

# Introduction

## Land of Exile

On February 9, 2018, Kim Yuna, a former figure-skating champion and final torchbearer, lit the cauldron, officially kicking off the much-anticipated twenty-third Olympic Winter Games in the sleepy mountain town of Hoenggye, roughly eighty kilometers south of the heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone dividing North and South Korea. For most South Koreans, the countdown to the opening ceremony was less about Olympic fatigue than wariness over months of vitriolic posturing between US president Donald Trump, who frequently took to Twitter to taunt his North Korean nemesis, and Kim Jong-un, who matched him tit-for-tat with fiery threats of his own about nuclear annihilation, conducting more ballistic missile tests in a year than had his father and grandfather. Amid the sky-high tensions, a hard-won Olympic *détente* with the North negotiated by South Korean president Moon Jae-in in the final days ahead of the games led to a few memorable moments at the Winter Games: musical performances by the North's most renowned Samjiyeon Orchestra, a special dinner reception for the North Korean delegation and foreign dignitaries, and a joint march by the North and South Korean athletes at the opening ceremony under a unified flag. The cameras captured US vice president Mike

Pence's unforgettable belligerent stare-down and deliberate refusal to stand during the unified march, while curious eyes fixed on Kim Yojong, the first female member of the North's ruling family to set foot in South Korea, and a squad of 229 enthralling North Korean female cheerleaders clad in matching red wool coats, urging on both teams with their synchronized dances and chants.

The opening ceremony differed remarkably from the elaborate coming-out party during Seoul's Summer Olympics in 1988. South Korea in 2018 was no longer a dictatorship and developing nation but the world's seventh-largest exporter with the eleventh-largest economy, an OECD (Organisation for Co-operation and Development) member nation, and an aid-donor country. While the high-tech pyrotechnics and twelve hundred drones lighting the skies with Olympic rings signaled progress and power, the opening ceremony did not deliver the same emotional punch that many Koreans had felt during the Sydney Olympics in 2000 when the two countries marched together for the first time, setting the mood for a thaw in cross-border relations under the so-called Sunshine Policy of President Kim Dae-jung. Instead, there was a distinct new raw energy as athletes challenged gender boundaries and defied national stereotypes—athletes like Chloe Kim, the first Korean American snowboarding teenage phenom who dominated the women's halfpipe, or Yun Sungbin whose dominant gold medal performance in the skeleton made him the first Asian to medal in the event. Five women nicknamed the Garlic Girls from the small town of Uiseong known for this pungent root plant sparked a curling fever in Korea when they made an unlikely run to the finals. The much-beloved team's skip and lead, Kim Eunjeong and the bespectacled Kim Yeongmi, flanked by three sweepers, garnered the catchy English nicknames Yogurt, Pancake, Steak, Sunny, and Chocho. While the chants "We are one" for the

first unified Korean women's hockey team may have felt contrived for some, it was an epoch-making moment when twelve North Koreans and twenty-three South Koreans skated out on the ice together. Among the players were four North Americans of Korean heritage, including Marissa Brandt, an adoptee from Minnesota, and Randi Heesoo Griffin, a biracial athlete from North Carolina.

Witnessing the initial discomfort and tensions among the players and coaches evolve into familiarity and camaraderie on the humble skating rink made me ponder deeply about the past century. This team represented a snapshot of the two Koreas today, symbolizing the tragedy of national division and its diasporic population (including more than 160,000 children sent to adoptive homes in the West since the Korean War), as well as a hopeful vision of a unified future. No one could have predicted that a small step at rapprochement through a game of hockey would pave the road for the first meeting of Korean leaders in over a decade, followed by the unexpected summit in Singapore in June between Kim Jong-un and the unconventional Donald Trump, whose erratic showmanship would turn many heads in Washington and Seoul.

The drama of the two Koreas performed on the stage of the 2018 Olympics resonated with my own personal history in a profound way. I was born in Seoul in 1972, the year President Park Chung-hee declared the so-called Yushin Constitution (Revitalizing Reforms), which granted him full dictatorial powers, placing no limits on reelection, dissolving the National Assembly, and suspending the Constitution. At the same time, his adversary in the north, Kim Il-sung, proclaimed a revised constitution of his own where *juche* (self-reliance) replaced Marxism-Leninism as the official state ideology. My family were *wolnammin* (those who crossed to the south during the Korean War) from Sinuiju, a gateway city neighboring

