Nationalism is one of the most significant ideological forces on the Korean peninsula today in both the north and the south. In fact, a substantial portion of the tension in the region is connected to the failure to establish a unified state for the Korean nation. Moreover, of the factors making unification and an easing of tensions difficult, one of the most important is the very different forms of nationalism followed by the north and south. While it is common to place the origins of the division of the peninsula in post–World War II superpower politics, its roots can also be found in the different way Koreans responded to imperialism, particularly that of Japan, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the colonial period of 1910–1945, when Korea was under direct Japanese rule. This chapter will therefore explore Korean nationalism, first by briefly considering pre-modern Korean identity, and then examining the development of nationalist thought from 1875, the year of the Kanghwa Forts Incident, in which Japan forced Korea to “open” to the modern world, to 1945, when Korea was liberated from Japanese rule. In particular, it will focus on how Korean nationalists adapted other ideologies, such as liberalism or Communism, in hopes that they would help them build a strong and independent nation-state, and on how the colonial experience shaped Korean nationalism.

Pre-modern roots of Korean nationalism

Scholars of nationalism debate whether nationalism is a product of modernity or whether it existed, at least in some form, in pre-modern times (Gat 2012). These debates also influence Korean scholars, with some arguing that something very close to modern nationalism existed in Korea since the Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392) or even since unified Silla (668–935) (Pak 2008). For our purposes, rather than engaging directly with this debate, we will focus on how there did exist in pre-modern Korea a sense that there was a close relationship between the dynastic states that ruled the peninsula, the people who were ruled, the land on which those people lived and which the state claimed sovereignty over, the language they spoke, and the values they shared. While it is difficult to assess a sense of identity among the common people, Azar Gat has pointed out that their reactions during times of foreign invasion can provide us some sense of whether or not a group of people feel such an identity (2012). In this case, it is worth noting that many Koreans, including the common people, would stubbornly, though in the
end unsuccessfully, resist the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. Moreover, the first written reference to Tan’gun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation, appeared in the *Samguk Yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), a text written shortly after Korea finally submitted to Mongol overlordship, signifying that subjugation did not mean an end to Korean identity (Timothy Lee 2009).² Similarly, during the Japanese invasions of 1592–1597, known as the Imjin War, common people, led by local gentry or Buddhist monks, would rally to the defense of their country, even when the king or high officials had fled (Hawley 2005).

It is true that Korea under the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910) was a vassal state of Ming Dynasty China (1368–1644), and Korea participated, largely enthusiastically, in the Sinocentric world order. This should not, however, be seen as the denial of a Korean identity. Korea was still an independent country that maintained its own army and foreign policy, and while it might adopt Ming law, it felt free to revise that law as needed to fit Korean realities (Marie Kim 2012: 22). During this time, the deeply Confucian King Sejong even ordered the creation of a Korean alphabet, han’gŭl (Mi-rim Yoo 2006). Moreover, the commitment to Neo-Confucian civilization and gratitude for Ming intervention on Korea’s behalf during the Imjin War led to such stubborn Korean resistance that the rising Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) had to invade twice (1627 and 1636) to obtain their submission. Even after the Ming fell, Koreans still performed Confucian rituals venerating their emperors and identified themselves as the last bastion of true civilization, not only strengthening, at least among the elite, their sense of selves as Koreans but also providing them with a mission, the preservation of that Confucian civilization (Haboush 1999). Moreover, while Chosŏn Korea was an extraordinarily hierarchical society, the dynasty had long encouraged the values associated with Confucian civilization, both among elites and among the common people, and they had diffused all throughout society, providing Koreans with shared values and decreasing the gap between elite and commoner worldviews (Deuchler 1977). The growing sense of this identity can be seen in the use of words like tongp’o (literally meaning “same womb” and figuratively meaning something like “compatriot”) to refer to all Koreans. For instance, King Yongjo (r. 1724–1776), when calling for an end to certain harsh punishments against the common people, referred to them using this term (Pak 2010).

Thus, before the modern period, there existed on the peninsula a group of people who spoke the same language, had their own alphabet, and had lived under the rule of two continuous dynastic states over roughly the same territory for nearly a millennium, giving rise to an identity that was increasingly claimed by both commoners and elites. At the same time, this was not modern nationalism. The commoners were still subjects—they were not expected to participate actively or even comment publicly on government matters. Moreover, their identity was more closely connected to the dynastic states that ruled them than to an independent sense of Koreanness. Thus, while not quite modern nationalism, there were the pieces of a distinctive Korean identity in existence. It would be under the pressure of foreign imperialism that some Koreans would begin to weld those disparate pieces together into a modern national identity.

**Development of modern nationalism: 1876–1910**

In 1875, a Japanese flotilla purposefully provoked the batteries of Kanghwa Fort, an important installation that guarded the capital Seoul, into firing upon it. Japanese forces subsequently seized the fort and used the threat of recriminations over the incident to force the Chosŏn state to accept an unequal treaty. King Kojong (r. 1863–1907), fearing the Japanese might invade and believing that a more open foreign policy than that followed by his father was warranted, accepted the Treaty of Kanghwa, which was signed in 1876. In the years that followed, the United States
and other Western powers signed treaties with Korea, and thus the country opened to influence from nations outside the traditional Sinocentric world order (Deuchler 1977).

