that the old aristocracy was undergoing at least partial meritization.

This meritization of its aristocracy, and the Neo-Confucian vision of Heaven it rested upon, allowed Koryo Korea to begin to transcend its crisis of civilization, but in a conservative, gradual fashion. The ruling class was slowly internalizing a fancy new version of Confucianism that allowed them to become double-minded—Confucian now as well as Buddhist—by the end of Koryo times.

This gradual resolution of Korea's

crisis of the first stage of high civilization allowed Koryo and its Yi Dynasty successor to smoothly move into the second stage of high civilization as a centralized daughter culture of China.

B. Korea's Resolution of the Crisis Compared To Japan's

1. The differing external contexts

By mid-Koryo times the trend of events in Korea already looked rather different from the contemporary situation in mid and late Heian Japan. By late Koryo times, the Korean path into the second stage of high civilization was obviously becoming drastically different from that simultaneously being taken by Kamakura Japan.

Korea did not, after all, undergo feudalization as a response to its crisis of civilization, even though during late Silla through mid-Koryo times it at times seemed to be going through something resembling a prefeudal breakdown.

a. Japan's feudal process

You will recall that Japan eventually resolved its crisis of civilization via a dramatic shift away from the Tang Chinese model of centralized bureaucracy and into a post-Heian feudal process from the 12th century on. The narrative framework provided by the medieval chronicles and romances like the *Heike monogatari* vividly describes how power was cruelly snatched from the Heian courtiers by a succession of picturesquely Japanese but nevertheless unquestionably feudal lords. Scheming vassals and subvassals of these lords over time devolved ever smaller bits of sovereignty to ever lower levels of the ruling class.

Japan could risk lapsing into the kind of disunity characteristic of feudalism, I have suggested, because the Japanese were isolated on their tight little islands. They had no enemies to speak of on the islands except for the remnants in the far north of the Emishi barbarians who seem to have merely been pre-civilized versions of the Japanese themselves. The Heian state's proprietors could finish wiping up the floor with the last of the Emishi even while the structure of their Chinese-style

state was going to pieces and they began to drift into the beginning of their feudal process.

The only external threat feudalization stage Kamakura Japan faced, from the Mongols, came too late and was not sustained. Indeed, the two Mongol thrusts probably accelerated the feudalization process as the vassals betrayed the feudal overlords who could not reward them with additional land for their victories over the Mongols.

The Koreans and Japanese both turned inward after the Heian period. When Korea turned its back on Japan, that meant no external threat to the Japanese would come from Koryo Korea to inhibit the onset of feudalization.

b. Korea's lack of a feudal process

But in Korea no episode of isolation lasted long enough for the Koreans to risk instituting a full-blown feudal process. Though they could turn their backs on Japan, they could never ignore the rest of Zone A, or China itself.

This is why there was no feudal process in the aftermath of the fall of Silla. The old bone-rank aristocracy dared not continue to regionalize and localize power via a feudal process, as happened during Kamakura and Ashikaga times in Japan. The Korean aristocrats always had to keep enough of a central government in being to at least try to keep the foreigners out, or to make some sort of deal with them if exclusion was not possible. Koryo's state also had to expand to the north itself in order to forestall foreign moves into that region from the inland parts of Zone A.

The territory between the Taedong and the Yalu and Tumen Rivers had become a no-man's land by the 10th century. The new southern Manchurian state of Bohai was expanding into it. But Bohai was itself being eaten up by the new and powerful state of Liao just beyond it, its center located between the Yalu and Liao Rivers.

