Pre-Contemporary History

- For thousands of years, China had dominated the East Asian region, largely due to its superior bureaucracy and military. China governed many of its neighbors as "tributary states;" one of those states—all of which were subordinate to China—was Korea!
- However, by the 19th century, China fell into a state of decline—later known as the Century of Humiliation—as Japan and Western nations interfered with China's regional hegemony and established their own colonies in East Asia. However, throughout this period, Korea remained relatively isolated from foreign domination. This changed in 1894, when the First Sino-Japanese War broke out between China and Japan. The war demonstrated the failure of the Qing dynasty's modernization efforts, and by the conclusion of the conflict, Korea was removed from Chinese suzerainty and officially given independence (even though Japan exerted influence over the newly-formed Korean state)
- Surrounded by more powerful nations—Russia, Japan, the West's colonial projects—Korea sought to modernize its institutions, and it used Japan as a model for doing so. Korea established a new educational system and built universities (many of which are still around today!), modernized its military, promoted industrialization in fields like silk spinning and weaving, commissioned new infrastructure projects (like a national power grid), and adopted a Western-style style of governance. However, Korea gradually grew skeptical of Japan and shifted its political support towards Russia, primarily because Korea feared—correctly, in fact!—that Japan, which increasingly viewed itself as a colonial empire with expansionary interests, would invade the Korean Peninsula. These fears were partially realized in 1904, when the Russo-Japanese War broke out over competing imperial ambitions in Manchuria and Korea. Under the borderline-incompetent command of Tsar Nicholas II, the war effort was a disaster for Russia, and Japan proved its absolute military superiority by obliterating the Russian armed forces
- By the end of the war, Korea became a Japanese protectorate, and by 1910, Japan officially made Korea a colony of the Imperial Japanese Empire. Japanese rule over Korea was brutal: the Korean language was banned from use, Japanese rulers swiftly cracked down on displays of Korean culture, and the use of Korea's productive infrastructure was reoriented towards serving Japanese economic interests. In short, Japan's rule brutalized the Korean people[1]

World War II

- Following the Second World War and the US atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan's Empire was deconstructed, and the colonies it occupied were granted

[1] The brutality of Japan's imperial occupation of Korea was so devastating that *decades later*, during the Tokyo War Crimes Trial, many of Japan's colonial practices were classified as war crimes

independence. Korea faced two broad problems as it transitioned out of Japanese colonialism:
    - First, Korea had been governed almost entirely by Japanese forces for multiple decades, which meant that Korea faced a severe lack of the administrative and technical expertise needed for running a government!
    - Second, as tensions between the US and the USSR rose, Korea became an ideological battleground for the two Cold-War-era superpowers. However, outright violence was averted when the US and USSR agreed to divide the Korean Peninsula along the 38th parallel and govern the North and South halves of Korea under a system of international trusteeship; they further agreed that after five years, Koreans would regain the right to self-governance and foreign influences would be removed
- By 1946, the USSR selected Kim Il-Sung[2] to lead the provisional government in North Korea. Under Il-Sung's control, North Korea adopted a Soviet-style centrally-planned command economy, implemented mass land reforms, and seized control over private businesses; as a consequence, capitalist elites lost almost all of their power, and many fled to the South. Politically, one-party rule under the Workers' Party of Korea was established, and Kim Il-Sung began developing a cult of personality
- Meanwhile in the South, the US established a temporary military government, which proved to be a disaster: American personnel had no knowledge of Korean language, culture, or customs, and the interim military-controlled state had to violently put down several peasant uprisings, like the Autumn Uprising of 1946, which arose in response to the unpopularity of the US government's occupation. Eventually, the US held national elections, where Syngman Rhee—popular in the US due to his former career as a Washington-based political lobbyist, and popular in South Korea due to his legacy as a former politician under the Korean government-in-exile that existed during Japan's occupation of Korea—won in a landslide, with over 90% of the vote
    - Thus, with US-backed Syngman Rhee governing the South and Soviet-backed Kim Il-Sung governing the North, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) were established, and by 1948, the US and USSR withdrew from the peninsula, marking a rare moment in history were Koreans and Koreans alone were ruling over Korea!