The opening of the country brought Koreans into contact with numerous new ideologies. One of the most powerful was modern nationalism, which had as its goal the creation of a powerful nation-state in which the people would actively identify with and sacrifice for the nation. The nation was to rule itself, to be its own master, so domination or even substantial influence by foreigners was anathema. For Korean nationalists, this would mean departure from the hallowed tradition of honoring China as a suzerain and elder brother state and attempting to establish a relationship of equality, as called for by modern international law (Schmid 2002: 56–101). In addition to reformulating its relationships with other countries, the Korean state also had to transform itself into a strong centralized government that, through such institutions as public schools, could develop an educated populace who could actively serve the nation and instill in them a sense of nationalism. Success in such projects would in turn bring the national power necessary to maintain independence. Moreover, because in the Western system of international law nation-states were understood to be the only true sovereign actors in the world, it was legal for them to impose their rule over territories whose polities did not, in their view, measure up to “civilized” standards. Thus, Koreans had to quickly establish a powerful nation-state or risk becoming a colony.

Nationalism was not the only new idea to enter Korea. Other, related ideologies came in as well. One of the most important was the concept of “civilization and enlightenment” thought (J. bunmei kaika, K. munmyŏng kaehwa), a term coined by the Japanese intellectual, educator, and reformer Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) but which today could be fairly equated with “modernity” and the process of “modernization” (Craig 2009: 33–41) This body of thought, neither the product of a single individual or school, is defined by the notion of progress—that such things as knowledge, the arts, culture, and government advance through hierarchical stages, from inferior to superior. Thus, the nation-state stood above, and was better than, the pre-modern state and far beyond the tribal confederacy. The progress of knowledge was closely associated with the great advances made in science and technology that made it possible for the members of more advanced societies to control their environment, promising greater prosperity, comfort, and happiness in the future (Adas 1989). Industrial output, average lifespan, and rates of disease could all be measured empirically and compared, providing scientific proof of which countries were more advanced, more “civilized,” than others. Similarly, one of the highest marks of civilization was to bring the fruits of modernity to a country that had not been able to progress on its own, enabling nation-states to justify colonization as either an act of altruism or enlightened self-interest (Dudden 2005: 8–9; Adas 1989: 199–270). No contradiction was seen between imperialism and liberal democracy, which, like empire-building, was seen as the mark of an advanced country.

While civilization and enlightenment offered promises of a glorious tomorrow to nationalists, Social Darwinism, the application of Charles Darwin’s and Herbert Spencer’s ideas about natural selection to human society, promised a dark future should they fail to modernize. Social Darwinism held that the world was an arena where vicious struggles for survival between various nations and races took place, in Korean, literally the “strong eat and the weak are meat” (yakyuk kang sik ). If the weak failed to modernize, it was their own fault, and the strong had every right to take from them what little they had, as they were simply following the scientific laws of the universe (Tikhonov 2010). One reaction to Social Darwinist visions of a world locked in eternal and bloody struggle was Pan-Asianism. According to this ideology, though of different nations (China, Japan, and Korea), because they were of the same (yellow) race, Asian people should unite against (white) imperialism (Rausch 2012). Japan was often assigned a special place by
Korean nationalists as a leader and educator of other Asian countries, as it was the first one to successfully establish a modern nation-state. Chinese and Koreans who ascribed to Pan-Asianism hoped that Japan would act as a benevolent leader of Asia and help them modernize without infringing on their sovereignty. In practice, Japan would often use Pan-Asianist ideals to justify taking increasing control over its neighbors in a way little different from that of the white empires (Schmid 2002: 87–101; Ch’oe 2003: 104–13).

For Korea to survive as an independent country, it needed to adopt modern nationalism and the accompanying ideologies of modernity. Doing so would mean remaking the state and its relationship to society and the nation and therefore naturally raised questions about identity. What did it mean to be a Korean? What had to be criticized and abandoned? What must be reformed? Who should Korea look to as a model of reform: China, Japan, or the United States? How much leeway should the state allow public discussions of these questions? Different Koreans answered these questions differently. For instance, in 1884 a group of “progressive” Korean officials, who believed Korea should follow Japan by adopting radical reform, launched a violent coup against another group who followed China’s more conservative model known as “self-strengthening.” The progressives seized the king and for three days issued reforms influenced by civilization and enlightenment thought before a Chinese army restored power to the king and the pro-China faction (Cook 1982).

It wasn’t just elites who reacted to Korea’s changing situation—the common people did as well. Exposure to the vagaries of international trade combined with religious oppression and government corruption led leaders of the Tonghak faith, a new religion founded in Korea in 1860, to launch a rebellion in 1894. Though the rebels, by no means all followers of the religion, initially vented their wrath against the Chosŏn state, they also attacked foreigners, and when China and Japan sent troops to help put down the rising, they fought with them too. Once this proto-nationalist movement was suppressed, fighting broke out between Chinese and Japanese troops, resulting in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Japan won the war but lost the peace when King Kojong escaped its clutches and hid in the Russian Embassy following the Japanese-ordered assassination of his wife Queen Min (Duus 1995; Larsen 2008).