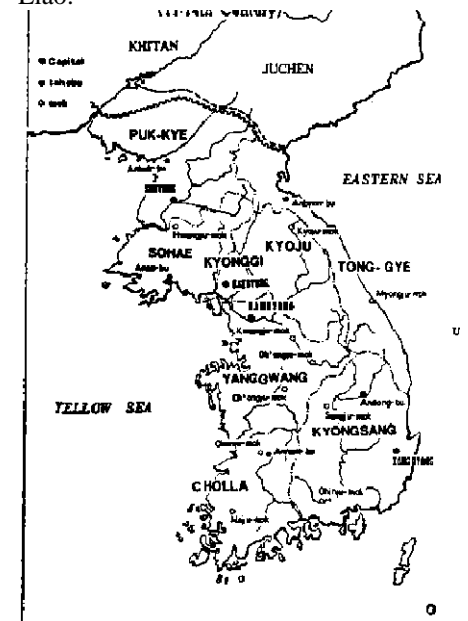
If Koryo had allowed Bohai to move into this no-man's land, Liao would have not been far behind it. This eat-or-be-eaten situation in the Northern Periphery came about during the long period of decay of late Tang's power in subzone A3 and the short period of disunity in zone B during the 10th century that followed Tang's fall.

Koryo had no choice but to hang together in a centralized government effective enough not only to keep hold of the

territory Silla already held, but to swallow up still more land north of the Taedong to the Yalu and Tumen and perhaps beyond.

That is precisely what the early Koryo rulers did. If Liao had not been so strong, Koryo would have expanded further, across the Yalu and west as far at least as the Liao River. That territory had been associated with things Korean since the days of ancient Choson. Liao was, however, too strong for Koryo to advance that far with impunity.

At least, you might think, Korea had finally achieved its "natural" boundaries along the Yalu and Tumen. But of course these boundaries only *seem* natural to us because they are the ones that proved stable thereafter. In a sense, if you will pardon the vulgar pun, it required a series of unnatural acts to achieve and then maintain these supposedly natural frontiers. It would have been just as natural (or unnatural) under other circumstances either to have remained down at the line of the Taedong, or at the other extreme, to have gone beyond the Yalu all the way to the Liao.



Woo-keun Han, *The History of Korea*, p. 184.

These abiding geo-political realities of peninsular Northeast Asia also faced the Americans, the Chinese and their respective northern and southern Korean allies some ten centuries later in 1950.

The Americans outflanked the invading North Korean armies in September 1950 with the amphibious landings at Inchon, near the mouth of the Han River. They then rapidly fought their way up the peninsula from their defensive redoubt in the Pusan perimeter (once comprising the core territory of ancient pre-unified Silla).

By October and November of 1950, the North Korean army had disintegrated, and the Americans were faced with the problem of deciding where to halt their advance north.

Faint-hearts and some mischievous neutrals urged America to stop at the 38th parallel. This would have been absurd. The 38th parallel bisected the Han River system, occupation of *all* of which was necessary to stably control the peninsula.

If, however, the Americans, like ancient Unified Silla, had contented themselves with an advance to the Taedong (still well north of the 38th parallel), Chinese intervention would surely have been avoided. Mao Zedong privately said as much at the time.

By unwittingly imitating medieval Koryo and pressing all the way up to the Yalu, the Americans unwittingly provoked Chinese intervention and a bloody stalemate roughly along the 38th parallel.

In 1950, the “natural” frontiers of Korea and even a single Korean state proved impossible to restore for either the Chinese or American side.

Back in the 10th-13th century, it was also necessary, if Koryo was to compete with the rival Zone A states, for it to keep up an intimate tributary relationship with whoever was strongest in or near China. Even at the beginning of its reign in the 10th century, Song China was essentially confined to the Central Zone. Once Song was pushed into the southern half of Zone B by Jin early in the 12th century, Koryo had also to become tributary to Jin and whatever strong power from the Northern Periphery came to control the northern parts of the Central Zone.

c. unstable tributary politics

Northern Song and early Koryo had to cooperate with each other like a pair of drunks walking down the street. If they had not held each other vertical, they might both have fallen down, or Liao (the bully on the same street) could have more easily knocked them down one at a time. Each needed the other to fend off Liao.

That did not, however, guarantee a permanent balance of power. The Ru-zhens’ Jin Dynasty eventually arose north and east of Liao during the late 11th and early 12th century. By the 1130s Jin swallowed up Liao—i.e. the rest of A3 (up to the Korean border)—and all of sub-zones B1 and B2, and not just subzone B2’s northern fringe, as Liao had done.

