Until the 1980s the very conjunction of the term “global” with “Korea” would have been an incongruity or an oxymoron. After all, the master signifier of Korea was the “Hermit Kingdom”; Korea was antipodal to any commonsense notion of “global.” Google’s Ngram View reveals that the nouns “Korea,” “Corea,” and their cognates rarely appeared in print in the post-Gutenberg West. Korea’s rather shadowy presence on the world’s historical stage should not be surprising given its tributary status under a series of Chinese empires, which was then superseded by Japanese colonial rule in the twentieth century. Indeed, imperial Japan threatened Korea’s expunction from world history and geography in the first half of the twentieth century. In the shadow of the two neighboring civilizations, Korea’s cultural achievements remained occluded to the outside world, save for several signature exports, such as celadon and ginseng. Consequently, the very mention of Korea routinely puzzled otherwise educated people in much of the world until the 1950s. For too long, Korea remained the answer to the trivial question of the polity between China and Japan. Until the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the only notable modern event associated with Korea was the Korean War. Even then, its most common moniker remains the “forgotten war” (Blair 1987). In short, the idea of “global Korea” would have been strange because the world remained largely oblivious to and about Korea.

In the twenty-first century, we cannot but talk about globalization when we talk about South Korea. The plausibility of an entry on “global Korea” is readily apparent in a world where Samsung cell phones and Hyundai automobiles are ubiquitous and the music video “Gangnam Style” remains the single most watched YouTube video. One cannot do so as easily for North Korea, one of the few states to actively resist incorporation into the capitalist world-economy. Yet when we consider Korea, past and present, North or South, we cannot bypass the inextricably intertwined relationship of the Korean Peninsula with the rest of the world. This essay will focus on globalization and South Korea, but the Korean polity has always been and remains a transnational and globalized entity.

The Korean War, the Cold War, and non-global Korea

The Korean War was an international war (Stueck 1995; Wada 2014). Inasmuch as it was a civil war, countries far beyond the Korean Peninsula deployed soldiers and weapons in the
war-ravaged peninsula. In spite of its considerable destruction, its rather marginal status in world history owes to its temporal proximity to a truly massive international war (World War II) and to a series of postcolonial wars that convulsed the former colonial powers (Algeria in France, Vietnam in the United States, etc.). Be that as it may, the Korean War long remained the most significant event associated with Korea, outside of the Korean Peninsula.

What the Korean War confirmed was that neither North Korea nor South Korea could be understood beyond its place in the Cold War and hence in its international context. Whether we consider economic aid or political support, the place of the Soviet Union, China, and the Second World for North Korea or that of the United States, Japan, and the First World for South Korea remained essential to make sense of the two Koreas. Liberation did not come from within, after all, and the elevation of Kim Il-Sung in the North and Rhee Syngman in the South cannot be understood apart from their connections to their patrons in the Soviet Union and China or the United States, respectively (Armstrong 2013; Lie 1998).

The critical significance of the global or international context in understanding Korea is the first sense in which we can stress the salience of global Korea. In this regard, the long political and ideological dependence on successive Chinese empires marks the traditional history of Korea (Kang 2010). Much the same can be said about colonial Korea (Japan) and postcolonial Koreas. Any serious account of Korean politics cannot exclude the preponderant impact of the contiguous – and faraway – empires (e.g. Schmid 2002). Any balanced perspective on the Korean Peninsula from its origins – the ancestors of modern ethnic Koreans came originally from Africa and did not generate spontaneously in the Korean Peninsula – to the Korean War – an international war that overlapped a domestic political struggle – can hardly exaggerate the role of the external and the exogenous: the study of Korea is perforce the study of global Korea.

Nevertheless, what is striking about the domestic self-understanding in (and much of scholarly writings on) both post-independence Koreas is the accent on the national and the endogenous. Precisely when the international context impinged so profoundly – one is tempted to say definitively – on Korea, the historiographies in both Koreas became resolutely nationalistic and inward-looking (cf. Em 2013). In spite of diametrically opposed ideologies, the two Koreas became something of a mirror image of each other: formally alike in their zealous devotion to blood-based nationalism that stressed native and indigenous genealogies over external and exogenous events and influences (Shin 2006; Lie 2014). Nationalist historiography and social sciences were influenced by and in turn shaped the political primacy of semi-nationalism: “semi” because both the North and the South largely excluded the other from their egocentric outlook. An exemplary instantiation of this mindset can be found at the Academy of Korean Studies in South Korea. In a large map of the Korean Peninsula at its main lecture hall, the territory of North Korea is left blank: no Pyongyang and not even the nationally sacred peak Paektusan. Korean Studies in this line of thinking is South Korean Studies.

