Hideyoshi, and the invention of metal movable type in the thirteenth century. The problem, he suggested, was that Korea had rested on its laurels rather than building on its past. Nevertheless, Yu never doubted that Korea had the inherent capacity to play a major role in the new civilization. Indeed, he believed that the solution to the country's dilemma lay in "embellishing" (yunsaek) a greatness that had existed in the past and was essentially still latent. He was certain that if Koreans only made the effort, such refinement would lead not simply to Korea's becoming an honored guest in the hierarchy of civilization but to its eventually becoming a master, "a model to all nations under heaven." Once again "the glory of the world will return (kwit) to our country," he wrote, in a statement that epitomizes the energy and optimism that Yu drew from his sense of Korea's history.10

Yu's belief in the potential for Korean greatness in the new world order was a shared understanding that linked the Korean reformists in the last decades of the Chosôn dynasty, despite factional and policy differences. But, unfortunately, the reformists would not live to see that greatness realized. Indeed, most would die in the bitter knowledge of Korea's colonization by Japan. That their efforts failed in the end was not entirely their fault. The historical forces, both international and domestic, arrayed against them were formidable, and given these circumstances, there may well have been no way for Chosôn Korea to have escaped its tragic end.

Still, one could also argue that the reformists' fixation on culture may have blinded them to the importance of the economic and military underpinnings of the new world until it was too late. Over and over again they stressed education as the key to "enlightenment," and they envisioned a long, gradual process of development toward mastery of the new civilization. But time was against them. In the ruthless climate of high imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the social Darwinian struggle was above all a struggle of economic and military power. By 1905 that struggle, so far as Chosôn Korea was concerned, was over. Japan had vanquished both China and Russia in two major wars and forced a treaty of "protection" on Korea, which left Koreans only in nominal control of their own affairs. In 1910 even that fig leaf of sovereignty was removed, and the country was formally incorporated into the Japanese empire as a colony.

Korea under Japanese Rule

The harsh thirty-five years of Japanese colonialism left many indelible scars on the Korean peninsula and people. Arrogance and racism, at times blatant, at other times subtle or even unconscious, often colored the policies and pervaded the atmosphere of the occupation. The colonial government-general's explanation for Japan's annexation of Korea reduced Korea's history to one of abject backwardness and dependence on China. It painted the Chosôn dynasty as utterly stagnant, incapable of regeneration from within, and therefore in need of Japan's protection and guidance. Such rationalizations became the common wisdom of the empire and colony and were integrated into the colonial education system.

This sustained propaganda was not without its effect. Even as late as the 1960s it was difficult to find Koreans who had positive views of their own long history within the Sinicist world order, to say nothing of the Chosôn dynasty. When Park Chung Hee seized control of the South Korean government in a military coup in 1961, there were many Koreans who were suspicious of his motives and methods. Few if any at the time, however, found anything to criticize in his denunciation of the Chosôn dynasty for its "criminal history" (che'ak sa): "We brand the history of the Yi [Chosôn] Dynasty as criminal because of its fourfold partisan strife, servile submission to China, and the complacency of the aristocracy. We blame our present poverty on the evil heritage from the Yi Dynasty. The young generation of today looks back on the past, and the misdeeds of their forebears with wrath and contempt."11

The Japanese colonial propaganda was effective in part because it resonated with Korean criticisms of the Chosôn dynasty that had been developing since the late nineteenth century, and whose correctness had been proved for many Koreans by the dynasty's failure to preserve the country's political autonomy. The early diaries of Yun Ch'illo are replete with such attacks. Later, in the early 1920s, the great essayist and novelist Yi Kwangsu, in a passage that still startles with the depth and scope of its anger and bitterness, condemned the five hundred years of Chosôn dynasty history as no more than a "record of worthless ideas and empty debates."12

