

## History of Korea - Part 8

Michael Downey  
May 19, 2025



The Joseon Dynasty was the beginning of modern day Korea. At the same time, in the name it adopted, it attempted to reach back to the original Old Joseon Dynasty for its identity and legitimacy. The founder of the new dynasty was Gen. Yi Seong-Gye (temple name Taejo) was sent by the last king of Goryeo to the north with an army to do battle with forces of the new Ming Dynasty. On the way he changed his mind and turned back to overthrow the Goryeo regime. He was angry with and opposed to the weak inefficiency of the government. After several attempts to put someone else on the throne that all ended in failure and bloodshed, he ascended the throne himself. He was not inclined to make big changes and attempted to continue things as they were. His new dynasty was largely dominated by the same ruling families and officials that had served the previous regime. Within a short time, succession issues among his sons and rivalries among factions promoting different sons brought an early end to his reign. After six years on the throne he abdicated in favor

of one of his sons. He went into semi-exile and never saw any of his sons again. In his short reign he encouraged the people to identify again as Korean after the long hiatus under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty. He improved relationships with the Chinese Ming Dynasty and although he had been actively involved in combating Japanese Waeko pirates, he also strengthened relations with Japan.

During the Joseon Dynasty, conflicts between neo-Confucianism and Buddhism reached a head. Neo-Confucianism was an ethical philosophy that had developed in Song China. It was based on traditional Confucianism but absorbed self-cultivation cultivation ideas from Buddhism and concepts like Ki, material force, from Taoism. Neo-Confucianism focused on duty and family obligations while Buddhism taught to let go of everything including family and position. They were natural rivals. When Joseon came to power it was led by elites that admired Chinese culture and Confucianism. The ideal of establishing an ordered society based on everyone being aware of their duties and cultivating the character to fulfill them was certainly attractive to the elite. When the founder, King Yi Seon-gye, was laying out the new capital, Seoul, he had Buddhist as well as Neo-confucianist advisors with him. The Buddhist, of course, were well synchronized with shamanism. The question was where to place the city wall on the west side of the city.

After much consultation, it was decided to place the wall in a way to exclude Mt. Inwang (인왕산 법바위) and its Shamanistic and Buddhist shrines from the city of Seoul. The supremacy of Neo-Confucianism and the persecution of Buddhism was established from the beginning. Buddhism was banned from court and temple construction was curtailed. Buddhist lands were confiscated, and limits were placed on the number of monks that could take vows under the Temple Abbots. Under this kind of pressure, Buddhism became more deeply synchronized with Shamanism, the practitioners became more made up of the lower classes, and the temples migrated deep into the mountains.

Life for 80% of the people of Joseon was much unchanged from the Goryeo people. The largest number were engaged in farming, fishing, and trade. (sangmin) The Nobi or slaves were growing in number and there were the under classes. Baekjong, hereditary butchers, leather workers, itinerant entertainers, and Kisaeng also called ginyeo 기녀 made up the lowest classes. The Kisaeng were enslaved women from outcast or enslaved families who were trained to be courtesans, providing artistic performance and conversation for upper class gentlemen. Although members of the lowest class were trained in music, dance, and poetry. Though few in number, they played significant roles in society. Often they were admired for skills in dance and poetry. Through their renown in dance, music, and the composition of poetry they imprinted their tears onto the popular culture. Their poetry was most often about love, loss, and heartbreak. Those familiar with much of Korean popular music today may recognize these roots.

The most famous monarch of the Joseon Kingdom was Sejong, known as Sejong the Great. He ascended the throne when he was 22 years old. His father (Taejong) abdicated in his favor. Sejong's greatest accomplishment was creating Hangul, the phonic writing system for the Korean language. Previously Korean was written in Hanja, Chinese characters which were difficult to memorize and write. Hangul was much simpler and allowed the minimally educated (for example me) to read and write Korean. King

Sejong is not only credited with this advancement, he was also responsible for multiple projects and inventions. His inquiring mind led him to sponsor the development of such scientific devices as rain gauges, sundials, and water clocks. His interest in astronomy led to the invention of celestial maps, globes, and other instruments. It seems he really wanted to improve the lives of his people.



Throughout the Joseon era, various regional and ideological factions struggled for dominance of the political system. The government was often plagued by struggles over succession to the throne. These struggles often ended in fratricide and sometimes matricide. The candidates to the throne all had their supporters among the elite. These developed into rivalries north and south, east and west. The result was a government that was torn asunder and ineffective.

The Imjin wars were a series of invasions by Japan. The primary goal was the invasion of Ming China and Korea was considered the first step. Joseon was not fully prepared and Japan captured a lot of land including both Seoul and Pyongyang. The Ming Dynasty provided troops and with the naval victories of Admiral Yi Sun-sin and his turtle ships, the Japanese were turned back. A second invasion took place in 1597. This time the Koreans were better prepared and drove them off in short order.