For several decades after the Korean War, then, the two Koreas remained deeply embedded in the global Cold War but ideologically involuted in their nationalist narratives and self-conceptions. Thus the conjunction of “global” and “Korea” appears problematic from the regnant Korean worldview(s). Park Chung-hee’s nationalism, no less than Kim Il-Sung’s juche (self-reliance) philosophy, stressed nationalism that dovetailed well with the narrative of the Hermit Kingdom. To speak of Korea, North or South, past or present, was perforce a particularistic discourse, encased in the territorial terrain of the Korean Peninsula. To discuss Korea was to analyze it largely as an autonomous entity, as non-global Korea. Sure enough, contemporary politics focused preponderantly on domestic matters at a time when few North or South Koreans ventured abroad.
It would be remiss, however, to neglect the appeal of foreign, especially putatively more advanced, cultures. Even in the realm of ruling political ideologies, the North appealed to international communism or Marxism, whereas the South claimed adherence to Western (and especially American) liberalism. Popular consumption of movies and music – from colonial-era Japanese-influenced works to the post-liberation bifurcation of Soviet and Chinese culture in North and of the United States in South – brought the modern – advanced and sophisticated, and therefore something desirable – to many Koreans. Even Korean national cuisine came to be shaped by foreign imports and external influences (Cwiertka 2012). Internal internationalization – in a sense a continuation of the pre-modern valorization of Chinese culture – proceeded rapidly even at the height of cultural nationalism. The awareness of the world outside in turn accentuated the self-conception of Koreanness. Rather than village, regional, or provincial identities – and even more salient status distinctions – the self-identification as Korean became paramount.

In the immediate post-Korean War decades, it is North Korea rather than South Korea that boasted a more international or cosmopolitan outlook and policy. This is in part because of the internationalist thrust of communism, and North Korea sought actively to interact with other countries in the socialist bloc in the 1950s and 1960s (Scalapino and Lee 1972). The increasingly authoritarian rule by the late 1960s elevated the place of 
\textit{juche} ideology and demoted the role of the international (Cumings 2004). It is safe to say that North Korea remains one of the most closed countries in the world, whether we think of the penetration of global economic institutions (such as ATM machines or fast-food chains) or of the world wide web in the twenty-first century (Lankov 2012). North Korea, ideologically and practically, approaches the ideal of the hermit polity.

It is the 20/20 hindsight, however, that presumes the superiority of the South over the North. Just as North Korea has not always been closed off, South Korea has not always embraced the external and the global. Somewhat surprisingly, given that Park Chung-hee’s rule has become so closely associated with the policy of export-oriented industrialization, South Korea under his rule was also relatively closed off from the rest of the world because of economic and cultural protectionism (Lie 1998). Economic protectionism – the desire to protect foreign currency reserves in order to fuel South Korea’s export-oriented industrialization and to nurture its nascent industries – was mandated. Cultural protectionism was part and parcel of authoritarian nationalism, seeking to keep foreign and therefore dangerous elements. In the 1970s, even anodyne articles in \textit{Time Magazine} would be censored (literally cut out of the magazine by diligent censors). Symptomatic was the extensive effort to curb foreign influences – often resorting to outright censorship – even in the realm of popular music (Lie 2015).