Attempted Unification & Korean War

- North Korea faced two major problems that gravely concerned communist leadership at the onset of independence:
    - First, the North Korean communist regime feared that the US-backed South Korean government—and its potential for rapid industrialization and economic

[2] Il-Sung was largely selected due to his existing ties to the Soviet government: during WWII, he had trained alongside Soviet troops!

prosperity—could cast doubt on the superiority of communism. Consequently, North Korea strengthened ties with neighboring, communist regimes—like the Soviet Union and, by 1949, the People's Republic of China
    - Second, North Korea faced an immediate food crisis: during Japanese occupation, most farms had been established in the South, and while that meant that fortunately meant that most industrial factories were based out of the North, it *also* meant that North Korean soil was terrible for farming (relative to the fertile land in the South)
- Facing these existential crises, Kim Il-Sung persuaded Joseph Stalin (the leader of the communist Soviet Union) and Mao Dezong (the leader of communist China) to back a North Korean invasion of the South. In 1950, North Korea—backed by both the USSR and the PRC—launched a ground invasion of South Korea. The conflict quickly developed the dynamics of a proxy war, as the US[3] and Western-backed UN[4] sided with the South Koreans, while the communist Soviets and Chinese aided the North Koreans
- By the end of the Korean War, the borders between the North and South had largely reverted back to where they had been pre-war, with little territorial change. An armistice was signed,[5] marking the end of the war. A demilitarized zone was established along the border

Post-War Development

- North Korea initially leaned heavily on other communist nations for support, receiving food aid, technical support, and military assistance from China and the USSR. Around 1955, however, North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung delivered one of his most famous and important speeches, in which he advocated for the ideology of *juche*, or *self-reliance*. This ideology sought to divorce Korea—specifically, the North—from its historical, Confucian practice of *sadae*, which emphasized nationalistic filial piety and the importance of depending on greater, stronger foreign powers. Under the *juche* narrative, North Korea sought to reduce its reliance on other nations, such that it could achieve true self-determination and self-reliance. For instance, North Korea further intensified state involvement in the economy to develop a domestic agricultural sector to decrease reliance on foreign imports of food
    - However, these efforts largely stagnated: by functionally eschewing the practice of international trade in favor of domestic production, North Korea depended on

[3] The US was, prior to the outbreak of the war, quite reluctant to become involved, but the Soviet Union's successful test of a nuclear weapon, combined with public outrage at the Truman administration for the collapse of the non-communist Chinese Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War, put pressure on the US to deploy forces in one of the Cold War's first-ever proxy wars

[4] Interestingly, the UN was able to muster enough votes to deploy peacekeepers (around ~90% of which were supplied by the US) to the conflict because at the time, the Soviet Union was boycotting the United Nations for its continued recognition of the KMT-backed Republic of China, rather than the CCP-backed People's Republic of China

[5] Interestingly, South Korea refused to sign the Armistice, which means that *technically* the war never ended

its own inefficient industries—for instance, North Korea's lands are minimally arable—and likely would have been better off trading its valuable commodities, like mineral resources, for food!

- South Korea started on a similarly poor note vis-à-vis economic development in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War. The South Korean economy was heavily reliant on foreign aid from the US, struggled with rampant poverty, and frequently resorted to violence to crack down on political opposition. Syngman Rhee, the nation's President, ruled as an autocrat. Public dissatisfaction with endemic corruption and economic stagnation—and South Korea's relatively poor industrialization, relative to their communist neighbor to the north—led to mass protests in the 1960s. President Rhee resigned, and within just a year, the military staged a coup against the transitional parliamentary government. Eventually, a pseudo-democratic (but *de facto* dictatorial) government, the Third Republic of Korea, assumed control of South Korea
- Under this regime, South Korea set out to rapidly develop its economy and contain the spread of communism from the North—and to the ire of Kim Il-Sung's regime in North Korea, South Korea's economy flourished extensively in the following years! Primarily, South Korea modeled its economic agenda after Japan's "indicative planning" initiative. Within this system, South Korea pursued a hybrid system of capitalism, whereby the government worked closely with private businesses to hit broad, government-established production targets. South Korea pulled this off in three broad ways:
    - First, the rise of *chaebols* (literally: "rich family") contributed greatly to South Korea's rapid industrialization. Chaebols are large, family-owned businesses like Samsung, Lotte, LG, and Hyundai. Unlike conventional privately-run businesses, chaebols tend to be more focused on long-term growth, since they are majority-owned by families—who want to sustain growth not just now, but also into the future—rather than short-term-oriented shareholders! Chaebolization was additionally important to South Korea's industrial growth because it enabled companies to diversify into many different industries as a consequence of their size and state-backing; for instance Samsung has established a foothold in the smartphone, television, and biotechnology industries!
    - Second, all banks in South Korea were state-run, and that gave South Korean economic planners considerable influence over private-sector behavior: for instance, in the 1960s, South Korea forced LG to pivot away from textile manufacturing towards producing electric cables, which proved to be far more lucrative! Similarly, in 1970, South Korean banks threatened to bankrupt the Hyundai Group unless it entered the ship-building industry!
    - Third, South Korea adopted significant measures to boost domestic industries, like by banning foreign competitors from South Korean markets, simplifying the process of acquiring business-related permits, and subsidizing domestic chaebols