The Ming Dynasty was under pressure from the Manchurian Qing forces for ten years and was eventually toppled in 1644. When Joseon threw its support to the Ming, the Qing invaded Korea in 1636. In the invasion, northern and central regions were decimated. Manchu armies raped and pillaged Korean cities over and over again. Korea had to submit and pay tribute to the Qing Dynasty. Korea's elite remained loyal to and considered themselves successors to the civilized Ming and opposed to the barbarian Qing.

The first European to set foot in Korea was a Spanish priest serving with Japanese invasion troops. Later, Dutch sailors were shipwrecked on the southern island of Jeju.

The conservative Confucianists of the Korean elite, after the Manchu invasions, instituted a strict policy of isolationism. In the west Korea became known as the Hermit Kingdom. The first Christian missionary in Korea arrived via Qing China and was a Jesuit Catholic. Christian ideas were anathema to the neo-Confucian sensibilities of the elite. There were no such barriers with the women, slaves and lower classes and the harvest of souls was significant. Large numbers of converts flocked to the new religion. The new religion gave hope to the hopeless under classes. The government saw this to be potentially ripe for unrest and the Catholic Church's opposition to ancestor worship as directly against this important tenet of Confucianism. The government instituted a series of brutal persecutions and outlawed native and foreign Catholics. Twenty thousand or more native and foreign Catholics were martyred. They came close to wiping out the Catholic Church but believers rebounded and it is one of the largest Christian denominations in Korea today. Protestantism was brought by mostly Missionaries from Great Britain and the United States. They spent a lot of effort building schools, hospitals, orphanages, and universities. The most well-known was an American named Underwood and the money he spent in Korea came from the Underwood Typewriter fortune. Many today refer to Presbyterianism as the 'ORIGINAL' church in Korea.

The most important event in the modern history of Asia was the meeting of East and West. When the European powers arrived, the circumstances of that meeting has greatly impacted the history of East Asia ever since. The main East Asian nations are China, Japan, and Korea. Each of these nations were in a long downward spiral when the outsiders suddenly showed up. China Was huge and had been a great civilization for a very long time but it was in decline politically, economically, and socially when they encountered the west. It was a lopsided meeting. The industrialized west was able to dominate China in a shameful way.

The same could be said about Japan and Korea. The west arrived with their ocean-going ships, guns, and cannon. More importantly they had technology, political ideology and new religions. They were sure they



were superior to native Asians. The ways the three countries reacted to the onslaught were different but the results were much the same.



The Taiping and Boxer uprisings in China, the Dan Hak rebellion in Korea and the Meiji Revolution in Japan were all in response to imperialism from the west, as well as the simultaneous crumbling of the old dynasties and power structures in the east. Modern history, including the Pacific War of World War 2, the division of the Korean peninsula into north and south, the rise of and the victory of the Communist Party of China, are all results of this same dynamic."

In the 19th century boy kings came to the Korean throne in succession, and their maternal relatives seized power and plunged the government into a state of chaos. One popular uprising followed another in the provinces, and the whole nation seethed with discontent and resentment. During the 19th century, drought and floods alternately struck rice fields and farms in Korea and caused great famines. Making matters worse, rulers increased taxes on crops and required more free labor from the starving peasants. Anti-government and anti-landlord sentiment boiled over into violent uprisings.

Many people sought refuge in religion. A new religion founded in 1860 by Choe Je-u, a fallen country yangban scholar,

advocated sweeping social reform appeared. It had much in common with traditional Korean religion and appealed to the rural populace. This religion was called Donghak, or 'Eastern Learning,' as a counterpoise to Seohak, or 'Western Learning' i.e., Roman Catholicism.

Choe Je-u, born in 1824, in North Gyeong sang province, Korea and died in 1864, Seoul, was the founder of the Donghak sect, with an apocalyptic flavor and a hostility to Western culture, which was then beginning to undermine the traditional Korean order. Philosophically it was anti-dynasty, anti-landlord, and anti- all things foreign. It was wildly popular among lower class people especially in southwest Korea. It was a mix of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Shamanism, and Christianity. After repeatedly failing the government exams, Choe in despair heard news of the anti Qing Taiping rebellion in China and its founder who claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. He received a revelation that he should start a new religion that would counter foreign religions and make Korea great again. His teachings promised both material and spiritual healing and wellbeing. He emphasized that God lives in each individual and so each individual was divine. By 1864 it became more than a blip on the Joseon radar. The leadership was arrested and Choe Je-u with twenty top followers were put to death. It's expedient to execute the leaders but not so easy to kill ideas. The Dong Hak ideas flourished and spread to all parts of the country sparking unrest and uprisings.

In 1894, Dong Hak inspired a peasant rebellion. Raising a large army in the southwest, government troops were defeated. This was enough to panic the government in Seoul and when the peasant army marched on the capital the dynasty called on ally Ming China who was happy to send troops. This freaked out the Japanese who sent their own army. The rebellion was crushed. This was the start of the Sino Japanese war and neither belligerent left Korea till the Japanese drove out the Chinese in 1905 to begin the 40 year colonization of Korea by Japan.