Economic and cultural protectionism did not mean that the two Koreas did not participate in political struggles for legitimacy on the world stage. To be sure, it was part and parcel of the grand struggle of the Cold War, but the fratricidal rivalry – along with those of the two Germanys and the two Vietnams – enhanced passionate enmity. Given the paucity of business people or students abroad – and very little to offer in terms of economic or cultural exports – both North and South Korea engaged in espionage and propaganda. At times these efforts were innocuous, such as translating the collected writings or speeches of Kim Il-sung and Park Chung-hee into non-Korean languages. Culture was usually the terrain in which these inter-Korean struggles surfaced most visibly, whether in the South Korean attempt to export the “traditional” Korean dance troupe Little Angels or the North Korean effort to propagate engaged literature. Sports, whether soccer or taekwondo, often served as a civil war by other means (Cha 2008). At other times they amounted to international crimes, such as the North Korean capture of ordinary Japanese citizens or the South Korean heist of the losing presidential candidate Kim Dae-jung.
The undercover struggles, emblematic of Cold War political culture, brought notoriety to both Koreas (such as the quickly forgotten Koreagate in 1976 when the South Korean Tongsun Park sought to peddle influence among US politicians). Yet the dominant reality was that the two Koreas struggled to gain global recognition of even their very existence in the Cold War decades (except, to repeat, as a place of the “forgotten war”). As consequential as the Korean War and the continuing war between the two Koreas remained, they were often an afterthought in the global Cold War (Khong 1992; Masuda 2015).

The Seoul Olympics, political democracy, and internationalization in South Korea

The Seoul Olympics – similar to other quasi-propagandistic Olympiads, such as Berlin in 1936, Tokyo in 1964, and Beijing in 2008 – presented South Korea to a world that had little if any knowledge of the country. On the one hand, it sought to showcase South Korean development to the world. Rather than the devastation from the Korean War or the ensuing poverty of the country, South Korea was presented as a modern, increasingly wealthy country. On the other hand, it was a terminus of the long legitimation struggles by the military regime to win popular support inside and outside South Korea. The 1980 Kwangju Uprising was only the most vociferous expression of widespread disenchantment with the military rule. Chun Doo-hwan, who succeeded Park after his 1979 assassination, promulgated what came to be known as “3S” policy – sex, screen, and sport – to generate popular approbation. Most importantly for the military and political elites in South Korea, the 1988 Olympics marked South Korea’s triumph over North Korea on the global stage. However successful North Korea had been in some spheres before then, its place would spiral downwards in terms of global reputation and respect, eventually settling as a rogue state, human rights disaster area, or an economic basket case (poverty, famines, and worse) (e.g. Demick 2009; cf. Ryang 2012).

The 1988 Olympics proved to be a major turning point for South Korea. The crescendo of social movements against authoritarian rule reinstated formal political democracy (here one should not neglect that the zealous effort to cleanse South Korea of negative images abroad, such as authoritarian rule, that facilitated the democratic transition). It also vouchsafed South Korea’s outward-looking economic policy and an attempt to brand it as a technologically reliable and even advanced country. What is crucial is that the twin impulses were united in propelling South Korea’s stress on internationalization or globalization and even its very identification as an international or global player. Especially from the early 1980s, with the loosening of foreign travel and the growing enrichment of South Koreans, study abroad became a veritable mania among ambitious, upwardly mobile South Koreans. It would be tempting to see South Korea’s education mania as an unbroken tradition from pre-modern times, but its renewed emphasis owes to South Korea’s dynamic, export-oriented industrialization, which required a large army of engineers and office workers knowledgeable about producing and selling in export markets. It was the fundamental consequence of land reform that propelled South Koreans to seek fortune in capitalist industrialization rather than traditional, land-based agrarian economy (Lie 1998). The definition of the elite shifted from the social background of the landowning class to the attainment of educational credentials, especially from leading foreign, and especially American, universities.

Foreign study and export-oriented industrialization accentuated the salience of the international among South Korean political, economic, and cultural leaders, who had already been looking to the United States as a political leader and as a model of modernity. The nationalist sentiment — expressing itself at times as an inferiority complex or the proverbial chips on the
collective shoulders of South Koreans – became inextricably, and perhaps paradoxically, intertwined with an outward orientation. It is difficult for a foreigner even today even to escape a barrage of questions from South Koreans about how she finds the country. A more sustained articulation of this impulse is the obsessive effort to rank South Korea among world powers in everything from GDP to university rankings. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ “Global Korea” website is symptomatic, collecting foreign coverage of South Korean in everything from economic matters to cultural achievements. To think about South Korea was to think about South Korea’s place in the world. The trend would accelerate in the 1990s and thereafter.

Counter-global South Korea?