After Kojong returned to his palace in 1897, the Chosŏn state enjoyed a period of relative peace in which it could actively pursue reform. For example, in order to break away from the Sino-centric diplomatic order and assert its own independence, King Kojong was transformed into the Kwangmu Emperor, officially making him the equal of his Chinese and Japanese counterparts. Similarly, the old gate which had been used to welcome Chinese embassies was torn down and an “Independence Gate” erected in its place. Such changes were not simply cosmetic. They contained within them deep shifts in how more and more Koreans saw their country—no longer as a vassal of China but as an independent nation-state (Schmid 2002).

Similarly, there were major reforms in the government, and many Kabo-era projects begun when Korea was briefly under Japanese dominance, such as the cadastral survey and the household registry, were continued. The state also proved its willingness to actively support industry and the economic development of the country, a major change from previous Confucian-driven neglect (Hwang 2006).

There were, however, numerous factors working against the Chosŏn government’s transformation into a modern nation-state. As James Palais has shown, the Chosŏn Dynasty was able to endure for so long (over 500 years) because it effectively worked out a balance of power between the throne and the yangban elite that served both their needs (1991: 4–19). The stability this brought, however, made it impossible for either the monarch or officialdom to gain the strength necessary to establish the centralized institutions needed to transform Korea into a modern nation-state capable of defending itself from foreign empires, overcoming opposition to reforms,
or even agreeing over what reforms needed to be taken. Moreover, the weakness of the state itself meant that it was perpetually cash-starved, and there proved to be insufficient time for its limited program of reforms to bear fruit before Korea’s independence fell victim to great power politics (Larsen 2008).

The issues new ideologies also raised about Korean identity made reform difficult, in particular because of differences of opinion regarding the relationship between the Chosŏn Dynasty and the Korean nation-state. Those who saw the two as inseparable, such as the royal family and those officials whose worldview and position were dependent upon them, would not enact reforms that might harm the interests of the dynasty. This question of the nation-state and its connection to the dynasty led to an ambiguous relationship between the state and non-governmental actors in the growing public sphere as newspapers began appearing in Korea, allowing more and more Koreans to engage in public discourse. These newspapers introduced Koreans to new concepts, such as “nation” and “citizen” (utilizing the word “tongp’o” to ease the transition in thinking) and also helped spread new ideas about history and culture in which the Korean nation and people stood at the center (Pak 2008). While many of these newspapers first appeared in Chinese or in mixed Korean and Chinese, one of the most important, The Independent, was completely in han’gŭl (though it was also printed in an English edition). This newspaper was the organ of the Independence Club, founded in 1896. Dominated by pro-American proponents of civilization and enlightenment thought, in addition to publishing its newspaper, it sponsored public speeches, meetings, and debates. Moreover, it was particularly effective at mobilizing public support and so played an important role in the return of the King from the Russian consulate, his crowning as emperor, and the erection of the Independence Gate. However, when the club was no longer deemed useful by the state and had, by working for the establishment of a legislature that would have real power and be filled with many members of the club, become a threat to the old order, it was violently suppressed. Establishing a legislature and working with the club would have helped to create the linkage between the people and the government (nationalistic democracy) necessary for building an independent nation-state. However, it would also have weakened the power of the monarch and the officials dependent on him for their power and was therefore disbanded, illustrating the limits of reform during the Kwangmu era (Chandra 1988).

Despite the crushing of the Independence Club, many Koreans were still willing to work to transform their country into an enlightened nation-state in the growing public sphere as private citizens. In part, this was because civilization and enlightenment thought closely connected the progress of individuals with the advancement of their nations, encouraging non-officials to take an active role in national affairs. However, Korean activists disagreed over what should be done. Some believed that Japan would benevolently help Korea to modernize and become a truly independent state and so supported its increasing influence on the peninsula. The leadership of the Ilchinhoe, a large and powerful populist organization, was particularly welcoming and even petitioned Japan to annex Korea (Moon 2013). Similarly, those Koreans who favored Pan-Asianism might see growing Japanese involvement in the peninsula as the necessary price for modernization. Civilization and enlightenment thought thus proved to be a two-edged sword: nationalists frequently criticized Korea for its failure to live up to enlightened standards in order to spur on reform, but such criticism could also be utilized to justify Japan’s increasing control of Korea (Schmid 2002: 101–138; Wells 1990: 48–70). Even among those who agreed that independence came first, there was still the question of whether to resist peacefully or violently.

While Koreans struggled over the future of their developing nation, Japan followed up its victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) by establishing a protectorate in Korea. In 1907,
the Korean Emperor secretly dispatched representatives to the peace talks being held in The Hague. As Korea had been forced to sign away its right to diplomatic representation in the 1905 protectorate treaty, this act was used as a pretext to force his abdication, leading to the ascension of his much more pliable son Sunjong (1874–1926). He in turn signed another treaty giving Japan even more power. In addition, the Korean army was disbanded. This turned out to be a mistake, as the now unemployed soldiers took their arms and fled, forming “righteous armies” (ŭibyŏng) that joined other such bands to violently oppose Japan. Their continuous attacks led Japan to undertake a brutal pacification campaign, which resulted in the deaths of thousands, mostly Koreans, including soldiers and civilians (Yong Ha Shin 1991: 207–276). Korean nationalists also engaged in individual acts of violence. In 1908, Chang In-hwan (1875–1930) and Chŏn Myŏng-un (1884–1947) assassinated Durham White Stevens (1851–1908) (Dudden 2005: 81–89). In December of the following year, Yi Chae-myŏng (1890–1910) severely wounded the pro-Japanese prime minister of Korea Yi Wan-yong (1857–1926). He had been inspired by An Chung-gŭn’s successful October assassination of Itō Hirobumi (Cho 1994; Rausch 2012). However, these lone acts of violence were not enough, and in 1910, five months after the execution of An Chung-gŭn, Japan formally annexed Korea. Korean nationalists had to shift from trying to save the nation to restoring it.

