

# SOUTH KOREA ON A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

## FROM "VICTIM NATIONALISM" TO NATION BRANDING

*Norbert Eschborn / Janine Läßle*

Those familiar with Korea are generally aware of the fact that Korean nationalism can present the greatest obstacle to foreigners seeking to understand what the Koreans are like.<sup>1</sup> There is clearly a specifically Korean type of nationalism, which has prevailed for a considerable time. This becomes apparent, for instance, when one contemplates a scene from the Asian crisis at the close of the 1990s. Like many other Asian countries, South Korea was in great financial turmoil. However, the Republic of Korea was one of a small number of affected countries that overcame this crisis within a very short period of time. One factor that played quite an important role in this context was the cohesion of the population and its willingness to make sacrifices for its country. At the height of the crisis, which had brought about unemployment, poverty and financial hardship, the Korean Housing and Commercial Bank joined forces with a state television station and started up a gold collection campaign.<sup>2</sup> Numerous Koreans donated their jewellery or other valuables to the state to support their fatherland.<sup>3</sup> After the campaign had run for just two days, the donations already amounted to ten tonnes of gold, vastly exceeding the expectations of the campaign initiators.<sup>4</sup> Although the population itself was suffering from the



Dr. Norbert Eschborn is Resident Representative of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Seoul.



Janine Läßle is studying Politics and Public Administration at the University of Konstanz and was working at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Korea office as a junior researcher.

- 1 | In lieu of many, see Michael Breen, *The Koreans. Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies*, Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2004, 18.
- 2 | Cf. "South Korea's gold collection campaign draws public support", *Augusta Chronicle*, 1 Jul 1998, [http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/1998/01/07/biz\\_220174.shtml](http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/1998/01/07/biz_220174.shtml) (accessed 27 Aug 2013).
- 3 | Cf. "Koreans give up their gold to help their country", *BBC News*, 14 Jan 1998, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/analysis/47496.stm> (accessed 29 Aug 2013).
- 4 | *Ibid.*

impact of the crisis, a sizeable proportion was willing to support the state financially and even to relinquish items of sentimental value.

### LOYALTY AND SOLIDARITY

Where does this willingness to put one's own interests aside and make sacrifices for the nation come from? Patriotism is often described as the key element of nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Seen in this light, nationalism embodies aspects such as feeling a connection with the people that share one's own nationality, feeling part of a larger construct. Equally important, it also embodies pride about one's own nation. For these reasons, people with a certain degree

**The example of the Koreans who gave up their personal possessions for the good of the state illustrates in this context how deep-rooted this loyalty is in the Republic of Korea.**

of national consciousness are loyal towards their state. The example of the Koreans who gave up their personal possessions for the good of the state illustrates in this context how deep-rooted this loyalty is in the Republic of Korea. One arrives at a similar conclusion with respect to the level of loyalty towards the nation when taking a closer look at Korean values. According to the Korean Culture and Spirit Promotion Project, there are two values of outstanding significance in Korean society: *Hyo* and *Chung*. In this context, *Hyo* embodies respect and gratitude towards one's parents, while *Chung* represents loyalty towards the fatherland.<sup>6</sup> Together they have been the "two most important moral values that guided the minds and spirits of the Korean people."<sup>7</sup> Loyalty towards the fatherland thus appears to play a central role in South Korea and to be deeply engrained in society. It may not be sufficient reason for the existence of nationalism, but it forms a fundamental part of this ideology and can thus at least be interpreted as an indication of the existence of a pronounced nationalism.

Apart from this, the success of the gold collection campaign during the Asian crisis also points to the existence of a strong sense of "us" in South Korea. The extent of this feeling of solidarity becomes apparent when one looks at a

5 | Cf. Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire and New York, 2007, 147.

6 | Ibid.

7 | Chung Hyo Ye, *Tales of filial devotion, loyalty, respect and benevolence from the history and folklore of Korea*, Korean Spirit & Culture Promotion Project, Seoul, 2008, 94.

survey from 2000. At that time, 93 per cent of the Korean respondents answered in the affirmative to the question as to whether they believed their nation was based on a common bloodline.<sup>8</sup> Apart from this extremely high positive response rate, the survey also demonstrates a particular characteristic of Korean nationalism: its ethnic component.

South Korean nationalism is thus also characterised by people defining their nation by a common bloodline, which unites all Koreans and which they believe goes back to their forebear Tangun. Korean mythology tells the following story: "In those days there lived a she-bear and a tigress in the same cave. They prayed to Hwanung [the king who had descended from heaven] to be blessed with incarnation as human beings. The king took pity on them and gave each a bunch of mugwort and twenty pieces of garlic, saying, 'If you eat this holy food and do not see the sunlight for one hundred days, you will become human beings.' The she-bear and the tigress took the food and ate it, and retired into the cave. In twenty-one days the bear, who had faithfully observed the king's instructions, became a woman. But the tigress, who had disobeyed, remained in her original form. [...] The bear-woman could find no husband, so she prayed under the sandalwood tree to be blessed with a child. Hwanung heard her prayers and married her. She conceived and bore a son who was called Tan'gun Wanggöm, the King of Sandalwood."<sup>9</sup>

This brief story represents nothing less than Korea's foundation myth. The large kingdom that Hwanung's son founded in ancient times was called Gojoseon and is considered the ancestral Korea. The city that he built near the present-day Pyongyang was called Asadal and served as the kingdom's capital. Today, Tangun is considered Korea's founding father, and 2333 B.C. marks the origin of the Korean nation in the Koreans' consciousness. There is, however, some debate among Korean academics as to whether there ever was such a person as Tangun. It was support from the state that helped those advocating this thesis to win every argument and make Tangun a historic

8 | Cf. Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea; Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006, 2.