In the 2010s North Korea, though not as hermetically closed off as some suggest, remains outside the Washington Consensus. The country is neither capitalist nor neoliberal, neither democratic nor liberal. The dominant ideology of juche legitimates a form of inviolated nationalism that keeps North Korea as a country that is relatively immune to global influences and trends. In contrast, South Korea in the early twenty-first century is a global country. It embraces globalization, whether economic or cultural, and seeks to be a global player in everything from electronics to fashion to sports to music.

As I suggested, however, the idea of global South Korea is a relatively recent phenomenon. The military regime pursued a culturally nationalist policy, including widespread censorship, but it also relied increasingly on export-oriented industrialization to legitimate its rule. More relevant, in a predominantly rural and agrarian country with limited communication and transportation infrastructure and relatively low educational attainment, South Korea in the 1960s could be characterized as parochial and perhaps even xenophobic. Surely few foreign visitors in South Korea until the 1970s saw the country as in any way cosmopolitan or global.

The educated stratum tended to be more cosmopolitan than their less educated counterparts. Certainly the generalization holds true for the colonial period and the high tide of US influence on South Korea in the 1950s (when it became fashionable among elite South Koreans to use American first names). Yet by 1960, South Korean university students were voicing stridently nationalist concerns. In part they were criticizing Rhee Syngman’s corrupt rule that was subservient to the US, but they were also acting as inheritors to the politics of nationalism that defined the anti-colonial movement (C.-S. Lee 1963). The 1960 April Student Revolution, which toppled Rhee from power, was nationalist to the core. The opposition to the 1965 Normalization Treaty with Japan mobilized the students and enhanced their nationalist passion. As Park’s rule turned increasingly autocratic, the student movement fused with the anti-government movement that in turn broadened its social base to constitute the people’s (minjung) movement (N. Lee 2009). By the 1980s the South Korean people’s movement incorporated not only students and intellectuals but also farmers, factory workers, and even office workers. What united them was in fact the opposition to military rule but also the invocation of “the people” that harbored a deeply nationalist ideology.

By the 1980s, then, both the military regime and the anti-government movement converged in their nationalism, even hyper-nationalism. Even the previously sacrosanct US became the target of virulent hatred as an unwelcome external influence (Moon 2013). What had begun as a government nationalist policy of lessening dependence on Chinese characters became a leftwing fad to write even numbers in Korean script in the mid-1980s. Nationalism became something of a benchmark of everything from historiography and political discourse to popular culture and commodity consumption (Nelson 2000; Shin 2006). South Korean ethnorracial homogeneity became taken for granted, mirroring in turn the North Korean racial ideology of
racial purity (Myers 2010; Lie 2014). The ubiquitous invocation of “we” and “us” presented South Koreans as united and homogeneous, inward-looking and xenophobic, and anti-international and counter-global. That is, there was a strong tendency within South Korea to excoriate foreign influences and to counter globalization.

The hyper-nationalist trend in South Korea would ebb after the 1990s. It would be remiss, however, to forget the nationalist surge that remained a strong, if not the strongest, current for both the military rulers and the anti-government protesters in the 1970s and 1980s. South Korea’s embrace of the global was far from ordained, and almost all foreign observers in the 1980s would have found the idea of global South Korea problematic.

From Segyehwa (internationalization) to the 1997 IMF crisis

Kim Young-sam (1993–98), the first civilian president after the reinstatement of political democracy, stressed segyehwa (internationalization or globalization) as the centerpiece of his administration. By the mid-1990s, segyehwa had become a buzzword in South Korea, inescapable in business talk as in popular discourse. The dark side of globalization – the 1997 Asian financial crisis that came to be known in South Korea as the 1997 IMF crisis – cast a long shadow on his goal and seemed to squelch it. Yet, ironically, it is the 1997 economic shock that firmly implanted globalization as the commonsense of South Korean life.