Nationalism: persecution and unity, 1910–1919

Armed resistance in the form of “righteous army” bands would continue for several years after annexation, when brutal Japanese pacification campaigns destroyed them or forced them out of the peninsula, typically to Manchuria. At the same time, Japan enacted other policies aimed at controlling and disciplining the Korean populace. The colonial police force (many of whose members were Koreans) and gendarme were expanded and given the power to both make arrests and inflict summary punishments (Chulwoo Lee 2000). For instance, the police enforced sanitary ordinances that governed the disposal of waste and where and how animals could be butchered, and could hand out summary punishments as they saw fit (Henry 2014: chapter 2). The enforcement of such laws was a part of Japan’s promise, which served to justify its colonial project in Korea, that it would modernize the country. Modernization would also allow Japan to develop and extract resources from Korea, strengthening the empire. As Japan had justified its annexation of Korea by arguing that it was best suited to modernize the country owing to their shared racial ancestry, Japan adopted a policy of assimilation, asserting that it would raise up its long-lost Korean cousins and make them into modern Japanese subjects (Caprio 2009). Nationalists naturally opposed such policies, as they would weaken a sense of Korean identity. The effects of the policy of assimilation were, however, limited because of the racial prejudice of many Japanese who both disliked Koreans and did not want them to rise, as doing so would make them competitors for limited jobs. Thus, schools, which theoretically could have done much to encourage assimilation, owing to the preferential treatment of Japanese and prejudice against Koreans, instead served as markers of separation, rather than similarity, and encouraged resistance to the regime (Oh and Kim 2013).

Japanese authorities used the coercive powers of the colonial state to suppress nationalists and the threat they posed to colonial rule. For instance, the flourishing and independent Korean-language press was shut down. Moreover, coercion was even used against those who might peacefully challenge the state. In 1911, 123 Korean nationalists were arrested on the false accusation that they had plotted to assassinate the Governor General of Korea. Confessions were obtained through the liberal use of torture, some of which even claimed that Protestant
missionaries were part of the plot and had provided weapons. In the end, 105 of these men were sentenced to prison terms of up to ten years. While limited somewhat by Western criticism, the savagery of such actions was a clear signal to nationalists that they must tread carefully lest they face brutal punishment (Kang 1997; Choi 2007).

This incident illustrates an important fact about Korean nationalism during this time—its religious core. Of the 123 men arrested, the vast majority of them were Protestant Christians. While foreign missionaries sought to be apolitical and focused on evangelical activities, their status as citizens of nations that Japan had to maintain good relations with (most were Americans and British) meant that the Japanese colonial government did not have a completely free hand in how it treated members of their flock. In addition, Japan had to guarantee a certain amount of religious freedom in order to maintain its claims that it had come to bring “civilization” to Korea. Thus, churches served as spaces where Koreans could meet and discuss the issues they faced. Moreover, the churches and the institutions connected to them, particularly schools, provided a structure that could be used to organize challenges to the colonial state. Finally, while not overtly challenging the colonial state, the democratic organization of Protestant Christianity, particularly Presbyterianism, as well as the existence of missionary schools, meant that Koreans would be presented with stories of freedom and resistance against tyranny and presented with a democratic and capitalistic modernity different from that enacted by the Japanese colonial state in Korea, providing a foundation from which to challenge Japanese authority (Wells 1990: 84–89; Park 2014). Korean Protestant Christians even developed their own distinctive forms of nationalism (Wells 1990). While not Christian, the successor of Tonghak, Ch’ŏndogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way), also, in the name of religious freedom, was given some space to develop similar ideas (Park 2015).

Koreans living outside the peninsula had more freedom to openly discuss how the Korean nation could be restored. For instance, working in Shanghai, the nationalist Sin Ch’ae-ho (1880–1936), who had written biographies of Korean military heroes before annexation, continued this work in 1916 through his novel *Dream of Heaven* (*Kkŭm hanŭl*), which was dedicated to the restoration of the martial spirit in Korea (Jager 2003; Em 2000). This was itself a continuation of nationalist theorists who had argued that while the Korean state, which was seen metaphorically as a “body,” might weaken or even die, the Korean national “spirit” could continue to live, and through cultivation, regain its state (Shin 2006). The growing popularity and promise of liberalism in the 1910s, as well as the collapse of dynastic resistance to the Japanese colonial state (the royal family had been incorporated into Japan’s imperial house), led to exiled nationalist leaders Sin Kyu-sik and Pak Un-sik to issue a declaration in 1917 that proclaimed that Korean sovereignty lay not in the emperor but in the people, rhetorically rejecting the Japanese empire’s attempt to use the house of Yi to control the people and aligning the nationalist movement with a republican form of government (Pak 2008).