Poor Koryo had thereafter to enter into a dual tributary relationship. Its primary tributary overlord became Jin. It retained a sympathetic relationship with Southern Song, the surviving rump of the Song state. However, this relationship was now one more between equals than one of tributary subordination.

But even that new balance of power could not be permanently maintained. During the late 12th and 13th centuries, the Mongols arose in subzone A2. There was no way at all to establish a stable balance of power against them. The Mongols expanded inexorably to swallow all of Zone A and then the whole of the Zones B and C heartland of Chinese power and culture in East Asia.

Even before all of China fell to the Mongols, Koryo faced the overwhelming desire of the Mongols to control Korea to secure their left flank as they expanded south into China. Koryo factionalism was exacerbated by this Mongol challenge.

Late Koryo was torn by factional conflict revolving around the insoluble problem of how to handle the Mongols. No stable dominant coalition could arise on the basis of conflict over foreign policy because it was impossible for either a hawk or dove faction to achieve a stable external balance of power. When the doves were in power, the Mongols expanded. When the hawks were in power, the Mongols also expanded.

And so there could only be an unstable oscillation in power between hawks and doves, each in turn inevitably failing. This could only worsen the domestic issues for factionalism which were intrinsic to Korean political life: the conflict between court and countryside, between Buddhists and Neo-Confucians, and personality based factions of the usual sort of East Asian, family-centered politics.

Korean politics has always tended to be dominated by what diplomatic historians call “the primacy of foreign policy” rather than “the primacy of domestic policy.” Only a stable tributary relationship with either a dominant Zone B or Zone A power would have allowed 13th century Korean politicians to concentrate on domestic issues in their own terms.

That sort of relationship with a government of China would not be possible again until the Ming Dynasty replaced the Mongols’ Yuan Dynasty in control of Zone B in 1368-1402. For the next two centuries, at least, Ming was strong

enough to balance off the various pastoral-nomads of Zone A against each other.

2. Internal aspects of the transition

a. rise and fall of the Ch’oe

There were also internal causes of factionalism that reached beyond domestic politics to the crisis of civilization as to Koryo’s foreign policy dilemma.

Factions continued to arise partly out of the disjunctions between the interests of the regions and those of the central court. This had been the abiding basis for factionalism going back to late Silla.

However, as the imported Neo-Confucian ideas spread more deeply into elite culture, particularly among the court’s lesser aristocrats, quarrels arose at the center between Neo-Confucians and Buddhists, and between the two schools of thought within Neo-Confucianism itself (Zhu Xi’s slightly Buddhist-influenced rationalism and Lu Jiuyuan’s heavily Buddhist-influenced intuitionism).

These bases for factions existed prior to and in addition to the impossible to resolve disjunction between hawks and doves.

Closely linked to the hawk-dove split was an abiding disjunction between civilian and military, as reflected in the new label for the aristocracy, *yangban*, the “two categories.” The military wing of the “two categories” grew ever more powerful as the Koryo state conquered and garrisoned the wild lands of northeastern Korea. In the course of the 12th century this new wing of the military aristocracy grew still larger and more influential as the recently conquered northeastern lands became more settled and productive.

Finally, in 1197, one family of military courtiers, the Ch’oe, originally from the northeast, used the quarrel over how to handle the Mongols as an excuse to take over control of the court.

Except for the foreign policy angle, this was very much like what had happened some thirty years earlier across the Straits of Tsushima, when the Taira provincial military aristocrats from the west of Honshu took control over the court at Heian. In much the same fashion, the Ch’oe from the northeast came to dominate the court at Kaesong. Neither the Ch’oe nor the Taira inaugurated a feudal

process for their respective country. The crucial difference, however, was that there was no subsequent Korean equivalent of the Minamoto defeating the Taira a generation later and *then* inaugurating the feudalization stage.