9 | Cf. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun; A Modern History*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2005, 29 et seq.

figure.<sup>10</sup> The fact that this founding myth is still imparted to every schoolchild today indicates that it is not some forgotten ancient story.

### THE ROOTS OF KOREAN NATIONALISM

Korea's history is in large parts that of a great nation. It may not reach back as far as 2333 B.C., the year of the mythical founding of Korea by Tangun, but archaeological finds confirm the existence of city states on the Korean Peninsula from approximately 1100 B.C.<sup>11</sup> It is not, however, merely the length of Korean history that makes it significant but particularly also the sophistication of the country in former times. The historic predecessor states of present-day Korea were great nations, which had a considerable influence on the development of the region of East-Asia. This changed fundamentally when the Korean state was weakened by internal conflict and unrest from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It was at that time that another state to the east gained in strength and began to expand its power: Japan. That country was to be instrumental in determining Korea's fate for the first 50 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Korea first became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and finally an official Japanese colony in 1910, which it would remain until the end of the Second World War.**

Japan's interest in Korea first became apparent towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. South Korea saw itself confronted by a neighbour to the east that was acting with mounting aggression, and it came increasingly under its influence. This development culminated in Japan annexing Korea. After the end of the Russo-Japanese War, Korea first became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and finally an official Japanese colony in 1910, which it would remain until the end of the Second World War. It was the suffering experienced during the colonial period that ultimately also crucially influenced the development of nationalism in Korea. Although some nationalist movements had existed in Korea even before 1900, these tended to take

10 | Cf. Ian Buruma, *Der Staub Gottes. Asiatische Nachforschungen*, Eichborn, Frankfurt am Main, 1992, 282.

11 | Cf. Daniel Tudor, *Korea. The Impossible Country*, Tuttle, Rutland and Singapore, Tokyo, 2012, 12.

the form of isolated "intellectual debates".<sup>12</sup> At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, the China-centric view of the world, which was embodied by the ideology of the so-called *hwa-yi*, elicited resistance from Korean philosophers. They fought against the idea put forward by the Chinese side that China was the centre of civilisation and that all other peoples were merely barbarians. The first signs of nationalist thinking in Korea became apparent in this context.<sup>13</sup>

However, it was not until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that nationalism gained in popularity and achieved the status of a mass movement. Considering that nationalism in the Western World had its heyday at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is a relatively young phenomenon in Korea. What is also extraordinary is the context in which the ideology developed there. While nationalism in the states of Western Europe arose particularly from the need to integrate disparate ethnic groups within one territorial state, the origin of Korean nationalism lies instead in ethnicity being under threat from an external aggressor – imperial Japan of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup>

Foreign rule by the Japanese was characterised by discrimination, exploitation and oppression in all areas of life. Higher education was reserved to the Japanese, pay was scaled by ethnicity and Korea's natural resources were exploited ruthlessly.<sup>15</sup> These repressive policies caused increasing protests by the Korean population, and gradually a resistance movement began to form. The desire to free the country from servitude and to live in a sovereign Korean state spread more and more widely; the idea of nationalism had taken hold in Korea. On 1 March 1919, these developments erupted in a mass demonstration, which entered the history books as the "First March Movement". During the protests, Korean nationalists

**The desire to free the country from servitude and to live in a sovereign Korean state spread more and more widely; the idea of nationalism had taken hold in Korea.**

12 | Chong Son U, "Geschichte, Gegenwart und Problematik des koreanischen Nationalismus", in: Iwo Amelung et al. (eds.), *Selbstbehauptungsdiskurse in Asien: China-Japan-Korea*, Iudicium, Munich, 2003, 355.

13 | Cf. Yong-Ha Shin, *Modern Korean History and Nationalism*, Jimoondang, Seoul, 2000, 5 et sqq.

14 | Cf. Gi-Wook Shin, James Freda and Gihong Yi, "The politics of ethnic nationalism in divided Korea", in: *Nations and Nationalism* 5, Apr 1999, Seoul, 470.

15 | Cf. Marion Eggert and Jörg Plassen, *Kleine Geschichte Koreas*, Beck, Munich, 2005, 134 et sqq.

declared Korea's independence, which triggered country-wide uprisings against the Japanese imperialists. The Japanese responded to the protests with extreme harshness. The demonstrations were put down with deadly force, producing devastating bloodshed. According to Korean estimates, some 7,500 Koreans were killed, 15,000 injured and 45,000 arrested.<sup>16</sup> 1 March 1919 thus represents a black day in Korean history; but it is also a milestone in the history of Korean nationalism. It was the first time that the Koreans had joined together to rebel against foreign rule and make their desire to become a sovereign nation known. 1 March 1919 marks the day on which nationalism became the ideology of the Korean people.

Korean nationalism subsequently continued to evolve and became increasingly popular. Korean newspapers spread ideas associated with it, activists abroad set up a government-in-exile, and the call for independence became increasingly louder.<sup>17</sup> The movement finally received a special boost at the end of the 1930s, when Japanese policies towards the Korean colony took a new, more extreme direction. This was a manifestation of the concept of *naisen ittai*, which translates as "Japan and Korea as one body".<sup>18</sup> In line with the wording of the new principle, the aim now was total assimilation of the Koreans. Seen from the opposite perspective, it meant the destruction of Korean identity. The Japanese rulers spread propaganda according to which Korea and Japan had common historic roots and the Korean race was merely a subgroup of the Japanese race.<sup>19</sup> The measures taken under the new policy included banning the use of the Korean language in public and the publication of Korean-language newspapers as well as the enforced adoption of Japanese surnames.<sup>20</sup> This comprehensive attempt by the Japanese to completely destroy the Korean nation had the opposite effect in that it strengthened Korean nationalism further.