The victory of liberal democracies in World War I (1914–1918) and American president Woodrow Wilson’s calls for national self-determination, which coincided with the death of Korea’s last independent monarch, Kojong, convinced many nationalists that they should launch a movement that would peacefully demand Korean independence. Protestant and Ch’ŏndogyo nationalists, as well as some Buddhists, organized what has become known as the March First Movement. All of the signatories of the March First declaration of independence belonged to one of these three religions, and twenty-nine of them assembled in a Seoul restaurant on that day in 1919. Their declaration was read out loud, and they were then arrested by the police, leaving the movement without its leaders. The declaration was read out loud by other nationalists, with students mobilized largely through religious schools passing out copies and
national flags, leading to widespread demonstrations that quickly spread throughout the peninsula, mobilizing as many as one million people (out of a population of approximately twenty million) to take part. Unfortunately, national self-determination was intended only for ethnic minorities in Europe who had been part of the defeated Central Powers—Japan was an ally and so not affected. Thus, the liberal democracies did not support the Korean bid for independence, and the Japanese colonial government, shocked at the ability of Korean nationalists to organize the movement in complete secrecy, reacted with brutal violence, killing thousands (Chong-Sik Lee 1963; Ku 1985).

Though the March First Movement failed in its attempt to win independence for Korea, it illustrates two important aspects of Korean nationalism. First, the March First Movement was truly a mass movement. The suffering of colonization and the shame of foreign rule, experienced largely through the coercive power of the colonial state, which penetrated more deeply into society than the Chosŏn Dynasty, led to the painful realization of the sad fate of a nation that loses its own state. The experience of colonial rule, with accompanying ethnic prejudice, which excluded Koreans from the higher levels of power, gave Koreans a stronger sense of their own identity and a consequent desire to obtain their own state which they themselves would govern. This led to a feeling of unity among Koreans in which their national identity trumped all others, allowing people who made conflicting religious claims to work together. Secondly, not only was nationalism spreading among the Korean populace, it was reaching people who had previously stood at the margins of Korean political life—the youth and women. It was not only older men who participated in the movement, but women as well. Even in the countryside, young female teachers might lead their students in shouts of “Long live Korean independence!” (Hildi Kang 2001: Chapter 2). The entry of such new political actors is well illustrated by the poignant and tragic story of Yu Kwan-sun (1902–1920). This young woman came from a rural family who had converted to Christianity. Through their contact with Western missionaries, Yu was able to attend a Christian school, exposing her to an understanding of Protestant nationalism. This inspired her to take part in the March First Movement, leading to her arrest and death from torture in a Japanese prison. Nationalism had thus taken root as a worldview for which many Koreans, both young and old, men and women, of different religions, would struggle and die for.

Nationalism divided, 1919–1930s

Almost immediately following the beginning of the March First Movement, exiled Korean nationalists leaders met in Shanghai, formally establishing the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in April of 1919. While very few Koreans actually lived in Shanghai, the comparative freedom of the city and its proximity to Korea and to the large Korean populations in Manchuria and the Soviet Union made it an ideal location. One of the first acts of the new government was to send a delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in an unsuccessful bid to secure Korean independence. In addition, as the provisional government sought to establish a democratic, liberal republic, it sought assistance from Western countries. The United States received particular attention, with the eventual first president of the Republic of Korea, Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŏng-man) (1875–1965), along with other Korean nationalists, making contact with American politicians and attempting to win sympathy for Korean independence through public speeches and publications. At the same time, despite its political orientations, the provisional government also made contact with the Soviet Union and received some aid from it. However, while enjoying some support at first, by 1921, factional struggles, the heavy-
handedness of its first executive, Syngman Rhee, and a lack of funds led to the decline of the
government’s influence. Though it would continue to exist until Korea’s liberation in 1945, it
would fail to unite all Koreans into a common nationalist struggle (Chong-Sik Lee 1963).

The situation in Korea itself was quite complex. The March First Movement failed in its
immediate goal of securing Korea’s independence, leading to the death of thousands. Moreover,
after the refusal of Western democracies to intervene on Korea’s behalf, it was not clear what
strategy Korean nationalists should turn to next. The Japanese colonial government, realizing
that its previous policy had been too strict, shifted to the so-called “cultural policy.” While
surveillance and the number of police actually increased under this policy, the government relaxed
some of the more onerous aspects of colonial rule, for example by abandoning the policy of
summary flogging (Chulwoo Lee 2000), and allowed for more space for Koreans to discuss
national affairs, including even the eventual possibility of independence. Thus, though censored
and at best semi-free, Koreans were able to launch their own journals and newspapers,
establishing a public sphere in which they could discuss what direction Korean nationalism should
take (Yong-jick Kim 2013).