The Ch'oe were originally and remained hard-liners—hawks if you will—toward the Mongols. When military victories proved elusive, they eventually tried to escape the Mongols by pulling the government out of Kaesong. They made the court take refuge on Kanghwa Island off the west coast of Korea near the mouth of the Han River. Even that move, however, could not keep the Mongols out of Korea. It just kept the court temporarily out of Mongol hands.

Eventually, the Mongols proved to be so strong that they raided into Korea at will and in such force, that by the 1250s the king and the dove faction despaired of the possibility of maintaining any further resistance. The royal family and the doves then joined forces to wipe out the Ch'oe power once and for all so as to free themselves to make a deal with the Mongols.

The equivalent to this in 13th century Japan would have been a renewed alliance between the emperor and the Fujiwara aristocrats to overthrow the Kamakura Shogunate so as to make peace with the Mongols after a successful Mongol invasion in the 1270s or 1280s.

Fortunately for Japan, neither of the Mongol invasions of Japan succeeded. Salt water and distance removed any prospects for these pastoral-nomad invaders expanding into Japanese territory. As a consequence, the histories of Korea and Japan began to drastically diverge.

When Emperor Go-Daigo put together an alliance against Kamakura in the 1330s, the Mongol threat was long gone. All he succeeded in doing was to trip off renewed feudalization as the less powerfully centralized Ashikaga replaced Kamakura.

In Korea, once the Koryo kings were back in nominal control, they accepted tributary status vis à vis the Mongols. That did not help much, since the Mongols continued to increase their exactions from Korea.

They demanded substantial tribute in goods and even in women, believing Korean women to be the prettiest in their domain. Supposedly in reaction to this, at least according to traditional accounts, the Koreans put their women into a far more

secluded position than before, establishing a tradition of female subordination, the vestiges of which still remain visible.

In 1273 the Mongols also confiscated hundreds of Korean ships to launch their first invasion of Japan. That invasion succeeded only in completing the extinction of Korean commercial maritime power when the *kamikaze* (“Divine Wind”)—a timely typhoon—destroyed most of the Korean ships.

As a consequence of the failure of the doves' appeasement policy in Korea, hawk versus dove factionalism within Korean politics continued right into the 14th century. The hawks at court grew stronger again after the Mongols withdrew from China in 1368.

b. rise of Yi Song-gye

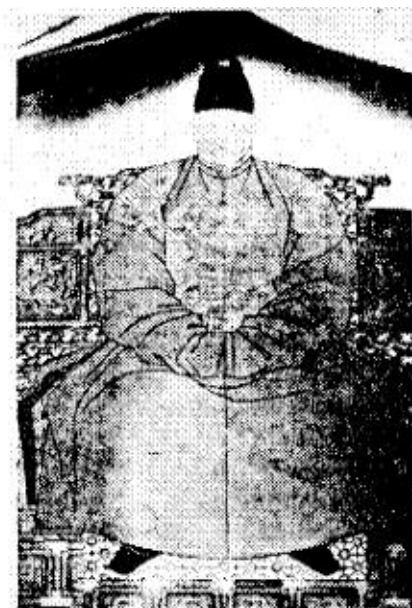
Yi Song-gye, who in the 1380s founded the Yi Dynasty, was (like the Ch'oe) a northeasterner, a military man, and hence a member of the hawk faction. Fortunately, he did not have to test his convictions in battle.

With the Mongols gone, Yi's fellow hawks promptly transferred their hostility to the native Chinese Ming Dynasty. Ming was fighting (ultimately successfully) to expand from its original power center in B4 up into subzones B1 and B2.

Yi Song-gye became dominant at the Korean court by the beginning of the 1380s. He became leader of the hawks by promising to use his military power to march up to the frontier, and kick the Ming Dynasty's friends out of southern Manchuria.

Yi assembled his army, marched up toward the Yalu, but then stopped and reconsidered the matter. Fighting the Ming was problematic at best. Facing down any opposition at court, including that from his fellow hawks, was by comparison a sure thing, since he possessed the biggest army in Korea.