Even if many Koreans agreed with the colonial government's negative assessment of the late Chosôn dynasty, they were not necessarily disposed to accept the government-general's conclusion that colonization by Japan was therefore justified. The will to greatness that had for so long been a part of the Korean psyche did not disappear. In general, the Korean critique of the Chosôn dynasty was centered on the perceived failings of the ruling yangban class rather than on the inherent capacities of the Korean people. Even Yi Kwangsu, who was influenced by the French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon and went much further than anyone else in disparaging the Korean
national character," blamed "bad government" as "directly responsible" for the dynasty’s decline. Yi was also careful to distinguish, in the manner of Le Bon, unsatisfactory but correctable "secondary" Korean traits from a "fundamental" Korean national character, which he regarded as a composite of many outstanding qualities. Like Yu Kilchun before him and other Korean intellectuals of his own time and since, he thus never questioned the ability, indeed the destiny, of Koreans, given proper leadership, to achieve greatness as a people in the modern world, to become, as he later wrote in his memoirs, a yangban instead of a sangnom nation.13

The early twentieth century also gave birth to a new school of consciously nationalistic historians, inspired by Sin Ch’ae-ho. Although Sin and his admirers saw only "subservience to China" (sadaejuui) in what Yi Hangno and the conservative yangban elite had regarded as the greatness of Chosön in the Sinitic world order, they nevertheless looked for and discovered that greatness in other aspects of Korea’s history. Above all, they held up the image of a long and brilliant Korean military tradition of honor and patriotism going back to the Three Kingdoms period, which they believed had been gradually neglected or deliberately repressed by an effete Confucian elite. The Chosön dynasty was for them the nadir of this great tradition, symbolized by the general neglect of the military and the government’s shoddy treatment of Admiral Yi Sunsin, the hero of Korea’s naval battles against Hideyoshi and the designer of the armor-plated battleships praised by Yu Kilchun. The admiral’s dismissal by the court in the middle of the naval campaign against the Japanese forces was seen as a prime example of factional politics at the expense of the national interest.

Ironically, Japanese colonialism worked to reinforce and intensify the Korean will to national greatness in the modern world, at least among many of the educated elite. First, one has to remember that the modernizing trends of the late Chosön period did not cease with the advent of Japanese rule. As part of the Japanese empire, Koreans continued to be exposed and subject to all modern developments within Japan itself through newspapers, magazines, radio programs, and films, as well as through the colonial educational system, and study and travel abroad. The colonial regime itself, moreover, became a major agent of modernization in numerous respects, by 1945 transforming the peninsula into the most industrialized region of East Asia outside of Japan.

And Koreans were by no means entirely excluded from this process, especially after weeks of nationwide demonstrations against Japanese rule in March 1919 helped bring about a more liberal colonial policy. After 1919 the government-general in fact took special care to mollify and court the Korean educated elite in the hope of nullifying, or at least defusing, subversive nationalist sentiment in the most articulate and influential segments of Korean society. The government even allowed a cultural nationalist movement to flourish in the 1920s and 1930s which was centered on the publication of popular and academic Korean-language newspapers and journals. While never overtly posing any political challenge to Japanese rule, such publications preserved an important niche for Koreans to explore, discuss, and participate culturally in the modern world in their own language and in accord with their own interests and sensibilities.

The world of imperial Japan, however, was for Koreans vastly circumscribed in comparison with their historical experience in the Sinitic world order. Despite the modernizing aspects of colonialism and much rhetoric about the universal benevolence of imperial rule and, later, the Greater East Asia Prosperity Sphere, the core ideology of the empire was highly particularistic and rigidly hierarchical, founded on assumptions of Japanese racial superiority and political dominance. In the atmosphere of militarism during the late 1930s and 1940s, these ethnocentric attitudes became particularly intense, but they had in fact been present in Japanese imperialist thinking since the late nineteenth century.