    - Fourth, Japan had to pay hundreds of millions of dollars to South Korea in the form of reparations, which gave South Korea the capital it needed to invest into new industries, like its steel industry, even when private investors were unwilling to finance those endeavors
- While South Korea's economy took off, its government—even though heavily undemocratic—feared that if wealth inequality accelerated too rapidly, pro-communist sentiment would grow. To preemptively limit this, South Korea redistributed wealth: for instance, the government subsidized fertilizer to boost the profits of rural farmers, conducted large-scale housing projects to increase rates of homeownership, and expanded access to schools, universities, and vocational training institutions
    - In totality, all of this saw South Korea's economy undergo the "Miracle on the Han River:" for instance, average incomes in South Korea grew nearly *7% per year* between the 1960s and the 1990s!
- Even though South Korea's economy flourished, its political freedoms remained heavily curtailed under President Park Chung-hee; in 1972, for instance, martial law was declared and the Presidency was given extensive power to rule by decree. Chung-hee became increasingly unpopular, and in 1979, he was assassinated! A military dictatorship took over and continued South Korean authoritarianism, shutting down universities, censoring the press, and suppressing joint student-worker protests through violent means. Eventually, these protests grew so overwhelming that the military's lead dictator stepped down and the junta agreed to implement a new constitution. By the late 1980s, after the June Democratic Struggle in 1987, South Korea eventually restored free, fair, open, and transparent elections, further revised its constitution, and released political prisoners. More symbolically, two former presidents were indicted on corruption charges, which encapsulated the degree of democratization South Korea underwent!

Diverging Paths & Attempted Integration

- While South Korea's economy shocked the world with its astonishing growth, North Korea fell behind, but Kim Il-Sung managed to further consolidate power in a few major ways:
    - First, North Korea placed a heavy emphasis on militarization, and as its military grew, most economic industries became tied to the military apparatus. This happened primarily because Kim Il-Sung was intensely paranoid: he feared invasion, and worried that North Korea was constantly at risk of foreign intervention!
    - Second, North Korea mass-produced propaganda to keep its people in line and promote national unity; even in the hardest moments of the country's history, like during famines, people were told that the suffering they were going through was "shared amongst all the people," and no matter the job people were assigned, they were told that they were an important part of the country. These themes are

reflected in North Korean art—even more recently, like in the lyrics of the popular girl-band Moranbong!

- In the 1970s, North Korea attempted to modernize its economy, like by pursuing mechanized agriculture and refurbishing its energy grid. However, by the late 1970s, North Korea faced a debt crisis, which meant that few international creditors were willing to lend to North Korea! As a consequence, North Korea had to pursue *new* means of income generation, and secretly began producing and exporting missiles to countries like Iran, Syria, Libya, Pakistan, and Egypt. Nonetheless, North Korea continued to face economic downturn, owing to its rigid, militaristic feudal social hierarchy and its inefficient, centrally-managed command economy
- In 1991, however, the DPRK's economy took a nosedive: the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that inflows of foreign aid and cheap energy from its major communist allies effectively came to a halt; North Korea's economic devastation was compounded with political crisis in 1994, when Kim Il-Sung died, so as his son and governmental successor, Kim Jong-Il, assumed power, his country faced financial, political, and humanitarian[6] ruination
    - Facing disaster, Kim Jong-Il adopted the *"Songun policy,"* which further elevated the military's position in society (for instance, *songun* literally means "military first"). Under this system, the military was charged with leading North Korea's economic recovery, such as by constructing massive hydroelectric dams to rectify North Korea's nation-wide electricity problems
    - Relatedly, Kim Jong-Il backed down on the *juche* ideology of self-reliance, and attempted to improve North Korea's global relations. In 1994, for instance, North Korea agreed to pause its nuclear weapons program in exchange for help from South Korean engineers in constructing energy-producing civilian nuclear reactors. In 1999, North Korea further agreed to tone-down its antagonistic international rhetoric, halt long-range missile testing, and limit DMZ incursions. All of this reflected not only *North Korea's* shifting attitudes towards the world, but also *South Korea's* embrace of the "Sunshine Policy," which sought to soften the hostility between these two nations
        - The Sunshine Policy has also been reflected elsewhere: South Korea increased its shipment of development aid to North Korea, established the Mount Kumgang Tourist Region to facilitate an inflow of South Korean tourists into North Korea, and built the Kaesong Industrial Region to increase mutually-beneficial economic cooperation
- However, North Korea grew dissatisfied with liberalization: even as North Korea normalized relations, aid inflows were disappointingly limited, as companies were