Because he was a prudent politician, Yi turned his army around and marched back to Kaesong. There he wiped up the floor with the doves, faced down his fellow hawks, and proclaimed the Yi Dynasty. Eventually he embraced a tributary relationship with the Ming Dynasty. He also moved the capital a bit further south, to Seoul, right on the Han River, which watered the key strategic fulcrum zone, control of which all but guaranteed him control over the entire peninsula.



Yi Song-gye (1335-1408). (Han, pl. 42.). The founder of the Yi Dynasty. His costume, right up to the Hat he wore for this formal portrait, is characteristic of the Ming Chinese style.

The close connection with Ming China further deepened Yi's attachment to the double-minded Neo-Confucian vision of Heaven. The early Yi monarchs finished the job begun by Koryo of re-presenting that vision of Heaven in the form of a still more elaborate Korean state. At the intellectual and even technological levels, Koryo and early Yi Korea presided over a sophisticated second stage high civilization.

3. Technological-economic aspects of the transition

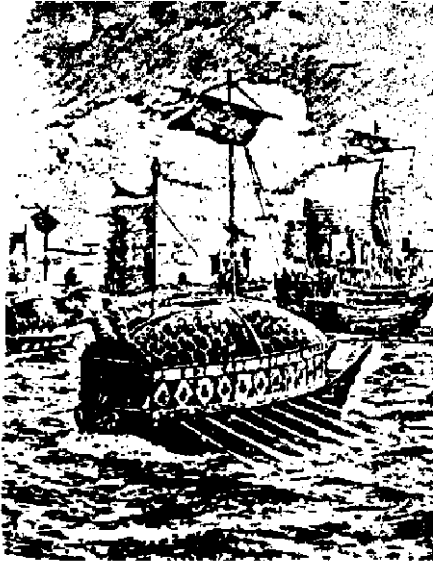
If we look at the evolution of the material aspects of Korea's culture, it is evident that the Koreans were constructing a technologically very elaborate civilization by late Koryo times, but (unlike Japan) one still unaccompanied by very many market exchanges.

Koryo period Korean craftsmen either independently reinvented or drastically improved on China's earlier invention of movable type printing from cast metal types. The state applied this technique to the massive project of printing all the extant Buddhist holy books, which in their original Chinese forms comprised several thousand volumes. Most accounts of the evolution of printing set these Korean innovations above even those of the Song Chinese progenitors of the technique.

The Koreans also improved upon Chinese celadon porcelain—the beautiful gray-green ware with brown speckles and

an elaborate pattern of hairline cracks deliberately built into the glaze just below its surface. Some people say that the Korean celadon of Koryo times is better stuff than the contemporary Song Chinese originators of celadon.

During the Koryo era Koreans also improved the formulation of gunpowder and devised fancier cannon than those available to the Song and Yuan Chinese, and perhaps did so a bit sooner.



Iron-clad “turtle ships” invented by Admiral Yi Sun-sin prior to the Japanese invasion of the 1590s. (Han, pl. 50.)

By mid-Yi times, if not sooner, the Koreans had worked out ways of applying iron armor to seagoing ships. The Song Chinese had only built riverboat iron-clads.

All these technological improvements, like those made at the metaphysical and political levels of life, nevertheless remained comfortably within the early modern (Song-Ming) Chinese tradition.

Though by early Yi times Korea had achieved a second stage high civilization in terms of its technological sophistication, its material culture was not as peculiarly different from China’s or ultimately as progressive as Japan’s was becoming, even by this time (corresponding to the age of the Ashikaga Shogunate and its eventual dissolution into the *Sengoku Jidai*).

Despite this technological sophistication, and unlike both China and feudal process era Japan, Koryo and even early Yi Korea had yet to evolve much of a market economy. Korea’s glorious technological innovations were mostly created by men directly dependent on the state or its provincial aristocracy.

These technicians were essentially well-off indentured servants of the aristocratic rulers. The goods they produced were the objects of political redistribution. By and large neither their makers nor their makers’ masters brought these goods to markets for economic exchange.