Under such a system there was clearly no room for a separate “Korean” national greatness. Some Koreans, nevertheless, seem to have continued to hope that such an arrangement could be worked out with the empire. Even prior to 1910, members of the Korean Ilchinhoe or “Advance in Unity Society,” which actually campaigned for and supported both the protectorate and the annexation, may well have been thinking along these lines, expecting to become part of a new Asian world order in which a modernized Japan assumed the role vis-à-vis Korea that China had played in the premodern past. In the 1920s there was also much talk of "home rule" by various elements in the Korean elite after the March First Movement and change in colonial administration and policy. And during the China and Pacific wars after 1937, many of these same people clung to the hope, abetted by wartime colonial propaganda, that actively supporting the Japanese war effort would give Koreans a special place in the postwar empire. All such dreams came to naught less because of Japan’s eventual defeat in the war than because of their inherent improbability given the character of the Japanese imperial system.
Even for those Koreans who eschewed politics and concentrated solely on getting ahead and making their mark in the modern world as members of the Japanese imperial system, the frustrations were many. First of all, there were often unspoken ethnic limits beyond which no Korean, however talented or demonstrably loyal to Japan, could rise in his professional career. Although the government-general had opened the system up considerably at the elite level after 1919, and many Koreans subsequently came to play significant roles in business, law, education, journalism, and even the colonial bureaucracy itself, few could aspire to the very top positions in any field, which for the most part were tacitly reserved for Japanese. All Koreans, even those in the elite who were comfortable in the Japanese language and closely associated with the colonial regime, also carried the psychological burden of being second-class citizens in their own country. In the case of the latter, this burden was particularly onerous, because they found themselves associating on a regular basis with people who, even if they were willing to acknowledge individual exceptions, more often than not tended to regard Koreans in the abstract as racially inferior.

Certain unusual features of Japanese colonial rule also conspired to heighten Korean resentment. In comparison with most if not all of the European colonies, where enormous disparities between the colonizer and colonized in terms of income, educational levels, linguistic and cultural background, and general modes of living tended to intensify feelings of superiority and inferiority, and to limit severely personal and professional interaction, the colonizing Japanese and the colonized Koreans, at least at the elite level, were relatively similar to each other in all these respects. Indeed, Japanese and Koreans shared a premodern Sinitic cultural heritage, and their languages, syntactically so similar as to suggest a common origin in the ancient past, were both rich in Chinese vocabulary and characters. The Japanese colonizers also did not live in strictly isolated or segregated compounds or areas and were not infrequently less well off than some of their wealthy Korean neighbors. Japan’s colonization of Korea was in that sense a great anomaly, as if, for example, England had colonized France, or vice versa.

Interaction between Koreans and Japanese in the colony was also enhanced by other factors. One was the geographic proximity of Japan to the peninsula, which facilitated Korean access to the colonial metropole for purposes of education, travel, or commerce. Another was the relatively large number of Japanese colonists in the country—more than twenty times, for example, the number of French residing in colonial Vietnam in the late 1930s. Again, in contrast to many European colonies, here there were no ethnic or religious commercial or professional groups, like the Chinese in the Dutch East Indies or French Indochina, the Sikhs in India, the Asians and Arabs in east Africa, to act as middlemen and reduce contact between colonizers and the natives. Indeed, especially after 1919, Koreans became very active in the commercial economy and continued to be so throughout the next twenty-five years, including during the China and Pacific wars. After 1937, the war itself opened up the colonial system even further, as Japanese were drafted into the army in ever increasing numbers, and as Koreans, who were not formally conscripted until 1944, were often recruited to take their places.

Such special features of Japanese colonialism might have worked over time to diminish Korean resentment had the Japanese authorities been genuinely committed to erasing racial discrimination in the colony and empire, or, to go one step further, been willing to consider a certain degree of political autonomy for Koreans to seek their greatness as a nation within a more loosely constituted empire. But such a commitment, let alone such an idea of empire, founded on prevailing Japanese notions of racial superiority. While individual Japanese often spoke out and tried to end discrimination where they could, as in the case of the influential colonial banker Aruga Mitsutoyo, who made a point of treating Koreans in his employ on a more equal basis, few Japanese were willing to countenance the idea of some kind of political independence for Korea; it is not clear that Japanese criticisms of discrimination had any substantive impact on general colonial policy and practice.  