As many critics readily pointed out at the time, it remained unclear what exactly Kim meant by segyehwa. Presumably it was part and parcel of the post-Cold War discourse of globalization – mooted everywhere from Paris and London to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Cambridge, England – and the euphoric, even utopian, pronouncements about world peace and the peace dividend, the potential for Korean unification, the entrenchment of political democracy, continuing economic enrichment, and the emergence of South Korea as a global player. Be that as it may, Kim was not engaged in conceptual clarification as an analytical philosopher but in sloganeering as a political leader and a democratically elected one at that. It is also the case that there was nothing much new substantively in what Kim proposed in contrast to his predecessors. Whether we turn to South Korean business interest in exports or the desire of South Koreans to study abroad, the changes were quantitative rather than qualitative. The most consequential outcome of Kim’s sloganeering was that the idea of “internationalized” or “globalized” South Korea became widely discussed and debated. Whoever pronounced on the present and the future of South Korea in the mid-1990s could not escape talking about segyehwa.

The 1997 IMF crisis was devastating not only in terms of economic contraction and massive unemployment but also in terms of psychic shock. The myth of uninterrupted growth and the hubris that some South Koreans were beginning to express and display were shattered almost overnight. In this regard, it paralleled the long period of economic gloom that followed the bursting of the property market bubble in Japan in the early 1990s. In spite of considerable similarities – most obviously, two export-oriented economies that had enjoyed decades of uninterrupted growth until the 1990s – the general orientation of the two countries after their 1990s crisis is striking. In Japan the general trend was to look within and to cultivate its internal market so much so that observers began to talk about Japan’s Galapagos Syndrome (a secluded archipelago that spawns unique flora and fauna). In contrast in South Korea, there was a renewed stress on looking outward and to seek foreign opportunities. Rather than cultivating domestic demand, as their Japanese counterparts were engaged in, South Korean business conglomerates stressed their outward orientation. Whether we look to Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Latin America, or Africa, South Korean corporations, such as Samsung, Hyundai, and LG, became
ubiquitous in the early twenty-first century, whereas the once–fabled corporations such as Sony, Toyota, and Hitachi have low visibility in these areas.

It may very well be that South Korea’s outward orientation is part of a larger stress on innovation and creative destruction (in contrast to Japan’s more conservative and measured policy). In this regard, technological transformations sweeping the world in the late twentieth century—most importantly, information technology—may have given advantage to the latecomer South Korea. I recall interviewing Sony executives in 1985 about Samsung Electronics, which had just been launched. The normally taciturn Japanese executives either smirked or laughed, but merely two decades later Samsung had superseded Sony (Chang 2008). Part of the success of South Korean businesses is their thoroughgoing external orientation and stress, including the strategic reliance on the international market, and hiring engineers and managers educated abroad. Yet it is also possible to see contemporary South Korea’s stress on relentless newness and innovation—and the concomitant destruction of tradition—that made it more competitive in global capitalism.

Facing a massive economic and social crisis, the long-term dissident Kim Dae-jung ascended to the presidency at seemingly the worst possible moment in 1998. The recognition of the crisis’s severity, however, facilitated the implementation of two major reforms. First, the Kim Dae-jung regime promoted information technology in general and established a nationwide infrastructure for digital communication (Oh and Larson 2011). By 2005, South Korea emerged as the first country to shift from dial-up to broadband and boasted not only the largest penetration of broadband but also the fastest Internet connection in the world. In part South Korea benefited from the advantage of backwardness. Unlike in the neighboring Japan, for example, South Korea had not invested heavily in the R&D of earlier analog information technology and its outward orientation facilitated the absorption of the latest developments in the United States, Japan, and elsewhere to create a state-of-the-art information technology infrastructure. The development of hardware and infrastructure in turn encouraged the rapid expansion of software and applications in South Korean life. South Koreans were not only quick to adopt smartphones and other new devices but also became pioneers in the nascent world of online gaming (Jin 2010).

Second, the Kim Dae-jung regime sought seriously to limit economic concentration and the monopolistic tendencies of the country’s largest conglomerates. Although most conglomerates survived the IMF crisis and Kim’s anti-monopoly policies relatively unscathed, the pervasive influence of big business declined at least momentarily. The new economic opportunities were seized especially in creative and “fashionable” industries, such as fashion and design or music and film, that depended on South Korean studying abroad. Whether we look at innovative videogame makers, film producers and directors, or popular music agencies and impresarios, many were launched in the aftermath of the 1997 IMF crisis (Lie 2015). South Korea emerged as a global powerhouse in the culture industry in the late 1990s. In other words, the surface crisis occluded considerable economic dynamism and the transition from an economy that depended on heavy and chemical industries to one that relied increasingly on more advanced technologies, be they science-based (electronics) or social-based (fashion).