By contrast, markets in feudal process Japan were becoming exceedingly well developed even by the 14th century. Japan gave the appearance of, as an old French proverb has it, having taken one step back (via the feudalization stage of the feudal process) the better to jump further forward by the last years of the defeudalization stage and during the centralized feudal and bastard feudal stages. Even by the end of Kamakura times in the early 14th century, only part way through feudalization, Japan had more and better developed internal markets than Korea had.

By the 17th century, Japan had fully caught up technologically, both with China and with Korea. In the development of its markets, it was ahead of both China and Korea, particularly of Korea. Korea had not “stepped back” with feudalization, and so had not subsequently jumped forward. It merely inched forward, still without many internal markets.

C. Yi’s Evolution Within The Chinese Pattern

1. Early Yi

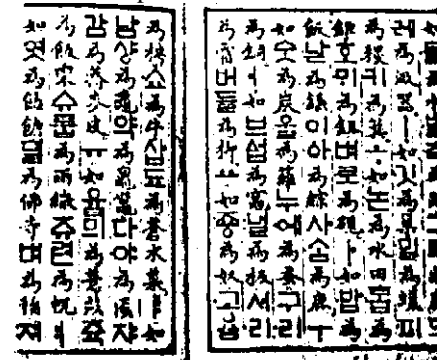
Yi Song-gye made no sharp departure from the Koryo pattern. To be sure, he moved the capital, just as Koryo had done after it had usurped power from Silla. His move from Kaesong a bit south to Seoul, as had the Koryo move from Kyongju to Kaesong, removed the new regime from the old factions entrenched in the old capital and allowed for a fresh start.

It also moved the capital more fully into the key strategic area of the peninsula, the Han River valley. Then, as always, the polity that controlled *all* of that valley (the northern as well as the southern tributaries of the Han), could much more easily control the whole peninsula. Even with his capital on the banks of the Han, Yi Song-gye remained close enough to his old northeastern base to allow him to solidify his control over the north in general.

By the middle of the 15th century, the Yi rulers showed how sophisticated their

culture had become when they sponsored the creation of what turned out to be the most esthetically pleasing and successful of all the modern alphabets, the *han’gul* script.

Though *han’gul* writing looks like slightly odd Chinese characters, this is because its “letters” are arranged into rectangular clumps to form words. That accounts for the pleasingly balanced look of individual words. The words do look like Chinese characters. *Han’gul* was, however, unlike the two Japanese *kana* scripts, a true alphabet, with separate symbols for the initial, medial and final sounds of syllables. This made it very easy to learn and relatively inexpensive to print using movable types, a technology which the Koreans had already mastered during Koryo times. Nowadays it is also easier to computerize than is Chinese.



Printed example of the *han’gul* script. (UW East Asian Library exhibit.)

The Koreans could now finally begin to conduct the literary side of their high civilization, as it moved further into its second stage, part of the time in written Korean rather than exclusively in Chinese. Abstract thought and not just popular literature could both now begin to appear in Korean. The elite still learned Chinese for fancy Confucian and Buddhist purposes, but increasingly the mass of the people, particularly once market forces were set loose after 1600, could become literate in Korean. This surely made it easier for Korean commoners escape their serflike status.

The *han’gul* script is still used to write Korean, supplemented by Chinese characters for the roots of certain words, at least in South Korea. It is used entirely without Chinese characters in North Korea. If the South eventually swallows the North, *han’gul* will likely become ever more exclusively used in the South as well.

To keep the men of merit in line, at least for the first couple of centuries of the

dynasty, the Yi kings made a new requirement. Senior members of a *yangban* family now *had* to take offices in the capital. In return, the kings granted tax breaks for the whole clan's provincial landed estates.

Thus, least one important member of each family had to focus on getting and keeping an official post in the capital. The threat of losing such a job was a powerful weapon to keep these families from ever getting too far out of line. As a consequence, factionalism weakened during the first two centuries of Yi as compared with Koryo times.