Some Koreans undoubtedly suffered the psychological effects of colonialism that led to a debilitating sense of inferiority. But generally colonialism intensified rather than diminished the will to national greatness among educated Koreans. Those who had chosen to accommodate themselves in one way or another to the realities of colonialism, by far the majority, and particularly those whose backgrounds and careers had put them into relatively close and frequent contact with the Japanese colonizers, had in many cases developed by 1945 a deep sense of anger and resentment (han in Korean) at the ethnic barriers to achievement under Japanese rule. They had also developed a more positive determination to demonstrate their greatness, both as individuals and as Koreans, once the shackles of colonialism had been lifted.
They were encouraged in this resolve by at least two things. One was the historic sense of Korean greatness that had been preserved in modified form by the nationalist historians who had come into prominence in the late Chosŏn period before the annexation and whose ideas had been taken up and developed by others in the colonial period, including many in the cultural nationalist movement. After 1919, and through the late 1930s, the cultural nationalists, whose main patron was the wealthy educator and publishing magnate Kim Sŏngsu, had had a major impact on the literate urban populace through the daily newspaper Tonga Ilbo and the monthly magazine Sindonga, together the most popular news media of the day. This continuing sense of Korean greatness, which also involved a corresponding sense of Japanese historic inferiority, not only exacerbated Korean bitterness at Japanese discrimination but also suggested that Koreans could equal or surpass whatever level of modern civilization the Japanese might attain.

Koreans were also encouraged by the actual experience of living and working with the Japanese over the course of several decades. In virtually every sphere of modern life, Koreans had taken advantage of the limited opportunities open to them and had often excelled, whether in business, the bureaucracy, education, journalism, law, medicine, science, engineering, the arts, or even the military, where the Japanese considered themselves particularly gifted and accomplished. Such Koreans had few if any doubts about their ability to measure up to Japanese or world standards in fair competition. In 1936, when two Korean marathon runners captured the gold and bronze medals at the Berlin Olympics, they instantly became popular symbols of what Koreans could accomplish if only the Japanese would be more “magnanimous” and allow them full and equal participation in the imperial world. The colonial and imperial authorities, however, not only claimed the marathon victories as “Japanese” Olympic triumphs, which was, of course, their international legal right given Korea’s status as a Japanese colony, but also closed down Tonga Ilbo temporarily (and Sindonga permanently) when the paper carried a photograph of the gold medal winner, Son Kijŏng, with the Japanese emblem on his uniform deliberately erased. These actions were a sign to many Koreans of how determined the Japanese were to deny Korea any sense of national greatness.

Frustrated or outraged by the colonial system, other Koreans sought personal or national greatness by leaving the country for neighboring Manchukuo, where the opportunities and margin for Korean achievement were often more generous, or by working and fighting against the Japanese empire in various ways in Korea and abroad. For many of the militant groups in particular, the bloody March First Movement of 1919 was a watershed event that signified the futility of further attempts at accommodation or peaceful opposition in the hope of securing some kind of Korean political autonomy. In the 1920s, moreover, in the wake of the successful Russian Revolution, the whole range of Western radical thought began to enter and take root in Korea through publications by young Korean intellectuals, including many Korean students recently returned from Japan or from the newly established Soviet Union itself.

In time a new vision of Korean national greatness began to be articulated by Korean Marxist historians, who recast Korea’s long history in terms of a glorious struggle of oppressed classes within the Marxist teleology of socioeconomic development. Here Korean intellectuals opposed to colonialism found a new counterhegemonic universal world order and cosmology centered on the Soviet Union that not only provided a rational explanation for Korea’s descent into colonialism but also gave promise, indeed, assurance of liberation and of a brilliant role for Korea in the socialist world of the future. Given its uncompromising and optimistic anticolonial stance, as well as its resonance with precolonial notions of Korean greatness, the new radicalism of the 1920s had a profound impact on the best minds of Korea’s younger colonial generation that extended well into the postcolonial era.

Korea Divided

Japan’s defeat in the Pacific war brought Japanese rule in Korea to an abrupt end, but in less than a month after liberation, the country was divided into two zones of occupation along the thirty-eighth parallel by victorious Soviet and American military forces. Shortly thereafter the onset of the cold war and political and social divisions engendered by colonial rule led to the establishment of two separate and hostile states in the north and south, and, eventually, to a devastating civil conflict that also involved in varying degrees the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, as well as a number of other countries fighting with the United States on the side of the United Nations forces. When it finally ended in a stalemate in 1953, the prewar boundaries of the two states were still largely intact, but millions of Koreans had been displaced, wounded, and killed. The country, moreover, was in ruins, particularly in the north, where sustained bombing by the United States over a three-year period had razed virtually every North Korean city to the ground.