16 | Cf. Shin, n. 8, 44.

17 | Cf. Chong-Sik Lee, *The Politics of Korean Nationalism*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963, 130.

18 | Brian R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race; How North Koreans See Themselves – And Why It Matters*, Melville House, New York, 2010, 27.

19 | Cf. Tudor, n. 11, 261.

20 | Cf. Andrei Lankov, "Japanese policy of assimilation", *The Korea Times*, 3 Mar 2011, [http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2013/02/165\\_82414.html](http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2013/02/165_82414.html) (accessed 22 May 2013).

The Koreans sought to do everything in their power to distinguish themselves from the Japanese imperialists and to retain their own identity. To this end, the Korean nationalists picked up on an ancient legend, which was first mentioned in writing in 1280 by the monk Ir'yon:<sup>21</sup> the legend of Tangun, who was the son of the god Hwanung and founded the Kingdom of Korea. The myth was spread among the population, and Tangun was henceforth portrayed as the founder of the Korean nation and forefather of all Koreans. This produced the ethnic component of Korean nationalism, which manifests in the principle of *minjok*. This principle states that the Korean nation is based on a common bloodline, which can be traced back to Tangun.<sup>22</sup> Korea is thus said to be a homogenous people that has a unique culture and history, which need to be distinguished from those of the Japanese and Chinese. Dissemination of this view was intended to unite the Korean people and defend its identity against the assimilation attempts of the Japanese.<sup>23</sup>

**Korea is said to be a homogenous people that has a unique culture and history, which need to be distinguished from those of the Japanese and Chinese.**

Korea's ethnic nationalism was born, and it became established within a very short period of time. The developments occurring after the end of foreign rule in 1945 would ensure that it was also retained in future. The elation about the end of the colonial era received a sudden damper when it became clear that Korea would not regain its independence immediately. Instead, the Allies took decisions about the country's future on behalf of the Korean people, which meant a continuation of the heteronomy that Korea had experienced under the Japanese.

The foundations for Korea's future were laid at the Yalta Conference in 1945, where the USA and the Soviet Union agreed on administering Korea by a joint trusteeship.<sup>24</sup> On

21 | Cf. Josef A. Kyburz, "Korea im Wettstreit mit Japan", in: Iwo Amelung et al. (eds.), *Selbstbehauptungsdiskurse in Asien: China – Japan – Korea*, Iudicium, Munich, 2003, 371.

22 | Cf. Tudor, n. 11, 261.

23 | Cf. Shin, Freda and Yi, n. 14, 470.

24 | Cf. Bernd Stöver, *Geschichte des Koreakriegs; Schlachtfeld der Supermächte und ungelöster Konflikt*, C.H. Beck, Munich, 2013, 38 et seq.; Kathryn Weathersby, *Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945-1950: New Evidence from Russian Archives*, Florida State University, Working Paper, 1993, 10.

8 August 1945, Soviet troops advanced to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel as agreed, while the Americans occupied the southern part of the country.<sup>25</sup> The subsequent increasing deterioration in the relationship between the USA and the Soviet Union also had an impact on Korea's fate. Numerous conferences brought no progress, agreements about all-Korean elections failed. In 1948, elections were held in the U.S.-occupied zone, and Syngman Rhee rose to become the first President of the Republic of Korea.<sup>26</sup> In the northern part, elections were held one month later, with Kim Il Sung becoming President of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.<sup>27</sup> This put the final seal on the partition of the Korean Peninsula.

### **NATIONALISM AS A DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

The Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953, the widespread destruction it entailed and the backward state of the South Korean economy created enormous challenges for the country in the 1950s and 1960s. Dictator Park Chung-hee, who came to power in 1961 through a military coup, pursued a highly controversial strategy for overcoming the problems, which involved utilising nationalism as a tool. Syngman Rhee had previously encouraged nationalist and cultural programmes to a certain extent,<sup>28</sup> but Park Chung-hee set in train an era of systematic use of nationalism for political purposes. He focused particularly strongly on enforcing his strategy of economic development; this required the Korean people to be united and motivated in order to jointly reconstruct the derelict economy. Starting from the basis of ethnic nationalism, the "survival and well-being"<sup>29</sup> of the Korean race were publicised as the main objectives in this context. Large-scale campaigns were conducted, appealing to the Koreans' "love and loyalty" towards their fatherland.<sup>30</sup> Each

25 | Cf. Stöver, n. 24, 36 et seq.

26 | Ibid., 46.

27 | Ibid., 47.

28 | Cf. Sang-Mi Park, "The Paradox of Postcolonial Korean Nationalism: State-Sponsored Cultural Policy in South Korea, 1965-Present", *Journal of Korean Studies* 15, 1, 2010, 71.

29 | Tudor, n. 11, 264.

