

Preface to David Prendergast, *From Elder to Ancestor: Old Age, Death and Inheritance in Modern Korea* (Hawaii, 2005)

Preface by Alan Macfarlane, 2004

It is a privilege to be able to write a few words as a preface to Dr. David Prendergast's work. The book largely speaks for itself. It is a highly readable, professional and insightful account of changes in the treatment and provision for an ageing population in South Korea.

The book is based on intensive fieldwork in the county of Puan in the south-west and adds considerably to our understanding of what is happening in the fusion between older Korean culture and modern western individualism. It revolves around an analysis of the roles of the individual and family in the ongoing development of a capitalist society at the end of the twentieth century.

I will not spoil the treat for the reader by summarizing the argument. Nor, since it is so clearly written and well organized, is it necessary to provide assistance to those who do not know the place or the literature. So I shall use this opportunity to try to do something else.

My wife and I visited David Prendergast and his wife Kim in the middle of their fieldwork for a few days in April 2000. I can therefore contribute some impressions of what an outsider saw, and a few ideas on the contrasts between South Korea and its neighbours. This provides a little context to this detailed account and shows why it is so important and fascinating to see what is happening in Korea now. I shall write in the historic present of my impressions in 2000.

The physical and social world

Anyone who reads something of the history of Korea and the enormous suffering of the people over the centuries will be immensely impressed by what they see now. In a couple of generations, a hard-working and organized people have turned a war-racked and poverty-stricken country into the world's ninth largest economy. It has more recently shown its great dynamism by its incredible recovery from the Asian economic crisis. It is an amazing story and the Koreans are justly proud of their achievements. Most now live in modest affluence in an orderly and peaceable society. These great advances are never to be forgotten, and they lie behind the scenes of turbulent growth which we witness on our short visit.

When we arrive in Seoul, we spend some time wandering through the under-ground and street markets. The whole thing is very familiar, though not exactly the same as either Tokyo or Beijing. A haunting analogy is in the back of my mind, which suddenly crystallizes – of a recent trip to Istanbul. The same energy, the same mix of a recent rural past and rapidly 'westernizing' consumerism. A brief transitory moment when two civilizations are in balance and the streets are piled high with the mix of country products (ginseng, tortoises and live fish, pig's heads, dumplings, vegetables) and smart designer clothes and watches.

The floorshow at the restaurant consists mainly of tourist folk dancing and drumming by women dressed up in traditional costumes as female shamans in red and white. The sixteen different plates were halfway between Japanese 'tempura' and Chinese food – with lots of red pepper added.

We go by tube and taxi to the express bus terminal. A huge chaos of revving buses; apparently the place is re-organized every month or so. Then a three and a half-hour bus drive down to Puan, on the south-western coast, where David is doing his fieldwork. Cherry blossom and forsythia scattered through a city of grey tower blocks and in between hills and small plots of rice land or vegetables.

When we arrive, we walk round the town of Puan. The rush of Seoul has disappeared. There are lots of small stores and markets, with the usual mix of western and local goods and people more relaxed. Again, the goods and shops seem to be somewhere between the very high quality of Japan and the those made in many developing countries such as India.

We go out into the countryside for a walk in a national park. We drive past a funeral. Men wear suits and bright yellow hats of hemp and a brightly coloured coffin. Koreans love bright orange, reds, blues, greens, and not just at death; all the hikers in the national park had bright costumes.

The hard seat bus and countryside reminds us of valley Nepal; small houses, roughly dressed 'peasant' women getting on and off the bus, and behind the foothills, but no great Himalaya. Up a steep winding road and the bus trundles over an un-tarmacked road to a large car park.

Driving back in the bus again we see no domesticated animals apart from a few chickens. The soil is too precious to let animals wander over it. So those that are now kept (cows, pigs, dogs) are kept penned or indoors.

Looking at the age of the peasant men and women who get on the bus brings home a huge looming problem for Korea – the exodus from the countryside. Only the middle-aged and old are left. What will happen when they die out and all the young have jobs in the city or industry? This is something that is directly relevant to David's work.

We then make a three-hour train journey through central Korea. Here are a few impressions. The huge number of Christian churches in every town, their neon crosses scattered symmetrically in conformity to some ecological principle through the high rise apartments.

There is a vast array of plastic used in farming. Half the fields in many areas under plastic – from huge 'green' houses to tiny strips over each individual bed. We are told that this has enormously improved the Korean diet, providing vegetables and fruit throughout the year.