Dandong, China, across the Apruk (Yalu) River. My grandparents on both sides hailed from the landed class, were Christians, and were products of the Japanese colonial education system. To avoid military conscription in 1944, my paternal grandfather gave up his dream of studying economics and enrolled in the Army Veterinarian School in Ōsaki, Miyagi Prefecture, which was part of the Army Horse Corps. My grandmother was a *sin yeoseong* (new woman), who crossed the straits with my grandfather during the height of the war-time period and intermittently studied nursing in Tokyo while raising my father. The unexpected surrender of Japan compelled many from the Korean landed class in the north to flee to the south in fear of retribution and targeted killings by aggrieved peasants and Communists, and temporarily find safe haven in Busan, the provisional wartime capital. Despite her privileged upbringing, my maternal grandmother (who also fled during this time) never hid the fact that she was one of the best traders of *meriyasu* (undergarments) at Busan's Gukje sijang (International Market), the neighborhood for war refugees, and one of many mothers who evaded the military police and peddled goods stolen from the military PX (post exchange) to feed their families during the war. As exiles, permanently separated from their families in the north, dislocation meant forging a completely new identity as "South Koreans," creating a new *hojeok* (family register) that identified Seoul as their place of birth and residence. And if that were not hard enough, it also meant extricating themselves completely from all things Japan, which included "unlearning" Japanese and exclusively using Korean—a very difficult thing for my grandmother, who until her death voraciously read Japanese novels and magazines and watched endless NHK dramas.

My wife's parents also hail from the north, and like many displaced elderly North Koreans in Seoul, they frequently dine at

Uraeok (Woo Lae Oak), a family-operated establishment. Tucked away in the back alleys of Seoul's old industrial district, surrounded by light fixture businesses and sewing machine parts stores, it offers the finest original Pyeongyang-style cold buckwheat noodles served in an icy beef broth. There is good reason why they are ardent supporters of the hard right and frequently hurl epithets like *ppalgaeng-i* (commie) at the current president, Moon Jae-in, or the late Kim Dae-jung. Emotionally scarred from displacement and a bloody civil war, their generation experienced extreme poverty and major postwar reconstruction efforts that required as much sacrifice as the war itself, first under Syngman Rhee and then Park Chung-hee. The latter's draconian policies pushed South Korea's economy to grow at an unprecedented rate—often referred to as the Miracle on the Han River. The acrimony between my parents' generation and mine is common as the former still revere Park Chung-hee as an anti-Communist hero who set South Korea on the right path to become an economic powerhouse.

Our parents' generation still remember the 1960s when South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world, with only \$79 per capita income compared to North Korea's \$120, about 1.5 times higher than its southern counterpart. As a migrant-source country, Park Chung-hee's government sent thousands of Koreans abroad as farmers, miners, medical professionals, and construction workers to select countries in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East during the 1960s and 1970s to earn foreign currency. One such person who took up the call was my father, Min Chul Yoo, who applied for a position as a government dispatch doctor to Ethiopia. Despite his being in the first group of students to learn the blepharoplasty (double-eyelid surgery) technique at Yonsei Severance Hospital, a procedure introduced to Koreans by

Dr. Ralph Millard (a surgeon who was stationed in Seoul during the Korean War to do reconstructive surgery for the wounded) and now a popular birthday or coming-of-age gift, the temptation to go abroad was strong at the time. The government promised doctors a diplomatic passport and the ability to earn up to three times more than what they could at home in US dollars. But above all, my father was young, oblivious to the dangers of civil war in Africa, and intrigued about traveling to different countries and working on two-year contracts. As members of the first group of South Korean aid workers to Africa, volunteers like my father would pave the road for future aid programs like KOICA (Korean International Cooperation Agency, established in 1991), which would transform South Korea from a recipient country to the fifteenth-largest donor country, spending more than \$2.2 billion on official development assistance.

My family arrived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in the fall of 1975 during the middle of a bloody revolution after a Communist military junta overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie's monarchy a year earlier. Mengistu Haile Mariam would emerge as the leader of the Derg (Communist junta) after a major shootout in 1977 when he consolidated his power base through the Red Terror campaigns against his rivals, whom he branded counterrevolutionaries. While many leaders of newly independent countries in Africa during the 1960s and the 1970s embraced Marxist-Leninist ideals, Mengistu was one of the few to express interest in North Korean *juche* ideology. In 1984 he created the Workers' Party of Ethiopia after meeting Kim Il-sung a year earlier, impressed with his cordial reception and the *juche* ideology. The North Korean Propaganda and Agitation Department, which coordinated the ideological education and campaigns as well as party and state propaganda,

appealed to Mengistu who sought support to build a cult of personality through the construction of monuments, media, and mass games. With the help of North Korean cultural advisers, Mengistu adopted Kim's "on the spot guidance" trips around the country, plastering his photograph in villages, state-owned cooperatives, government offices, and other public spaces. No longer wearing his military uniform, Mengistu now donned a North Korean-made vinalon outfit, forcing party members to wear Communist lapels. He also commissioned Pyongyang's Mansudae Overseas Art Studio to design and construct the Tigrachin [our struggle] Monument in Addis Ababa, a fifty-meter-tall obelisk (similar to the famous 1,700-year-old obelisk in Axum, which Mussolini had stolen) topped by a red star, with two wall reliefs flanking it on both sides, commemorating the fallen Ethiopian and Cuban soldiers who had fought over the Ogaden region between Ethiopia and Somalia between 1977 and 1978. The huge monument stood boldly in front of the Black Lion Hospital, where my father worked for thirty years. The monument is now a tourist site. North Korea enthusiastically sought to promote these kinds of cultural projects as part of their Third World solidarity movement initiatives and even donated hundreds of copies of Kim Il-sung's biographies, which certainly outnumbered *Das Kapital* and could be found on ministerial bookshelves and local libraries all over Addis Ababa. Yet despite all the promotion and investment to export *juche* ideology to developing countries, there were very few takers, making Mengistu an exception rather than the norm.