30 | Gi-Wook Shin, "Nation, History and Politics: South Korea", in: Hyung Il Pai and Timothy R. Tangherlini (eds.), *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity*, Institute of East Asian Studies, Berkeley, 1999, 154.



individual had to make a contribution and give something back to the country that had done so much for them. Work was described as a “patriotic duty”,<sup>31</sup> and workers were even referred to as “soldiers of industry”.<sup>32</sup>

**The subject of “National Ethics Education” became a fixed part of the curriculum, a Day and a Month of Culture were introduced, and “spiritual mobilisation” of the people became an official component of cultural policy.**

The subject of “National Ethics Education” became a fixed part of the curriculum, a Day and a Month of Culture were introduced, and “spiritual mobilisation”<sup>33</sup> of the people became an official component of cultural policy. As part of these measures, the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation was established with the intention that it should transfer the state ideology into the minds and daily lives of people using film and literature.<sup>34</sup> The “New Village Movement”, which was created in 1970, played a central role in this policy. Following the Japanese model, this state-controlled movement officially pursued the goal of improving living conditions and infrastructure in Korea’s rural areas. But it equally served to indoctrinate the people – moral education and cultural events constituted integral components of the movement.<sup>35</sup>

By these means, the ideology of nationalism was not merely maintained in Korea subsequent to the colonial era, but virtually burnt into people’s consciousness. Chun Doo-hwan, who succeeded Park Chung-hee and governed until 1988, continued state support for cultural and nationalist programmes, thus ensuring the enduring existence of nationalism.

It is therefore also Korea’s extraordinary history, and in particular the dark last century, that provides an explanation of why nationalism in Korea still has such a strong presence in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and how the unique characteristics of Korean nationalism came about. In addition to the original need to disseminate nationalist thinking as a defence against the Japanese assimilation attempts and

31 | Andrew E. Kim and Gil-Sung Park, “Nationalism, Confucianism, work ethic and industrialization in South Korea”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33, 1, 2003, 41.

32 | Ibid.

33 | Park, n. 28, 77.

34 | Ibid.

35 | Cf. Andrei Lankov, “Saemaul Udong Sets Model for Developing Countries”, *The Korea Times*, 16 Apr 2010, [http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2012/03/291\\_64301.html](http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2012/03/291_64301.html) (accessed 22 May 2013); Park, n. 28, 77 et sqq.

the subsequent nationalist indoctrination by Park Chung-hee for the purpose of the country's industrialisation, it is finally also pride about the country's economic upsurge at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that can be seen as fuelling the extraordinary intensity of the country's nationalism. After having suffered virtually a century of painful experiences – oppression, foreign rule by major powers such as Japan, the USA and the Soviet Union, and finally poverty after the civil war – the population had finally achieved its long-desired sovereignty at several levels. Foreign rule, dictatorship and poverty had been overcome. The Republic of Korea had become a democratic state with a booming economy. The country had regained its former greatness. The shadows of the past had been dispelled at long last, and people could be proud of their nation once more.

### HOW DOES KOREAN NATIONALISM MANIFEST TODAY?

**Over half of the respondents of a survey would have denied their children their blessing for marriage to a foreigner – the idea being that the bloodline going back to 2333 B.C. should be preserved.**

A recent survey gives some clues to explain the enduring strength of Korean nationalism. In 2006, 56.5 per cent of Korean respondents confirmed they agreed with the statement "I am against my children marrying a foreigner".<sup>36</sup> Over half of the respondents would therefore have denied their children their blessing for marriage to a foreigner – the idea being that the bloodline going back to 2333 B.C. should be preserved. Apart from this example, there are further aspects complementing the picture of present-day Korean nationalism and illustrating its persistence.

#### Hallyu – the Korean Wave

One of these aspects is embodied by the so-called Korean Wave, referred to as *Hallyu* in Korea. While the country was exposed to the influences of foreign powers such as Japan and the USA for a long time, a reversal took place towards the end of the 1990s. Korean pop culture expanded across the whole of Asia in the form of the Korean Wave. "Gangnam Style", the hit by Korean rapper

36 | In Yin Joon, Young Ho Song and Young Joon Bae, "South Koreans Attitudes Towards Foreigners, Minorities and Multiculturalism", paper presented during a meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1-4 Aug 2008, 335.

Psy, even found its way into the global media and is the most successful example of Korean pop culture to date. In 1997, Korean television series were broadcast in China and Taiwan for the first time, to great success against general expectation. Broadcasts in Hong Kong and Southeast Asian countries followed. During subsequent years, Korean TV series and movies became increasingly popular and spread like wildfire throughout the Asian region. Some years after that, Korean pop music also increased in popularity and began to dominate the Asian charts – the Korean Wave was born.

Parallel to the increasing proliferation of Korean pop culture, general interest in Korea rose as well. Korean food as well as Korean fashion won an ever-increasing following, the demand for Korean language courses soared, and a type of fan tourism emerged involving people visiting the locations where famous Korean movies had been shot.<sup>37</sup> There were and are even some people who go to extremes in their desire to look like their Korean idols, as plastic surgeons report.<sup>38</sup> Korea is “in” in Asia. This fact fills the country’s people with enormous pride. UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon, himself from South Korea, made this comment: “The Korean Wave has brought the country long-overdue respect.”<sup>39</sup> Jeongsuk Joo refers to this phenomenon as “pop nationalism”<sup>40</sup> – the sudden popularity of the country’s culture in the entire Asian region is strengthening nationalist feelings and sustaining pride and national consciousness in South Korea. *Hallyu* is thus more than just music and television; it is an expression of modern Korean nationalism and of the realisation of being an influential nation.

### **Korean Spirit and Culture Promotion Project**

Besides modern pop culture, efforts are also being made to maintain original, traditional Korean culture. In 2005, a Korean organisation entitled Korean Spirit and Culture

37 | Cf. Jeongsuk Joo, “Transnationalization of Korean Popular Culture and the rise of Pop nationalism in Korea”, *The Journal for Popular Culture* 44, 3, 2011, 490 and 495.