With the war’s end, the two Koreas settled down to the work of rebuilding
and developing their societies. Koreans, both north and south, were free at last to pursue their visions of national greatness in a now bipolar international order. For South Koreans this meant continuing an involvement with the democratic industrial capitalist civilization of the West, now centered on the United States, but without the political and racial limitations that had characterized the Japanese empire. Like the premodern Sinitic world order, the world of post-1945 Pax Americana was also universalistic. Although the assumption of the new capitalist world order was that the United States would continue indefinitely to play a dominant role politically, militarily, economically, and even culturally, the potential for other less advanced countries within the order to move upward on the ladder of civilization was also acknowledged, as it had been in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, as part of a worldwide effort to “contain” the spread of Soviet power and communism, the United States government actively supported developmental efforts in countries that, like South Korea, were on the front lines of the struggle against communism. American government policies also took shape in a postwar intellectual environment, stimulated and supported to a considerable extent by cold war political priorities, in which the “modernization” of less developed countries came to be regarded not only as a worthy goal in itself, but also as an effective strategy for combating communism and countering Soviet and Chinese influence.

In stark contrast with the premodern Sinitic world order, the American world of postwar “modernization” was focused above all on economic growth, which initially at least, in the 1950s and early 1960s, was seen as the key that opened the door to “modernization” in other areas as well. Economic prowess, of course, combined with military power had always been at the core of the strength of Western industrial capitalist civilization in the world; the Japanese had been quick to recognize and absorb this fact in the early Meiji era. Many Korean modernizing intellectual and political leaders, however, undoubtedly in a reflection of their premodern heritage, continued from the late nineteenth century on to conceptualize greatness in the capitalist world order largely in philosophical and moral terms. Hence, even as late as the 1950s, the problems of slow or unsatisfactory economic development were often seen by social critics less as economic problems per se than as part and parcel of the general moral failure of a political regime that repeatedly violated Western democratic principles. For Syngman Rhee, South Korea’s first president, Korea’s greatness in the world also seems to have been predicated above all on a political reunification of the peninsula by the South; economic development, though important, was in that sense seen as a secondary national goal.

With the seizure of power by army major general Park Chung Hee in 1961 in the aftermath of a successful student-led revolution against the Rhee government and a brief, chaotic attempt at liberal democracy, “modernization” (kinndaehwa) became the official catchword and policy of the South Korean government for the next eighteen years. For Park, “modernization” meant, first and foremost, economic development, and everything, including democratization of the political system, was subordinated to that overriding objective. Economic development in Park’s thinking was directly linked not only to the alleviation of poverty but also to military defense, to eventual reunification of the peninsula on southern terms, and ultimately to national independence and pride.

Park’s vision of national greatness stemmed from the various experiences that had shaped his own life: an impoverished peasant childhood, resentment of Japanese colonial discrimination, an attempt to overcome that discrimination by becoming an officer in the imperial Japanese army, and anger and frustration at American interference and South Korean political and economic dependency on the United States after 1945. Meiji Japan’s success in building a “rich country, strong army” served as an important historical model for him throughout his life. In 1972, when he restructured the government along more authoritarian lines, Park called his new system “Yusin,” adopting the same name and Chinese characters that had been used for the Meiji “Restoration.” Like other Koreans who had excelled against great odds in the colonial system, he also had confidence that Koreans, given a fair chance, could do as well as or better than the Japanese in any national undertaking.

From childhood and youth Park had also absorbed many of the ideas of the new nationalist intellectuals such as Sin Ch’ae-ho and Yi Kwangsu. These writers had attacked what they considered the pedantic scholasticism of the Chosón literati and found Korea’s true national spirit in such martial heroes as the Koryó monk Myo’ch’óng and Admiral Yi Sunsin, whom they saw as asserting Korean independence or resisting foreign domination. As a young man Park had been particularly inspired by Yi Kwangsu’s novel about Yi Sunsin, and after 1961 the Chosón dynasty admiral became an official icon of national heroism and his birthplace a national shrine. Indeed, throughout his rule Park was critical of many aspects of Western, particularly American, culture which he thought were unsuited to Korea; he deeply resented any
American interference, particularly in the area of domestic politics. Particularly in the 1970s, he used all the resources available to him, including the educational system, to inculcate national pride in Korea’s past achievements, especially those that in his mind gave evidence of Korean cultural uniqueness and patriotism, and he tried to foster what he believed were the most important Korean traditional values, including such things as harmony and loyalty that also meshed well with his goal of building a powerful and united nation-state.