The new “cultural policy” led to the development of “cultural nationalism,” which
abandoned attempts at immediate political reform in favor of developing Korea’s “culture.”
Nationalists such as Yi Kwang-su, the Japanese-educated author of “A Theory of National
Reconstruction” (Minjok kaegoron) blamed Korea’s colonization on the under-developed nature
of Korean culture and argued that elite-led mass education of the Korean people would transform
them morally and spiritually, bringing modernity and national independence (Robinson 2014;
Shin 2006). Two examples of the activities carried out by cultural nationalists were the campaign
to establish a university in Korea, which would train leaders for the future, and a movement
for Koreans to buy Korean-made goods, which would further develop Korean business. By
taking this approach, Korean nationalists could both work for the modernization and
independence of Korea without running afoul of the massive coercive power possessed by the
Japanese colonial state. While initially meeting with success, such campaigns had certain
limitations. For instance, while it would not utilize naked coercion, the Japanese state undercut
and subverted these movements: the colonial government established a university (though it
made sure that it served the interests of Japanese living in the colony before Koreans) and courted
Korean business leaders, encouraging them to choose class and empire over nation (Robinson

Japanese oppression had united Koreans during the March First Movement behind a
religiously affiliated leadership. However, the growing public sphere, the failure of liberal
democracies to assist Korea, and the success of the Russian Revolution (1917) led some Korean
nationalists to turn away from such “bourgeois” forms of nationalism and look to Marxism and
socialism as both an alternative means of modernization and as a way gaining national independ-
ence. Korean newspapers and journals began to discuss such ideas more freely and Korean
Communist parties were even established in Russia (1918) and in Shanghai (1919). A Communist
party was even established for a short time in Korea in 1925 before it was forcibly disbanded
by the Japanese colonial state (it would be reformed and dissolved several more times) (Ch’ŏn
2008).

While the rise of the nationalist left, made possible by the new “cultural policy,” divided
the nationalist movement, there were attempts at union. For instance, from 1927 to 1931, left
and right united in the Sin’ganhoe (New Trunk Association) to pursue nationalist activities.
However, in the end, the left, led by underground Communists, dissolved the organization,
realizing that instead of being able to use it to control the nationalist right, it was undermining
their own cohesion (Chong-Sik Lee 1963; Ch’ŏn 2008). Such a result is not surprising considering the theoretical differences between the sides. The left saw the right, which within the Korean was comprised almost wholly of cultural nationalists, as unrealistic in their belief that once Korea became sufficiently advanced enough, Japan would just peacefully permit Korean independence. Moreover, even if they did obtain independence, Korea would still face the class divisions and economic inequality that leftists opposed. In fact, the left saw the university and buy Korean movements as attempts by rightist nationalists to selfishly pursue their own class interests under the cloak of Korean nationalism. Instead of emphasizing such bourgeois concerns, leftist nationalists argued that Koreans should focus on the workers and peasants. Moreover, rather than pursuing apolitical movements, nationalists should seek alliances with socialist movements in other countries in order to bring worldwide national and economic revolutions (Robinson 2014). Though ultimately correct that the Japanese empire would not simply allow Korea to go without a fight, whenever the left attempted to organize anything like a political revolution, it faced the full force of state coercion (Caprio 2013). Thus, on the peninsula itself, the rise of the left split the nationalist movement and exposed the limitations of cultural nationalism but was unable to establish a new strategy that could unite the movement or resolve the basic issue that allowed Japan to control Korea: its near complete monopoly of the use of violence.

At the center of these divisions was the fact that nationalism is not an all-encompassing ideology that can exist on its own. Nationalism had to mix with another ideology, be it liberal democracy or socialism, in order to establish a working government. No longer not the only hegemonic force within Korean nationalism, but facing criticism that religion actually prevented the rise of modernity and national liberation, religious nationalists also looked to their own traditions to develop ways to deal with both the problem of colonization and the growing economic and social dislocations that arose from Korea’s increasing integration into both the Japanese empire and the world economy. In addition to being important leaders within traditional cultural nationalist circles that sought to make Korea a Christian democracy similar to the United States, some religious leaders, particularly Protestants and members of Ch’ŏndogyo, looked to a reconstructed and revitalized countryside as providing an alternative path to modernity outside of both industrial capitalism and socialism in which villages organized around spirituality, self-support, and mutual aid would resolve the serious economic and social issues Korea faced and allow the peasants to live happy and fulfilled lives. Moreover, these movements located Korean national identity within the countryside, with the implication that the liberation of the peasantry would also lead to national liberation (Park 2015).

The “cultural policy” also meant a greater space for Korean scholars to conduct research, access new intellectual trends, and publish their findings. And since scholars who were proponents of the Japanese colonial project in Korea presented the policy of assimilation as a kind of family reunion and presented pre-annexation Korea as a stagnant country that could not govern itself, it was natural for Korean nationalists to enter the world of academia to challenge such claims, thereby chipping away at the arguments justifying colonization. In particular, Korean nationalist historians looked back to ancient history to show the existence of powerful, advanced Korean states. For instance, Ch’oe Nam-sŏn (1890–1957), the author of the March First Movement’s declaration of independence, presented Tan’gun, the putative ancestor of the Korean nation, as a historical figure who had ruled a major civilization. Such focus on Tan’gun pointed to an essentialized, immutable, and biological origin of Korean identity, signifying that imperial attempts at assimilation were doomed to fail. Similarly, studies on Korean language, linguistics, and literature were also intended to heighten a sense of difference between Koreans and Japanese, a necessary defense against assimilation and a foundation from which to build a future nation-state (Shin 2006).
Years of violence, 1931–1945