Curiously, then, it is not so much the impact of Kim’s internationalization policy but rather the shock of the 1997 IMF Crisis and the Kim Dae-jung regime’s policy that entrenched the outward-looking, global orientation for South Korea. It is possible to delineate a straight line from traditional Korean dependence on China or Rhee’s obeisance to the United States or Park’s export-oriented industrialization policy to the contemporary global orientation of South Korea. Yet it would be more accurate to locate in the 1990s the thoroughgoing global
orientation of South Korea. In this regard, Kim Dae-jung personified the transformation of South Korea from a provincial country and people to an increasingly cosmopolitan one. In foreign policy (Nordpolitik, or a rapprochement with North Korea, that emulated the Ostpolitik of West Germany) or personal quest (to win the Nobel Peace Prize), Kim worked ferociously to be part of the larger world and to gain recognition therein. To be South Korean meant to be at once intensely nationalist but also insistently global (cf. Chang, Seok, and Baker 2009). Never mind that few could define precisely what “global” implied and in this regard no different from the early desire to emulate the United States – or Japan or China – and be “modern.” The idea of being “global” encapsulated and synthesized these earlier desires and impulses. Global Korea was the master identity of contemporary South Korea in the age of globalization.

Globalization and South Korea

By the early years of the twenty-first century, South Korea became inextricably intertwined with the global. Contemporary South Korea cannot be understood from its place in the world and its global ambitions.

The most obvious way in which to speak of South Korea is to speak of global South Korea is in the realm of business and economy. South Korea’s export-oriented economy scatters not only products “Made in South Korea” around the world but also dispatches South Korean business people and their concerns across the globe. One would have to look far and wide to find a place without the palpable presence of South Korean corporations. More than their global presence, the inevitable impulse of South Korean business is to export and its global orientation defines South Korean capitalism. Hence, not only are foreign credentials and training valued but South Korean corporations also seek to attract global talent, either by outsourcing or hiring foreigners.

The profit motive is ubiquitous and South Korean corporations are no exceptions to the general rule. Yet there is something more to the outward orientation of South Koreans, whether we turn to young South Koreans studying abroad or eager South Korean missionaries around the world. Needless to say, numerous factors are at work but one enduring theme is the South Korean quest for modernity: to take its place in the global stage, among “advanced” countries, as a recognized and respected member. At times the quest verges on the vainglorious, such as the concerted drive to gain a Nobel Prize for South Koreans or to win gold medals at the Olympics. Some become dismal failures, such as the disgraced scientist Hwang Woo-suk, whereas others become national celebrities, such as the feted ice skater Kim You-na, but they constitute the two faces of the same coin: the South Korean quest for global recognition. As suggested earlier, global success, especially in “advanced” areas such as fashion, design, and popular music, is especially valorized (Hong 2014). It would be easy to provide a social-psychological narrative to the desire for modernity and recognition. An education in nationalist history – in which Korea played a distant second fiddle to China before the twentieth century, was colonized by Japan in the first half of the twentieth century, and suffered from national division in the second half – should make many South Koreans eager for their country to have their place in the sun and to gain recognition and respect.

Nevertheless, the quest for the modern and the global is inherent in the dynamics that convulsed South Korea since its founding. Japanese colonial rule destroyed not only the traditional Confucian polity but also the regnant ideologies of traditional Korea. Land reform destroyed the material basis of the Confucian literati-landlords. The Korean War destroyed the country and the countryside (and made the political division semi-permanent). Intense industrialization resulted in probably the most rapid rural exodus in world history. Put simply,
South Korea has become untethered from its past and something like constant change became its principal constant. In this context, it is not surprising that both at the individual and the collective level, the quest for betterment or upward mobility became something of a master desire. The quest for the modern and the global is in this sense a repudiation of the past and the embrace of a better future – in this sense not much different from the proverbial American Dream. It is merely clothed in the language and culture that is the detritus of the recent Korean past.