38 | Cf. Doobo Shim, “Hybridity and the Rise of Korean popular culture in Asia”, *Media Culture and Society* 28, 1, 2006, 29.

39 | Joo, n. 37, 496.

40 | Ibid.

Promotion Project was founded to this end. It pursues the aim of not merely maintaining Korean culture, but of disseminating it particularly to other parts of the world. The efforts made in this connection are quite remarkable. The organisation maintains offices in Germany, the USA and the UK and produces free brochures published in several languages, which offer information about Korean history and culture. Large numbers of these brochures are distributed to schools, universities, businesses and embassies as well as high-ranking members of foreign governments.<sup>41</sup> Among other things, their existence underlines the importance that cultural heritage has for the Republic of Korea. An equally significant aspect embodied by the organisation is one that currently occupies a central role in Korea's nationalism: the need to disseminate one's own culture and make the world take note of South Korea, which is also apparent among the population.

### **NATIONALISM IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JAPAN AND KOREA**

**In 1966, Japan and South Korea resumed official diplomatic relations, but there are a number of unresolved conflicts between the neighbouring countries, which flare up time and again.**

A further aspect in which present-day Korean nationalism manifests is embodied by the country's relationship with Japan. This aspect symbolises the darker side of nationalism in Korea, as it fuels the persistent conflicts

between the two countries. The bilateral relationship has been strained since the Second World War. In 1966, Japan and South Korea resumed official diplomatic relations, but there are a number of unresolved conflicts between the neighbouring countries, which flare up time and again. This effectively prevents closer cooperation, which would be beneficial to both sides in a number of different areas.

#### **Dokdo/Takeshima**

The Liancourt Rocks – known in Korea as Dokdo and in Japan as Takeshima Islands – constitute one of the central points of contention between Japan and Korea. The group of islands, with a surface area of just 0.186 square kilometres, was annexed by Japan in 1905, an event that

41 | Cf. Korean Spirit and Culture Promotion Project, <http://kscpp.net/KSCPPHome/OurProjects/tabid/95/Default.aspx> (accessed 8 Aug 2013).

represented the starting point of Japan's imperialist ambitions towards Korea.<sup>42</sup> Dokdo is therefore of great symbolic significance for Korea.



Symbol of Korean assertion against Japan: The Dokdo islands, to the left on the screen of a taximeter, to the right as a model in the metro of Seoul. | Source: © Norbert Eschborn.

After the end of the Second World War, territorial matters were settled by the 1952 Peace Treaty of San Francisco. This listed numerous islands that Japan was meant to return to Korea, but Dokdo was not included. Ever since then, both Japan and Korea have insisted on a territorial claim to Dokdo. Japan justifies its claim by stating that Dokdo was not covered in any of the post-war agreements and had not been taken by force. The islands had in fact been *terra nullius* under international law at the time of annexation, i.e. had never previously been part of any state.<sup>43</sup> The Koreans, on the other hand, state that Dokdo had been part of Korea's sovereign territory for a long time and that its annexation by Japan was therefore illegal.

42 | Cf. Seokwoo Lee and Hee Eun Lee, "Overview – 'Dokdo: Historical Appraisal and International Justice'", in: Seokwoo Lee and Hee Eun Lee (eds.), *Dokdo: Historical Appraisal and International Justice*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Leiden and Boston, 2011, 3.

43 | Cf. Hyun Dae Song, "The Dokdo-Takeshima Issue: Its Origins and the Current Situation", in: idem (ed.), *The Historical Perceptions of Korea and Japan: Its Origins and Points of the Issues Concerning Dokdo-Takeshima*, Yasukuni Shrine, Comfort Women and Textbooks, Nanam Publications, Seoul, 2008, 44.

Dokdo had not been *terra nullius* in 1905; the Republic of Korea had merely not been in a position to protest against the annexation in the international arena as it had already been under Japanese influence by then.<sup>44</sup> In substantiation of these assertions, the Korean side cites sources which they say prove that Dokdo had already been part of the Kingdom of Silla in 512 A.D. (a predecessor of present-day Korea) and that Korea's territorial claim to Dokdo therefore goes back some 1,500 years.<sup>45</sup> After the end

**In 2002, the publication of Japanese textbooks, in which Dokdo was depicted as being part of Japan, triggered demonstrations in South Korea and resulted in diplomatic tensions.**

of the Second World War, South Korea took over administration of the group of islands, but Japan still insisted that Dokdo was part of Japanese national territory.<sup>46</sup> After the conflict had lain dormant for some time, it flared up again towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Japan unilaterally declared a 200-nautical-mile economic exclusion zone around Dokdo and harassed Korean fishing vessels present in this area.<sup>47</sup> Subsequent provocations from both sides then brought the matter to a head. In 2002, the publication of Japanese textbooks, in which Dokdo was depicted as being part of Japan, triggered demonstrations in South Korea and resulted in diplomatic tensions. In the Republic of Korea, a series of stamps depicting nature motifs from Dokdo was issued in 2004 in spite of Japanese protests.

The following year saw a brief escalation of the conflict, when the Shimane Prefecture, into which Dokdo had been incorporated in 1905, declared 22 February "Take-shima Day". The timing of this was particularly sensitive. The day of celebration was declared exactly 100 years after the annexation of Dokdo on 22 February 1905 and thus precisely one century on from the start of Korea's colonisation.<sup>48</sup> This affront triggered furious protests by the Korean population. The conflict has not abated during the

44 | *Ibid.*, 44 and 89.