While welcoming foreign capital and technology in his quest for economic and military self-reliance, Park was also mindful of Korea’s colonial past, and foreign investors were subject to a barrage of rules and regulations designed to ensure that Korea would reap maximum benefits from such transactions with minimum loss of economic control. When American economic advisers and funders balked at Park’s pet projects such as a national highway system and steel mill as premature or unnecessary, Park ignored their counsel and went ahead on his own, in some cases even turning to Japan for the required funds. To Park such projects were indispensable for Korea, not only in reaching the goal of military self-sufficiency but also in attaining the stature of a great power. He did not take kindly to American suggestions that Korea continue to rely on Japan and other foreign countries for its steel and other heavy goods and chemical products.

Park’s ideas and policies were instrumental in bringing spectacular economic growth to South Korea, but his constricted vision of national greatness, obsessively focused on state wealth and power, also became the subject of growing criticism. While most South Koreans appreciated the economic development that Park and his government had wrought, as well as the government’s fostering of pride in Korean history and culture, many others, including significant numbers of university students, intellectuals, workers, and even members of a well-educated and increasingly affluent middle class that had prospered under Park’s rule, began to question his leadership and legitimacy, especially after the dismantling in 1972 of the existing democratic framework and establishment of the Yushin system, which in effect made Park president for life.

Indeed, despite nearly two decades of successful economically centered “modernization” under Park, many of South Korea’s educated elite, including even some who had worked closely with the government, had never fully abandoned the broader vision of modernity that had been the hallmark of Korean reformists in the late nineteenth century such as Yu Kilchun. To them, national greatness was not simply a question of economic and military strength but also a matter of political and social democratization as well as freedom of expression. For Korea to be truly great, it had to have all of these elements, which were identified with the “advanced” nations of the West. In that sense, Park Chung Hee’s understanding of national greatness was actually more reminiscent of the imperial Japanese army’s chauvinism of the 1930s than either the postwar American “modernization” paradigm or even the more broadly based sensibility of the Meiji era, especially in its earlier decades, when the idea of “rich country, strong army” was only part of a larger vision of universal “civilization and enlightenment.”

After Park’s assassination in 1979, a younger group of politically oriented military officers led by Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo succeeded in taking over the government. But the popular will was against them. Less than seven years after Chun’s inauguration as president, which took place under the existing undemocratic Yushin system, massive public protests by Koreans from all walks of life, including the new middle class, forced the government to commit itself to a program of political and cultural liberalization, which eventually culminated in the free and open election of a former dissident politician, Kim Young Sam, in 1992.

Under Kim, the first civilian president since 1960, civil control of the military was reestablished through a series of demotions and forced retirements. Popular revulsion at subsequent revelations concerning Chun’s and Roh’s accumulation of hundreds of millions of dollars in personal slush funds during their political tenure also led to full-scale official investigations, not only of the two former presidents’ finances but also of their illegal seizure of power in 1979–80. These investigations and the trials that followed, extensively covered by the media, served to air and expiate long-standing grievances against three decades of military rule, and to send an unequivocal signal that the country would no longer tolerate military intervention in its politics.

The presidential election of 1997 saw yet another milestone in South Korea’s long and tumultuous march toward democracy that has propelled the country into the forefront of democratizing nations throughout the world. Kim Dae Jung, the country’s most famous democratic dissident, whom earlier military regimes had tried to silence through kidnapping, attempted murder, torture, and imprisonment, was elected president. His election represented the first peaceful transfer of presidential power to an opposition party candidate since the founding of the republic in 1948. That it occurred...
in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Korean War also seemed to confirm the depth of South Korea’s democratic impulse. Despite the impact of the crisis, the fundamentals of the economy remained strong, and the Kim Dae Jung government’s quick and dramatic efforts at economic restructuring and revitalization once again provided evidence of a determined sense of national purpose. With such economic potential, a functioning democratic government, and a society culturally open to the outside world with a liberalized press, South Korea seems finally to have reached the threshold of a national greatness in the modern world first envisioned more than a hundred years earlier.