South Korea's humanitarian mission to Ethiopia was not simply a reciprocal gesture for the participation of the twelve hundred soldiers from Emperor Haile Selassie's Kagnew Battalion during the Korean War. My father discovered quickly that being a government

dispatch doctor required other obligations beyond upholding Dr. Albert Schweitzer's ideal of reverence for life. A Korean CIA field agent attached to the embassy monitored the three doctors in Ethiopia, regularly requiring them to compile detailed reports of their activities, including interactions with medical personnel from China, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. Such reports became increasingly important as a venue for monitoring North Korean activities in Addis Ababa, especially during the height of the Cold War during the 1970s and 1980s as the North and South strove to gain support from countries in Africa, both with the aim of joining the United Nations. By the 1970s, the South Korean government had dispatched doctors to countries such as Botswana, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Niger, Swaziland, Uganda, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). I left Ethiopia to attend college (and later graduate school at the University of Chicago) in the United States in 1987 after the devastating famine that killed tens of thousands and the escalation of Ethiopia's bloody civil war with Eritrea, which had raged for some two decades. Four years after my departure, the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front and its allies finally toppled Mengistu's regime in 1991, forcing the dictator to flee to Zimbabwe where the late Robert Mugabe, another admirer of Kim Il-sung, granted him asylum. My parents remained in Addis Ababa during the transition to a new government under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

As a faculty member of Yonsei University for the last five years (after teaching for over a decade at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa), reflecting on my experiences in Africa during the 1970s and 1980s has given me the opportunity to talk to people, read widely, and reflect critically on the complex postwar history of the

two Koreas that profoundly shaped my family's personal history as well as countless others'. This book seeks to give presence to ordinary people who have languished in the dark in the annals of national history, by drawing particularly on microhistory, which narrows the scope and scale of observation. A distinctive feature of this study is its integration of multiple narratives of Korea within the larger processes of globalization and world history. To humanize and concretize this history, each chapter focuses on a feature story drawn from popular culture that captures the key issues of the day. The book also addresses the geopolitics and transnational connections that disrupt ideas of national belonging or citizenship. For instance, it examines the uneasy placement of people into ethnoracial and other sociopolitical categories like *ppalgaeng-i* (commie), *saetomin* (people of a new land), and *damunhwa-in* (a multicultural person), formed out of a convergence of peoples, ideals, and cultural orientations, complicating the semantic domain of what it means to be a Korean. This volume endeavors to provide a compelling and accessible gateway to understanding contemporary North and South Korea and their respective diasporas through the mundane and the everyday, contextualized in broader frameworks.

There is one major caveat. In contrast to the surfeit of sources on the South, there is a dearth of available information on North Korea, as fragmentary, selective, and sometimes unreliable narratives culled from defectors or NGO groups construct a particular discourse about the North. Given the secrecy of official statistics, the difficulty in accessing historical archives, and the tendency of the scholarship to focus on the narratives of elites or of men, the coverage of the North is naturally less detailed compared to the

South. At the same time, this volume employs strategies like reading against the grain and listening carefully to marginalized subjects and their silences to analyze the dominant narratives against which they construct their own.

The study begins in 1953 in the aftermath of a devastating civil war, national division, and the emergence of two very different Korean societies in the north and the south. They are separated by a buffer zone—four kilometers wide and 250 kilometers long—along the thirty-eighth parallel, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which is the most heavily militarized border in the world and the last Cold War frontier. Only an armistice agreement holds together a fragile peace, though the specter of nuclear war on the peninsula still haunts both sides of the border. The book then explores how twins born of the Cold War developed two separate identities in the eyes of the world. The North chafes under its image as an isolated, impoverished pariah state caught up in a time warp, with the world's worst human rights record and a reclusive leader who perennially threatens global security with his clandestine nuclear weapons program. In contrast, the South basks in its reputation as a thriving democratic and capitalist state with the eleventh-largest economy in the world, a model for other countries in the Global South to emulate. The volume ends with the latest developments, giving special attention to the increasing global fascination with everything Korean—from K-pop to Samsung phones, cosmetic surgery, Google map images, and Instagram photos of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). In contrast to standard histories, this study examines not only the internal developments of the two Koreas side-by-side but also the diaspora experience, which has challenged the master narratives of national culture, homogeneity, belongingness, and identity. The epilogue offers a

conspectus of the book by examining *Burning*, a recent award-winning film by Lee Chang-dong, one of South Korea's auteurs, in the context of recent regional disputes, from trade to military deployments, that have altered relationships of the peninsula with Japan, China, and the United States and that will certainly influence the future of the two Koreas.