45 | Cf. Jon M. Van Dyke, "Addressing and Resolving the Dokdo Matter", in: Lee, n. 42, 29; Ralf Emmers, *Japan-Korea Relations and the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute: The Interplay of Nationalism and Natural Resources*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Working Paper, Singapore, 2010, 2.

46 | Cf. Emmers, n. 45, 2.

47 | Cf. Michael A. Launius, "The politics of competing territorial claims to Dokdo", Article presented during the First World Congress of Korean Studies, Seoul, 18-20 Jun 2002, 6.

48 | Cf. Wada Harouki, "Japans Policy Towards Territorial Disputes in East Asia", in: Song (ed.), n. 43, 189.

last few years. The most recent events in the dispute over Dokdo included a visit to the islands by the Korean Prime Minister in 2008, which was timed to coincide with large military exercises, the publication of further history books in Japan in 2010, which contained critical statements regarding Dokdo, as well as the first visit to Dokdo by a Korean president, Lee Myeong Bak, in 2012.

### **“Comfort Women”**

“Comfort women” represent a further point of contention between Japan and the Republic of Korea that goes back to the colonial era. This term refers to a group of women, numbering between 50,000 and 200,000 according to different estimates, who were forced into prostitution by the Japanese during the War in the Pacific.<sup>49</sup> They were accommodated in “comfort stations”, which existed in all areas occupied by the Japanese, and their main purpose was to strengthen the motivation of Japanese soldiers and thus enhance the effectiveness of the Japanese army.

South Korean women bore the brunt of this chapter of Japanese colonial rule, as over half of the “comfort women” were from Korea. Some were sold by their parents as minors because of financial hardship, some were abducted by the Japanese and others surrendered voluntarily to the colonial masters lured by empty promises of well-paid jobs in Japanese factories.<sup>50</sup> The Japanese government played a leading role in the planning and administration of the “comfort stations”. To date, there has been no official apology or any payment of damages to individual surviving victims.<sup>51</sup> In order to demonstrate their outrage about this, 234 former “comfort women” started the so-called Wednesday Demonstrations in 1992, which have been held in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul on a weekly basis ever since.<sup>52</sup>

49 | Cf. Myoung-Sook Youn, “Controversies surrounding the question of the Japanese army’s comfort stations and comfort women”, in: Song (ed.), n. 43, 217.

50 | Cf. Cungee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, 3 et seq.; Youn, n. 49, 219.

51 | Cf. Youn, n. 49, 223 and 227.

52 | Cf. Mee-Yo Kwon, “Activist from Canada Attends 900<sup>th</sup> Protest”, *The Korea Times*, 13 Jan 2010, [http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/07/117\\_58991.html](http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/07/117_58991.html) (accessed 27 Aug 2013).



A symbol of Korean victim nationalism: A memorial for “comfort women” in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. | Source: © Norbert Eschborn.

### Yasukuni Shrine

For several decades, high-ranking Japanese politicians have been paying regular visits to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo to commemorate the Japanese war dead, the last instance being a visit by 168 members of the Japanese parliament in April 2013.<sup>53</sup> These visits are regularly followed by diplomatic tensions between South Korea and Japan. The reason is that the people commemorated at the Yasukuni Shrine include 14 convicted class A war criminals. According to the rating system introduced by the Allies, class A criminals are the main perpetrators, represented by the political leadership. Seven of the 14 war criminals revered at the Yasukuni Shrine were executed in the course of the Tokyo Trials – the equivalent of the Nuremberg Trials. In addition, the Yasukuni Shrine commemorates some 200,000 fallen Koreans who had been forcefully recruited into the Japanese army during the course of the Japanese occupation.<sup>54</sup> Korean families have repeatedly requested that the names of their family members be removed from the list of persons commemorated at the Yasukuni Shrine. They explained that to them the thought of their family

53 | Cf. “Japan and its neighbours. For whom the bell tolls. A visit to the controversial Yasukuni shrine upsets the neighbours”, *The Economist*, 27 Apr 2013, <http://economist.com/news/asia/21576724-visit-controversial-yasukuni-shrine-upsets-neighbours-whom-bell-tolls> (accessed 7 Aug 2013).

54 | Cf. Takahashi Tetsuya, “Yasukuni Shrine. A Controversial Historic Issue involving Japan and Korea”, in: Song (ed.), n. 43, 202 et sqq.



members being commemorated at the shrine for their service to the Japanese fatherland was unbearable. However, the request by the Korean families has remained unheeded to date.

Relations between Japan and South Korea are a highly complex matter. There is already a sizeable body of literature discussing this tense relationship, but the focus in this paper is once again on the aspect of Korean nationalism. The significance this bears in the conflict between the two countries is demonstrated most clearly by the controversy over Dokdo. The islands are hardly more than a few scraggy rocks, yet they have become the object of a lengthy dispute pursued with a great deal of aggression. This is only explicable to those who realise that Dokdo acts as a symbol for Korea's oppression by Japan. The group of islands embodies all the painful years during which Korea had to suffer under Japan's rule, and it therefore also underpins Korean nationalism. If Korea were to give way in the dispute over the islands or even just conduct itself more cooperatively, this would mean a renewed triumph of Japan over Korea. The Koreans' national pride makes it imperative for the Republic of Korea to hold on to Dokdo to demonstrate its regained strength to Japan and to the rest of the world.