While the Japanese colonial state was willing to tolerate the nationalist movement within the peninsula to a certain degree, those who went too far faced its coercive power, suffering torture, imprisonment, and death. The coercive power of the government meant that, with the exception of largely spontaneous outbursts of violence, such as the student protests of 1929 that were sparked by Japanese harassment of Korean schoolgirls, nationalist movements within the peninsula remained largely peaceful. In contrast, nationalists in exile had more freedom to work for independence, and while some, like Syngman Rhee, would utilize peaceful means, such as attempting to win American support for Korean independence (Lew 2014), others would turn to violence. In particular, after the mid-1910s, violent resistance to Japanese colonial rule in Korea was centered largely in Manchuria, as large areas within it were outside the reach of Japan or any effective government for that matter. Korean nationalists located there would launch raids across the border into Korea or attack Japanese targets within the region. As on the peninsula, these Korean nationalists were not united, particularly after the Russian Revolution and the growing interest of Koreans in Communism. Fighting could even break out between Communist and non-Communist Korean nationalists, though over time, the former became the dominant force, thanks to assistance from the Soviet Union and later from Chinese Communists (Chong-Sik Lee 1963; Yŏm 2008).

Something of the shape and significance, as well as the limitations, of the Korean nationalist movement in Manchuria can be seen in the early career of Kim Il Sung, the future dictator of North Korea. Kim’s father died while he was young, soon to be followed by his mother, leaving the young man an orphan. Fortunately for Kim, he had an opportunity to receive an education, attending both Korean and Chinese-language schools and completing the eighth grade, before he fell in with a Communist guerrilla band in Manchuria. Kim proved to be an adept guerrilla fighter whose active career lasted from 1932 to 1941, a time when many guerrilla fighters were killed or defected to the Japanese. Moreover, Kim won several significant victories against Japanese forces in battles involving hundreds of men and even managed to destroy a Japanese police station in Korea. However, increasing Japanese power in Manchuria forced him to retreat to the Soviet Union in 1941, where he would remain largely inactive until Japan’s surrender. In fact, Kim was absorbed formally into the Soviet Union’s army, a connection that helped ensure that country’s support but illustrates the limitations of Korea’s power. Similarly, under the principle of “one country, one party,” Kim was forced to join the Chinese Communist Party. This, along with the fact that Kim frequently fought under Chinese command in armies with a Chinese majority, illustrates how Korean Communists were largely under the control of their more powerful allies. At the same time, it was such links that helped insure Chinese and Soviet support for the establishment of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea with Kim at its head and his failed 1950 invasion of Korea (Suh 1988; Yŏm 2008).

Right-wing nationalists also engaged in violence. Kim Ku (1876–1949), operating out of Shanghai and receiving support from overseas Koreans in places like Hawai‘i, organized two well-known violent attacks against Japanese targets. The first, known as the Sakuradamon Incident, occurred in January of 1931 when Yi Pong-chang (1900–1932) threw a hand grenade at what he thought was Japanese Emperor Hirohito’s carriage (he had the wrong one). The attack only killed two horses, but Japanese attempts to censor positive Chinese news accounts of the incident led to increased tensions and were likely one of the causes of the 1932 Shanghai Incident. The second, known as the Hongkou Park Incident, occurred in Shanghai in April of that year and involved Korean nationalist Yun Pong-gil (1908–1932) throwing a bomb at a crowd of Japanese dignitaries gathered in honor of the emperor’s birthday, killing a Japanese general and official.
While Yi and Yun were executed, and Kim Ku himself would have been captured by the Japanese if it were not for Chinese assistance, the attacks did show that Koreans were willing to resist Japan and that at least some were willing to die for Korean independence. Furthermore, the attacks won Kim Ku Chinese support, allowing him to revive the moribund Korean Provisional Government and for the training and equipping of Korean soldiers and spies to be used against Japan. Such support would increase following Japan’s invasion of China in 1937 (Chong-Sik Lee 1963).

While those nationalists outside of Korea could work positively for nationalist goals, those inside the country would find it increasingly difficult after the Manchurian Incident of 1931 to do anything but survive increasing Japanese pressure with something of their principles intact. In response to the rise in militarism in Japan in the 1930s, pressure on Koreans to assimilate, and after 1937, assist in Japan’s war effort against China, rapidly increased. For instance, beginning in 1934, only Japanese could be used at schools. In 1939, independent Korean newspapers, which had come under ever stricter censorship, were forced out of business. In that same year, Koreans were also forced to adopt Japanese surnames. Any independent Korean institutes were either dissolved or subverted and taken over. Whereas during the dark years of the first decade of colonial rule, churches had served as a sanctuary for some now limited freedom, Koreans were forced, often through heavy-handed tactics and transparent coercion, to worship at Shintō Shrines. Christians, particularly conservative Protestants, fiercely opposed such measures, leading to imprisonment and the death of several dozen while they were in custody (Choi 2007; Park 2015; Wi Jo Kang 1997).