The quest for the modern and for betterment underlies the extensive Korean diaspora. Sizable ethnic Korean populations can be found not only in East Asia but also in the Americas and Europe (in addition to students and business people in OECD countries, and missionaries and business people in less affluent countries). Although Korean diaspora is as old as the history of Korea, South Korea has been a major sender country, especially to the United States (Abelmann and Lie 1995). The extensive diasporic populations in turn contribute to South Korea’s role in the world. Whether we look to the early successes of export-oriented industrialization in the 1960s – when textile export benefited from ethnic Koreans in Japan who provided technology and marketing – or the recent surge of popular music – South Korean students in the United States, as well as Korean Americans, often provide musical knowhow and even talent – the Korean diaspora plays an indisputable and indispensable role in South Korea’s external success (Lie 1998, 2015). The extensive diaspora constitute the imagined unity of Korea as a global phenomenon.

The valorization of the global has other consequences. As noted earlier, South Korea, like North Korea, was largely xenophobic and embraced ethnoracial homogeneity until the 1980s. Yet the idea of global South Korea – and the examples not only of the multicultural and multiethnic United States but also other OECD countries – made multiculturalism as a major government policy initiative in the early years of the new millennium. That is, multiculturalism and even multiethnicity became desirable not only to attract global talent but also to make South Korea seem more modern and global (Lie 2014).

To take another example, Christianity rapidly emerged as the most visible religion in South Korean life by the 1980s. In spite of the variety of historical and cultural reasons for the rapid dissemination of Christianity in South Korea, one important factor is the association of Christianity with modernity and “cultural advancement” (the dominant religion, after all, of the United States). What has come to characterize South Korean Christianity beyond the stress on this-worldly success is its outward orientation. South Korean Christian missionaries are now the second largest group of missionaries after Americans (Han 2009). South Korean Christianity is thus symptomatic of global South Korea.

In summary, disparate forces have forged South Korea as a globalized country. Yet, as I have argued, the association was far from ordained, and marks a concatenation of relatively independent factors. Nevertheless, its export-oriented economy and the extensive diaspora, among other factors and forces, make South Korea’s engagement with global affairs all but inevitable. The trend has deepened since the 1990s and the global orientation – paradoxically with the persistence of nationalism – characterizes contemporary South Korea.

Global Korea as a mode of scholarship

In the age of globalization, the practice of historical and social-scientific writings has come to stress transnational and global dimensions of human and social activities (e.g. Hunt 2014). The proliferation of scholarship written under the signs of world history, world-systems analysis, global history, transnational history, and so on point to the pervasive dissatisfaction with
received nation-focused and sometimes nationalist historiography. Given that the modern state functioned as the dominant institution of the past two centuries, it should not be surprising that the bulk of historical and social-scientific scholarship takes place within the crucible of the modern nation-state, which in turn is often projected backwards to distort our understanding of the past (Lie 2004). It is unfortunate that historical and social-scientific writings on East Asia, and especially on Korea, still continues under the aegis of a nationalist straitjacket. Precisely when Western scholarship on the West has decisively moved to more explicitly transnational, regional, and global modes of historical writing, Korean history (whether practiced within or without the Korean peninsula) still remains resolutely nationalist.

As much as transnational and supranational dimensions of historiography have received short shrift, we should be mindful that regional and diasporic dimensions of Korean history, past and present, remain woefully under-researched. Nationalist historiography accentuates the past as a relatively stationary entity and presumes a great deal more homogeneity than was probably the case. Our contemporary globalization has alerted us to the massive transnational movements of capital, commodities, information, and people, but the same insight can be applied usefully to evoke the past in its manifold complexity and diversity. Modern human beings first entered the Korean peninsula some 30,000 years ago, and we can only presume that population movements continued since then but we simply don’t have much information or insight. The seemingly new fact of globalization should alert us to the older reality of transnational processes.

Finally, the idea of global Korea should alert scholars and non-scholars to the comparative dimensions of the history of the Korean Peninsula. A particular foible of nationalist scholarship is to assume one’s national history as distinct and probably unique but, as Marc Bloch (1949) pointed out, all history is, at bottom, comparative history (or one can say the same about social-scientific knowledge, which should be at once comparative and historical). It is of course not the case that all national histories are alike but comparisons – facilitated in turn by the globalization of historical knowledge – should alert scholars to the similarities and differences from other places and other times. The comparative dimension should make the study of Korea in turn relevant for non-Koreanists and even non-Asianists. The age of globalization should usher in the possibility of truly global knowledge.

References