Then there are the immense construction works. In ten years Korea will have an amazing infrastructure of roads and railways. Every valley seems to have curving motorways, half constructed, running this way and that, and the tunnelling and flattening is extraordinary. And yet the roads are relatively empty. Apparently the

recession has been cushioned by this Keynesian expenditure. But what will they do when they run out of space for further building?

In a folk museum the food displays and other materials suggest that by the late nineteenth century, at least, there was the same kind of highly regionalized local culture, implements, food, clothing, as in France or Italy at that time. The material culture seemed to confirm the picture of a bright, ancient, civilization, which had reached a very high level by the tenth century.

In summary, the external world of Korea is a strange blend to an outsider. Cherry blossom, huge mechanical cranes, tall grey apartment blocks, rock music, numerous churches, nuns and Buddhist monks, a vibrant mixture of heavy industrialism and a very colourful, turbulent cultural past. A large construction site coming out of recession, built of steel and stone. A blend of north China, Istanbul and small town America in the 1950's – religious, consumerist, individualist, quite authoritarian, colourful, stodge and red pepper, a fiery and interesting place.

Korea and her neighbours

A short visit and some reading, as well as the detailed work of Dr. Prendergast, gives the impression that basically Korea is a 'cousin' of China. Not the same, but structurally and physically part of the same family. This visit seems to hint at some of the underlying traits of Chinese influenced civilizations – patriarchy, Confucianism, unilineal descent, clans, wood and stone, extrovert, puritanical.

On our last evening it was particularly helpful to talk to various leading anthropologists of East Asia, especially Professors Kwang-Ok Kim and Okpyo Moon. Professor Moon suggests that, up to about the tenth century, Korea was very different in its social structure from China, with equal inheritance by all the children, perhaps ideas of descent traced through both lines. Then the gradual pressure and example of China over time led to the Confucianization of Korea, which really only seeped down to the bottom of society by the later eighteenth century.

So it might be conjectured that Japan and Korea were quite similar in the sixth century. Then both went through a Chinese phase. Japan evolved out of this into an authentic feudal period – and also escaped the huge effect of the Mongol and Manchu invasions. Korea never went through a feudal period and was subject to Chinese, Mongol, Manchu and Japanese pressures. It was also subject to pressures from within; population explosion, agricultural and other technological developments, the fragmentation of landholdings.

A combination of these forces pushed it towards a more Confucian, rigid, system, favouring one son in inheritance, based on male-connected clans. Despite some striking differences, in particular the development of phonetic writing, it looked more and more like northern China. In many respects it became more orthodoxly 'Chinese' than China, even a mandarin class (*yangban*) emerged.

Yet beneath it all, there were memories and traditions of something different. A sort of vestige of the separation of spheres which we call 'modernity'. The rapid

development of Korea and its adoption of Christianity are both indications of a civilization which only wore Chinese Confucianism as a cloak.

Thus looking at East Asia as a whole, one has a very interesting set of case studies. In the centre is China, a vast, outwardly expanding, ancient civilization of the Han, absorbing the peoples round it and already by the birth of Christ very technologically and socially sophisticated. On its flanks a number of civilizations almost equally old, but with different roots and cultures, in particular Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. As the centuries passed by they were attracted and repulsed by the central magnet of China. Japan 'became' Chinese/Korean in the seventh to ninth centuries, then veered away. Korea remained Chinese influenced and expanded this influence.

The book

David Prendergast's study helps us to understand some of the problems and challenges that many industrial societies are now facing and will face increasingly in the future as their populations age. We in the West are already increasingly worried about this issue, but as Dr Prendergast points out, over the next half century a situation will emerge in South Korea where more than one third of its total population will be over the age of 65. This is a huge burden, and is affecting not only Korea but many east Asian countries, including Japan (already) and China (in the near future).

The main theme of the book concerns how the current political authorities are trying to plan and legislate for this by reappraising the responsibilities of the family, inheritance and mortuary practices, employment relations, the provisions of welfare and so on. The book also complements this through an analysis of how families and individuals in those families are reacting, and in some cases resisting, these contemporary challenges. It explores how relationships and obligations are negotiated towards the end of the life cycle on a number of different levels.

This account is particularly fascinating since the Korean solutions differ markedly from those in other countries, for instance by making the obligations of children to support their parents a legal duty, enforceable by the courts, in a way which has not happened in Japan or the West and is unlikely, I suspect, to happen in China.