Under such conditions, many Koreans, including nationalists, who lived under Japanese rule were forced to publicly participate in ritualistic acts demonstrating their loyalty to the empire, such as bowing at Shintō Shrines. For many, such acts were carried out grudgingly and out of fear—and for the Japanese colonial state, that was enough (Hildi Kang 2001). However, outspoken nationalists were expected to issue public statements exhorting Koreans to participate in the war effort, praise the emperor, and proclaim their loyalty to the empire. Nationalists such as Ch’oe Nam-sŏn and Yi Kwang-su gave in. While such acts of national apostasy could be read simply as giving in out of a desire to reap the benefits of collaboration and avoid the substantial losses that would have accrued with, what must have appeared quixotic, acts of bravery. Particularly in the early years of the war when Japan was winning, the attractions and power of Japanese modernity and the Pan-Asianism that promised to liberate Asia from Western imperialism must have been persuasive. For nationalists who had spent years of suffering and pain to seemingly no avail, with Japan promising to become ever more powerful with the prospects of spreading its influence throughout Asia, the temptation to join what appeared to be the winning team must have been strong (Michael Kim 2007). Following the war, Yi Kwang-su even argued that he had sought to act as a shield for the Korean people—resistance would not have worked—the Japanese would have simply taken the resources and labor they desired. Better than to work with them, in victory Koreans would share in the spoils, in defeat, as colonial subjects, they could not be blamed (Treat 2012). Moreover, one could in a sense both believe in the empire and be a Korean nationalist—that seems to have been the case with Park Chung-hee, future dictator of the Republic of Korea, who both wrote a letter in blood to the Japanese Emperor asking to be admitted into a military academy and exalted national heroes, such as Yi Sun-shin, famous for fighting against the Japanese (Chong-Sik Lee 2012).

In the end, Japan would be defeated and Korea liberated, not substantially through any Korean actions but through the forces of geo-politics. The lack of a distinctly Korean victory meant there would be no single Korean person or party that could claim credit and use that prestige
to effectively unite the Korean people. Instead, right-wing nationalists, through the patronage of the United States and the United Nations, would gain power in the south, with Communist nationalists eventually gaining power in the north under the sponsorship of the Soviet Union. Left- and right-wing visions of what an independent and modern Korean state should look like led to a fratricidal civil war that killed millions of Koreans and hundreds of thousands of American, Chinese, and United Nations forces. But unlike most other civil wars, international intervention, while aiding the belligerents for a time, prevented them ultimately from finishing the war. Koreans would thus obtain part of the nationalist dream, national independence, and, at least in the south, modernity, but would still feel the heavy hand of great power politics.

The painful psychic wound of the failure to obtain the nationalist goal of one nation, one state, despite liberation from colonial rule, continues to haunt the peninsula. The continued division of Korea still serves as a potential point of conflict and of proliferation of nuclear weapons. Internally, the colonial period and the nationalism that developed during it still influence the two Koreas to this day. North Korean concerns about independence are rooted much in the desire to avoid foreign domination once again, and even in a globalized South Korea, anti-Japanese feelings, particularly over such emotional issues as the comfort women and collaboration with the Japanese, are still strong. The anti-colonial nature of Korean nationalism, by emphasizing the importance of autonomy and independence, can mask the fact that Japanese nationalism has also shaped that of Korea. North Korea’s xenophobic nationalism focused on the purity of the Korean race owes much to Japanese ultra-nationalism (Myers 2011), and Park Chŏng-hee (Pak Chong-hŭi) consciously patterned much of his own style of rule after Japanese history (Chong-Sik Lee 2012).

Areas for further research

A great deal of excellent work has been done on Korean nationalism, particularly in examining the connection between nationalism and other ideologies. Recently, English-language scholarship on nationalism has been willing to challenge nationalist narratives—for instance, Yumi Moon, in her work on the Ilchinhoe, frequently seen from the nationalist perspective as arch-traitors, has sensitively explored their perspective, showing how many of its members were guided by a sincere populism. Similarly, Brandon Palmer’s recent work on Japanese mobilization of Koreans for labor and military service, while carefully tracing the use of force in such efforts, also shows that at least some Koreans volunteered freely and used what limited agency they possessed to advance within the empire (2013) rather than to work against it.

In general, English-language scholarship tends to focus on narratives that challenge nationalism and to take critical approach focusing on deconstruction. While an important balance for Korean-language scholarship, which is often written from a nationalist perspective, the emphasis on such studies among scholars working in English has led to certain lacunae. With the possible exception of Gi-Wook Shin’s work (2006), there has not been a comprehensive history of Korean nationalism in English since Chong-Sik Lee (1963). English monographs focusing on a particular nationalist figure, even important ones such as Kim Ku or Cho Man-sik, are also largely lacking. While religion is closely related to Korean nationalism, studies on such connections are often hagiographical in nature, focusing on how a particular religion helped serve the Korean nation. A notable exception is Albert Park’s recent book on rural reconstruction efforts among Ch’ŏndogyo activists and Protestant Christians, which, while focusing primarily on modernity, touches on nationalism because of its subjects focused on a distinctly agrarian Korean nation, illustrating the rich work still yet to be done on religion and nationalism (Park 2015). More
such studies are needed, particularly ones that focus on new Korean religions, which, despite often being established by Korean nationalist leaders, receive little attention in English-language sources. Thus, while the foundation for research on Korean nationalism has been established, the house is still far from complete, and more builders are certainly needed.

Notes

1 It should be noted that the word “Korea” itself is a modern term.
2 According to legend, a god descended in what is now the Korean peninsula and was approached by a tiger and a bear, who both wanted to be human. The god told them that they could, if they stayed within a cave and ate only certain types of food. The tiger was unable to do so, but the bear did and was transformed into a beautiful human woman. She and the god then begat a son, Tan’gun—the ancestor of the Korean people.
3 Durham White Stevens was an American who technically worked for the Korean government but actually served Japanese interests.
4 It is interesting to note that all of these nationalists were also Christians (both Catholic and Protestant).

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