[6] Between 1994 and 1998, North Korea underwent a devastating famine, with hundreds of thousands—or possibly even millions of people—starving to death. A variety of factors led to this: a lack of foreign aid from the now-dissolved Soviet Union, severe economic mismanagement, a major flood that submerged large tracts of farmland, and a series of unusually intense and prolonged droughts

reluctant to enter North Korea given the arbitrary and capricious nature of its legal system, and as countries viewed North Korea as being unstable and conflict-prone. North Korea's foreign relations with the West deteriorated further in 2002, when US President George Bush included North Korea in his proclaimed "Axis of Evil"

- Even as the Sunshine Policy—and subsequent meetings between North and South Korean leadership—seemed to be moving intra-peninsular relations in the right direction, North Korea continued its nuclear weapons program in secret, and in 2003, withdrew from the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty before conducting its first nuclear weapons tests in 2006. At this point, Korean relations collapsed: North Korea retreated to isolationism and grew ever-more suspicious of the West—particularly given the abysmal state Russia found itself after the Soviet Union's collapse, which, from Kim Il-Sung's view, had been expedited by the USSR's Western-style liberalization under Gorbachev—and in South Korea, the rise of the far-right Saenuri Party symbolized the waning support in the South for mediation with the North

Continuation: South Korean Liberalization & North Korean Isolationism

- During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, South Korea's economy fell into recession, marking the end of South Korea's decades-long streak of rapid development. Following yet another major corruption scandal, South Korea pivoted towards American-style neoliberal capitalism and implemented various reforms to improve corporate governance, increase transparency in financial reporting, and stabilize companies' debt burdens. South Korea also imposed new regulations on chaebols
- However, even as South Korea reformed its economy, major businesses—particularly the chaebols—continued to enjoy cozy relations with the South Korean government. In 1988, for instance, the President of the Hyundai Group won a seat in South Korea's legislative National Assembly; other business leaders soon followed, and corporations gained increased control over South Korean politics. The rise of neoliberalism begot this by permitting wealth inequality to grow, thus enabling corporate figures to weaponize the sheer size of their wealth[7] and influence to control political systems: for instance, in 1997, a massive corruption scandal was leaked to the public involving the Hanbo Steel conglomerate, which, at the time, was the second-largest producer of steel in South Korea!
    - Perhaps the most telling instance of this occurred early in the 2000s, when Lee Myung-bak, the former CEO of Hyundai's construction department, was elected President from 2008 to 2013. During his tenure as President, Myung-bak pardoned powerful business leaders, including the Chairman of Samsung and high-ranking corporate officials from the SK Group and Lotte, on charges of tax evasion. Myung-bak was, himself, later arrested and convicted for corruption and bribery scandals!

[7] Samsung, for instance, accounts for well over 20% of all South Korean exports

- To push back against its negative international connotation, South Korea has tried to improve its image on the international stage, and it has used culture as its main "weapon" to accomplish this! For instance, the rise of "K Dramas" and "Korean pop" music, fueled by powerful studios like SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment, has enabled the rise of South Korean culture within Western media!
    - Interestingly, this has even (illegally) become a big deal in North Korea! Many marriages in North Korea will often be divided into a public, state-sanctioned ceremony, and a private, off-the-record reception where South Korean media is displayed—that's why North Korea has implemented such harsh penalties for consuming art produced in South Korea!
- But as South Korea has globalized its reputation and established a flourishing, prospering democracy, North Korea has been pounded by international sanctions
- Kim Jong-Il's 2011 death paved the way for Kim Jong-un's rise to power; his rule has seen minor economic reforms—for instance, farmers are now allowed to sell portions of their crops at open markets for a profit—but he has continued North Korea's nuclear program and broke off negotiations with the US under then-President Trump
- North Korea's primary means of side-stepping sanctions has been its robust trade with China. There's a few major reasons China is willing to prop up the regime in Pyongyang:
    - First, China wants to stabilize the Korean peninsula to avoid a refugee crisis, which could arise in the event of war or conflict
    - Second, China knows that—given North Korea's status as a nuclear power—any outbreak of conflict could plausibly result in nuclear weapons being fired *at* or *near* China, either directly by the Kim regime or by a local warlord
    - Third, the prospect of a unified Korea allied with American capitalism would threaten China's regional interests and undercut the narrative of Chinese nationalism pushed by Xi Jinping
    - Fourth, the dire economic context North Korea finds itself in allows Chinese companies to pay North Korean workers disgustingly low wages—even by Chinese standards—and therefore gain a comparative advantage in global markets