### **CONCLUSION: SELF-CONFIDENCE AND NATION BRANDING**

Consequently, nationalism is still very much present in Korea. This circumstance represents another particular feature of Korean nationalism. While nation states around the world are gradually losing some of their individuality to the benefit of unions of states such as the EU, nationalism in South Korea is more topical than in virtually any other developed industrialised nation. Taken together, the described examples paint a multi-faceted picture of what nationalism means in present-day Korea. In addition, they provide insight into an interesting characteristic of Korean nationalism today: the need to spread the country's culture to the wider world and enhance the country's international reputation. This need appears to be something of a complex rooted in history. For a long time, Korea was the pawn of foreign powers; even where its own future was

**Today, South Korea is the twelfth strongest economy in the world. From being a developing country, the state has risen to become a leading industrialised nation within an extremely short time.**

concerned, the populace was denied a voice. The country was one of the poorest in the world and illiteracy was rife. Today, South Korea is the twelfth strongest economy in the world.<sup>55</sup> From being a developing country, the state has risen to become a leading industrialised nation within an extremely short time. Yet South Korea is still somewhat of an “unknown quantity”,<sup>56</sup> as Daniel Tudor put it. Even those who have an interest in Asia frequently ignore the country, focusing instead on its powerful neighbours China and Japan.<sup>57</sup> This, in combination with the historic complex that appears to exist in the Korean mind, provides an explanation for this component of Korean nationalism. Now that the nation has finally regained its former greatness, it wants the rest of the world to take notice and accord it due respect.

The extraordinary change that South Korea has undergone over the last few decades manifests in various ways. One aspect that symbolises Korea’s new self-confidence on the back of this development is the campaign of “Nation Branding”, which the government has been pursuing for several years. Nation Branding is the attempt by a country to improve its international reputation in order to gain political and economic benefits.<sup>58</sup> While South Korea has become one of the economically strongest nations in the world, the country’s international image still appears to be limited to “Gangnam Style”, Samsung and Kimchi. Early attempts to change this were made by former Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who initiated a major image campaign to promote Korea worldwide on the occasion of the 2002 Football World Cup hosted jointly by South Korea and Japan.<sup>59</sup> Under Lee Myeong Bak’s government, Nation Branding came to feature more strongly in government policy. In 2008, the year he took office, he referred to Nation Branding as one of the three core values that

55 | Cf. The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/GDP-PPP-based-table> (accessed 8 Aug 2013).

56 | Tudor, n. 11, 9.

57 | Ibid.

58 | Cf. Alena Schmuck, “Nation Branding in South Korea: A Modern Continuation of the Developmental State”, in: Rüdiger Frank et al., *Korea 2011: Politics Economy and Society*, Brill, Leiden, 2011, 98 et sqq.

59 | Ibid., 101.

were crucial to Korea's future.<sup>60</sup> The following year saw the founding of the Presidential Council on Nation Branding. This organisation reports directly to the President and has a budget of 100 billion won (currently approximately 70 million euros).<sup>61</sup> According to Bak, the goals of this institution include the development of Korea into an internationally respected country.<sup>62</sup> The current Chairman of the Presidential Council on Nation Branding, Samuel Koo, stressed that his institution was working continuously so the nation could become one of the most important leading countries in the world.<sup>63</sup> There are already some definite signs of achievements in this direction – which may or may not be due to state campaigns. While the Korean Wave is limited to Asia, Psy's 2012 "Gangnam Style", for instance, became an international hit, the number of tourists to Korea has more than doubled since 2007, and Korean companies such as Nexon continue to impress through strong performance.

The Republic of Korea has changed from being on the defensive to taking the offensive. Like the Korean Wave, the Nation Branding campaign thus embodies not just the country's new self-confidence but also its ability to come to terms with the past. What originated as a defensive type of nationalism to protect the country's identity has ended in the country of South Korea making progress in putting itself on the map at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **OUTLOOK: END OF KOREAN NATIONALISM THROUGH GLOBALISATION?**

Nationalism remains an important part of Korean consciousness. South Korea is, however, also undergoing change. Companies such as the Samsung and LG corporations are operating successfully in the global marketplace. While the

60 | Cf. "Background & Objective", Presidential Council on Nation Branding, <http://koreabrand.net/gokr/en/cms/selectKbrdCmsPageTbl.do?cd=0118&m1=1&m2=3> (accessed 8 Aug 2013).

61 | Cf. Schmuck, n. 58, 107.

62 | Cf. Na Jeong-ju, "Presidential Council on Nation Branding Opens", *The Korea Times*, 22 Jan 2009, <http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/include/print.asp?newsIdx=38362> (accessed 8 Aug 2013).

63 | Cf. Samuel Koo, "Improvements in nation branding begin today", Presidential Council on Nation Branding, <http://koreabrand.net/gokr/en/cms/selectKbrdCmsPageTbl.do?cd=0124&m1=2&m2=1> (accessed 8 Aug 2013).

**It has become more attractive particularly to the Chinese and to people from Southeast Asia. South Korea has arrived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and finds itself swept along by the wave of globalisation.**

number of foreigners living in South Korea was vanishingly small at 50,000 only two decades ago, the country has been experiencing an enormous influx for some time.<sup>64</sup>

It has become more attractive particularly to the Chinese and to people from Southeast Asia. South Korea has arrived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and finds itself swept along by the wave of globalisation. These changes will also have an impact on Korean nationalism. Will the increasing opening up of Korea inevitably lead to a weakening of nationalism? Or is nationalism so deeply rooted in Korean society that it will remain impervious to the influences of globalisation? Are nationalism and globalisation reconcilable?