However, there was still no large domestic market sector in the early Yi economy. Coin collectors and numismatists and historians of money know this just from the fact that early Yi coins are about as scarce as Koryo and Silla coins. They are expensive now because they are scarce now. They are scarce now because the government in the early Yi period minted so few Korean coins that their numismatic prices are almost as high as much older coins because of that scarcity. The Koreans did not even import very many Chinese coins then, as Kamakura Japan had done during Koryo times and as Ashikaga Japan was still doing during early Yi times. There was no reason for the Koreans to do so absent internal markets.

The main reason for this absence of markets was that most of the craftsmen making the beautiful pottery (by Yi times often with a pure white glaze rather than the greenish celadon of Koryo times), the gunpowder, the books printed from movable type, were still working as well-paid dependents of the ruling class. Many belonged to the central government, others to powerful provincial aristocrats and still others to a few institutions, such as the Buddhist church, closely linked to the government.

Institutionally, this still resembled the situation in an early civilization. Even though these craftsmen were producing goods embodying the technology and esthetic sophistication of a second stage high civilization, there was still little true economic exchange going on. Few internal markets existed until late Yi times.

Such differential telescoping of stages of development is typical of a derivative civilization. Technology can change without social organization following suit for a long time. Only material determinists

need be bothered by this. Ideational determinists find nothing puzzling about it.

Though the situation was certainly no different in Japan up through Heian times, development of the market lagged longer in Korea than in Japan. It is that longer lag between these two civilizational cousins that the material determinists must explain.

2. Disaster from Japan and China breaks the pattern

Late in the 16th century came a *deus ex machina*—a god from the machine or external accident—in this case embodied in the first man to complete the centralized feudal structure of Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

Toyotomi's two invasions of the Korean peninsula in 1592 and 1598 changed everything there. They flattened the peninsula at least as thoroughly as did the full industrial age war of 1950-53 that ultimately matched the Americans against the Chinese. The 16th century Japanese invasions killed millions of people directly and indirectly, and forced the Yi government to go on the run much as Koryo earlier had to do when faced with the Mongol invasions some three centuries earlier.

What the Japanese did not destroy, Korea's Chinese allies did when they came to their tributary's aid. It was only the Japanese leader's death in 1598 that sent his armies scurrying home for the succession struggle. Korea was, however, so badly damaged that it could no longer serve as the stable northeastern anchor of the Chinese universal state's boundary with Zone A. This in turn made it easier for the Manchus to move south to the line of the Liao during the next generation, and from that favorable base conquer north and then south China.

In Korea itself, the social and economic dislocation wrought by both friend and foe during 1592-98 was at least comparable in extent to the degree of physical destruction inflicted on the peninsula by the 1950-53 war. In some ways it was harder for Korea to recover in the 1590s than in the 1950s. There was no full industrial revolution age environment in the 17th century to speed up Korea's recovery. As a consequence, the peninsula remained a ruin for a century rather than for less than a decade as occurred during the 20th century conflict.

As it turned out, however, by 1598 the

old economic pattern had finally been broken, though it took some time for this to become evident.

3. Late Yi changes

So low did its income fall after 1598 that the Yi central government decided it could no longer afford to support many of its dependent craftsmen. It freed them, forcing them to become independent manufacturers who had no choice but to bring their goods to real markets whether they wanted to or not.

The same sort of fate was faced by many of the quasi-serfs who had hitherto worked most of the estates of the provincial aristocrats. The latter could no longer afford the burden of their support either. Anyway, so many people had died in the battles of the 1590s that labor had become scarce relative to land and even capital goods. Even commoner labor could now earn premium wages, on or off the farm.

As landowners and urban merchants and craftsmen elsewhere competed for their services, serf-like laborers could run away from their bondage and speedily win informal and eventually formal emancipation. The populations of towns and the number of internal markets finally began to increase significantly.