North Korea

For North Korea the pursuit of national greatness since 1953 has taken a very different turn. Like the American-centered capitalist world order, the post-1945 socialist world order also had universalistic aspirations, with member countries pledging varying degrees of loyalty to an international socialist vision and community originally centered on the Soviet Union. Like the United States government in its promotion of worldwide “modernization,” the Soviet authorities also adopted a global perspective. They saw the international development of socialism as a way of combating American hegemony, and they conceived of it largely in economic terms, as an alternative to capitalism. Indeed, one of the great appeals of socialism and communism in this period was the promise of economic prosperity and justice. Fraternal and friendly nations, especially those, like North Korea, on the front lines of the cold war, thus received Soviet aid and technology just as “modernizing” nations, such as South Korea, benefited from a similar political and strategic relationship with the United States.

Within this initially Soviet-dominated world, the North Korean leadership, led by Kim II Sung, an anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter whose rise to power in North Korea after 1945 had been supported by the Soviet occupying authorities, initially tended to follow a conventional Stalinist approach to national development, paying due political homage to both Stalin and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, just as premodern Korean dynasties had sought to preserve their own political autonomy and Korean literati operated within a social and cultural milieu that was both consciously part of the cosmopolitan Sinitic civilization and also distinctively different, Kim rankled under any sign of foreign political interference, and he tried to find a niche for North Korea within the Soviet orbit that allowed for maximum national independence and expression. In that sense he was very similar to his South Korean counterparts, most notably Park Chung Hee, with whom he also shared a certain postcolonial mentality that included deep-seated personal feelings of han, an acute sensitivity about outside pressure and influence, and an ardor for national greatness. Like Park, he also had a strong military bent and background; his regime placed a similar emphasis in official textbooks and histories on figures and events deemed to demonstrate qualities and examples of patriotic, antiforeign sentiment and martial valor.

Kim’s search for North Korea’s special place in the socialist world was politically facilitated by the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, and later by the Sino-Soviet ideological rift. Stalin’s death removed from the international communist movement the towering autocratic figure who had presided over the Soviet Union through most of its existence and had served as Kim’s patron and model, thereby potentially expanding the margin of experimentation and creativity for North Korea as well as opening the door to Kim’s own personal ascendency in the communist world as an established and experienced leader. The subsequent Sino-Soviet rupture also strengthened Kim’s hand in this regard, since both of his giant neighbors were eager to keep him from going over to the other side. This allowed Kim to play them off against each other and garner not only material support but also considerable political and ideological independence for North Korea.

The result was communism with a distinctly Korean flavor. Beginning with a now famous speech in 1955, Kim began to articulate a philosophy generally referred to as chuch’e sasang (chuch’e thought) in Korean, which eventually acquired the status of a reigning state ideology. In English the term chuch’e is often rendered as “self-reliance” or “independence,” but such a translation is woefully inadequate. Historically the term appears to have meant the “body of the emperor or monarch,” and in a general philosophical sense, it refers to the self qua consciousness. In the North Korean context, however, chuch’e came to encompass a whole range of political, social, economic, and philosophical-cultural meanings linked to a central notion of self-defined national autonomy. Koreans and Koreans alone were to be the theorists and masters of their own destiny, and all thought and action, whether among Koreans themselves or in interaction with non-Koreans, were to be predicated on subjective national needs and goals. Chuch’e, in effect, was a passionate and unrestrained cri de coeur against centuries of perceived incursion or subjugation by external forces that had sought to
weaken or destroy the country. It was also, in that sense, an unequivocal re-
assertion of Korea’s will to national greatness.