As a consequence of these changes, free and respectable classes of sometimes literate men now appeared in the middle of the class spectrum both in towns and in the countryside. At last Korea's was no longer the simple, two-class society it had been since the days of early civilization.

These people in the middle were engaging in market relationships to a significant degree. But because their entrance into the market was so recent, Korea's internal markets were still developed to far lesser an extent than the markets of either Japan or China.

After 1600, the central government finally began to produce large numbers of coins. The presence of a growing internal market sector now both allowed and encouraged the Yi administrators to try to make money by making money to spend in those markets. They could also hope to regain a measure of leverage over the now partly marketized economy by making more or fewer coins.

However, the kings nevertheless inevitably also lost some of their political power as their overall tax revenues declined. This encouraged more factional-

ism at the center and assertion of more independence from the center by regional aristocrats. Markets, after all, create more regional centers. Regional centers can more easily be used by local aristocrats than by a central government still inexperienced in the ways to manipulate markets.

These regional centers also served as intellectual bases for new factions. Not only were there Zhu Xi-style rationalist Neo-Confucianists, newly fashionable Wang Yangming-style intuitionist Neo-Confucian ideas also came in from Ming China. Members of the frequent Korean tribute missions bought books and attended lectures on the new Neo-Confucian thinkers while in China and popularized their ideas among their peers after returning to Korea.

These missions even brought back Christianity, which they picked up from the Jesuit missionaries resident in China since the early 17th century. By the 18th century, several Korean factions formed around varying interpretations of Christianity. These have bequeathed a mixed Neo-Confucian and Christian heritage to late 20th century South Korea and influenced the so-called "Moony" sect of Rev. Moon which has evoked so much attention in America in recent years.

During the 260 years after 1600, the monarchy lost power both to factions at the center and to great aristocrats dominating the regions. When the child King Kojong came to the throne at the begin-

ning of the 1860s, his father, the Taewon'gun or Regent, could not attempt a "Kojong Restoration" of the same sort as the contemporary Meiji Restoration in Japan. Before Meiji-style non-excluding revolutionary reform could begin, the Yi clan proprietors of the central government would have to win back the powers they had lost.

Yet another barrier to reform was the fact that Korea was still a tributary dependency of China, and China was not yet prepared to either set an example for such fundamental reform or willingly turn loose its Korean tributary to make such innovations via borrowing from the West.

And so all that the Taewon'gun and his factional rivals could do during the decades after 1860 was to engage in what turned out to be a bewildering and ultimately futile series of court intrigues to regain effective control over Korean politics. These merely provided excuses for the Japanese and the Chinese to push into Korean internal politics.

Japan finally drove the Chinese from their traditional position as overlords of Korea via their victory in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, though they soon were (or appeared to be) displaced by the Russians as the new tributary overlords of the Korean court.

By the '90s King Kojong had grown up, and his father and wife and their factions had for various reasons disappeared from the picture. Also, during the decade after 1895, the Russo-Japanese stalemate

seemed to keep Russia and Japan from stepping into the overlord position Japan had forced China to vacate.

The king hoped he was at last free to consciously begin to imitate the Meiji Restoration. But it was too late for that. It was now only a question of whether the Russians or the Japanese would replace China at least as Korea's tributary overlords, and likely as its colonial master.

By 1905, the workings of the international balance of power had provided the answer: it would be Japan. At first Korea nominally became a tributary-like dependency of Japan, but it very quickly became a Japanese colony in all but name. Then, after King Kojong finally died in retirement in 1919, the Japanese formally brought the Yi Dynasty to an end and Korea became a full colony of Japan in name as well as fact.

Under Japanese control, Korea had to make a drastic shift in course away from the Chinese pattern, and to reach the maturation of its second stage high civilization along Japanese lines and under Japanese auspices. The Koreans have not yet quite gotten over the profound psychic and physical trauma induced by that change in course.

That trauma has been made even worse as Korean scholars have come to realize that the logic of Korean history all during the last half of the Yi Dynasty and perhaps since late Silla times had set their country up for that unhappy fate. EHK