In espousing and promoting chuch’e thought, the North Korean leadership, of course, never considered breaking off their historic and economically beneficial ties to either the Soviet Union or China. Nor did they ever abandon their commitment to what they regarded as a universally valid ideology of socialism/communism, laid down originally by Marx and Lenin and destined eventually to triumph throughout the world. Gradually, however, images and writings of Soviet leaders, as well as Marx and Lenin, gave way to those of Kim Il Sung. In time, a full-blown national cult of Kim and his family, including his son and eventual political heir, Kim Jong Il, developed to the point that socialism in North Korea became for all practical purposes synonymous with Kimilsungism. Even Korean national history since the late nineteenth century was rewritten to a large extent as a celebration of Kim Il Sung’s, his parents’, grandparents’, and even great-grandparents’ patriotic struggles against hostile foreign powers. In this family pantheon of heroes, Kim himself, of course, reigned supreme as the ultimate warrior and savior of the nation, not only in the anticolonial campaign against the Japanese, but also in the anti-imperialist struggle against the United States and its “puppet” Korean state to the south. The capital of Pyongyang, which had been reduced to rubble by American bombs during the Korean War, was rebuilt as a city of monuments to Kim, to his exploits against the Japanese, and to his family. Kim’s speeches and writings, as well as the mythicized story of his life, in time became the basis on which the country’s entire intellectual and cultural life, as well as its educational system, was organized and developed. In effect, Kimilsungism became a kind of secular religion with Kim himself functioning as a living sage-king or god.

A degree of personal megalomania seems apparent in this deification process. And Kim was undoubtedly inspired to a certain extent by examples of similar, though perhaps less comprehensive, cults of communist leaders in other countries, especially the cults of Stalin, Mao, and Ceausescu in the Soviet Union, China, and Romania, respectively. At the same time, the cult of Kim and his family also served to assert and glorify Korea’s special greatness in the communist world order. While all communist countries in a sense shared the legacy of Marx and Lenin, only North Korea possessed the unique legacy of Kim Il Sung.

Such thinking led inevitably to a certain amount of national solipsism, especially as socialism and communism as ideologies became more and more identified with Kimilsungism. If Kimilsungism was the Korean measure of socialist/communist greatness, then North Korea, simply by virtue of being the land of Kim Il Sung, was necessarily great, a “paradise on earth,” as North Korean publications so often declared. This kind of tautological thinking was also reinforced by the country’s economic recovery and growth after the Korean War, which, at least until the mid-1970s, was more dramatic and impressive than that of the South. Eventually the North Korean government began to hold the country up as a model to other developing countries throughout the world, even taking out full-page ads in the New York Times to proclaim its national accomplishments under the “Great Leader” Kim Il Sung.

Myopia on such a scale is not easily corrected. Neither subsequent economic stumbling in the North, combined with a simultaneous economic surge in the South, nor even later the crumbling of the Soviet Union itself, the political birthplace and capital of international communism, has been able to shatter North Korea’s exalted sense of itself. Indeed, as Don Oberdorfer, veteran Korea reporter of the Washington Post, discovered on a visit to North Korea in June 1991, the opposite was true: the failure of Soviet communism had only reinforced the North Koreans in their belief that their own brand of chuch’e-centered socialism was superior: “One might expect . . . to find a regime in a deep funk, fearful of the future and uncertain about which way to go. The greatest surprise to me was that Pyongyang’s officialdom was, outwardly at least, undaunted by the revolutionary reversals in their alliances. In the North Korean worldview, the faltering of communism in the Soviet Union and its collapse in Eastern Europe proved the correctness of Kim Il Sung’s independent policy of juche.”16

Even today, despite staggering economic problems and virtual international isolation, the North Korean government continues to speak of its state and society matter-of-factly as “the most exemplary system in the world.”17 One cannot help but feel that there is more in this attitude than mere bravado born of desperation. For a historian of Korea, of course, the obvious parallel that leaps to mind is the example of the post-Ming Chosón literati, who saw themselves as the last refuge of civilization in an otherwise barbarized world. As Confucius was reported to have said after the death of King Wen of Chou, “With King Wen dead, is Culture not here with me?”18

**The Power of History**

A will to greatness does not by itself guarantee that greatness, however defined, will be achieved or sustained. Looking at South Korea’s modern trans-