Korea expert Professor Gi Wook Shin does not see any signs of nationalism abating despite the increasing impact of globalisation.<sup>65</sup> Instead, he sees signs of the opposite effect, of an increase in the intensity of nationalism produced by globalisation. He thinks this is due to the fact that South Korea is attempting to shape the impact of globalisation in a way to ensure that it has only positive consequences for the country. Globalisation has also resulted in something of an awakening with respect to the country's own cultural heritage. This has manifested particularly in increasing state support for Korean culture – a measure that former President Kim Dae-jung included in the official agenda of the globalisation programme of his government. In the Nobel laureate's view, Korea can only succeed in becoming part of the globalised world if the Korean identity can be preserved.<sup>66</sup> One example that appears to confirm this trend can be found in Korean media legislation. This dictates that at least 80 per cent of the programmes broadcast by state television stations must be Korean productions.<sup>67</sup> So while beneficial effects of globalisation have been gradually permitted on the one hand, policies have been pursued to actively support the preservation of Korean culture on the other.

64 | Cf. Yoshihiro Makino, "South Korea struggles to welcome growing number of foreign workers", *The Asahi Shimbun*, 11 May 2013, <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/economy/business/AJ201305110007> (accessed 8 Aug 2013).

65 | Cf. Gi-Wook Shin, *The Paradox of Korean Globalization*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, 18 et seq.

66 | Ibid.

67 | Authors' own research.

There are now increasing signs of a development in the opposite direction where Korean nationalism and the Korean government's response to globalisation are concerned. One example is the reaction provoked by a law from 2000, which granted ethnic Koreans an unlimited right of residence in Korea unless they were immigrants from Russia or China. The purpose had been to restrict immigration to highly educated, English speaking foreigners of Korean descent, who were unlikely to come from those two countries. By 2004, the law had been changed after protests from civil society organisations, and it now applies to all ethnic Koreans living abroad.<sup>68</sup> Other discriminatory laws have fared similarly and some of them have been corrected or rescinded entirely over recent years. This applies in particular to the Korean Nationality Act that came into force in 1948, which had refused Korean citizenship to the children of fathers of non-Korean descent for half a century.<sup>69</sup> This law was finally revised in 1998. Now, children with one ethnic Korean parent are automatically awarded Korean citizenship, whichever parent it is.<sup>70</sup>

Another indication of slowly developing change is evidenced in the results of a 2005 survey by the East Asia Institute on the subject of Korean identity. In answer to the question "What is the most important criterion that makes a person Korean?", the option "Korean citizenship" was ticked by the greatest number of people overall; while the response "Korean bloodline" was chosen by almost as many people, it only ranked fifth by comparison with the other responses.<sup>71</sup> Of course one cannot ignore how small the differences were between the various options. However, when one considers the large proportion that had chosen the "common bloodline" option in the 2000 survey by Gi Wook Shin, the picture painted by the results from the 2005 survey is significant.

68 | Cf. Yoonjung Lee, "Migration, Migrants and Contested Ethno Nationalism in Korea", *Critical Asian Studies* 41, 3, 2009, 371.

69 | Cf. Hye Kjung Lee, "Gender, Migration and Civil Activism in South Korea", *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12, 1-2, 143.

70 | Cf. Kim Sun Uk, "An Analysis of Legislative Policy for Performance of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women)", in: Chang Pilhwa and Euhn-Shil Kim (eds.), *Women's Experiences and Feminist Practices in South Korea*, Ewha Womens University Press, Seoul, 2005, 267.

71 | Cf. Lee, n. 68, 377.

These few examples already indicate that a gradual change is taking place where the exclusive nature of Korean nationalism is concerned. However, when one considers that 56.5 per cent of respondents of a different survey conducted in 2006 stated they would not agree to one of their children marrying a foreigner, a somewhat confused picture emerges. How can this be explained?

**While the country was still in virtual isolation in 1980 and only 200,000 foreigners lived in South Korea in 2001 according to official numbers, the figure had already risen to 1.4 million by 2011.**

Today, nationalism inevitably still plays a very large role in Korean society. By comparison with the past, however, its significance seems to be reducing steadily, albeit very slowly. This trend is likely to accelerate over

the next few years due to a number of factors. First, one needs to consider the impact the increasing number of foreigners on Korean soil has, which will probably continue rising over the coming years. While the country was still in virtual isolation in 1980 and only 200,000 foreigners lived in South Korea in 2001 according to official numbers, the figure had already risen to 1.4 million by 2011.<sup>72</sup>

This corresponds to an increase in the foreign population of 600 per cent in just ten years. This trend looks set to continue, as the Korean economy needs an influx of both high and low-skilled workers to satisfy the needs of the factories of Korean industry. The demographic development in the Republic of Korea will only encourage this trend. As contact between Koreans and foreigners increases, the number of international relationships will rise. While Korean women who entered into relationships with American soldiers after the Second World War were greatly discriminated against, mixed relationships already made up twelve per cent of all new marriages in 2006.<sup>73</sup> In the rural areas of Korea, the proportion was as high as 41 per cent.<sup>74</sup> Although this high percentage is due to the special phenomenon that Korean farmers cannot easily find Korean women willing to marry them and therefore marry women from Southeast Asian countries, this trend does have consequences. Mixed marriages produce children who are no longer ethnically pure Koreans according to traditional thinking. As this interrupts the Korean bloodline, it will not be possible for the tale of

72 | Cf. Tudor, n. 11, 271.

73 | Cf. Lee, n. 68, 371.

74 | Ibid.

the ethnic homogeneity of the Korean people to persist. The number of these children is still relatively small, but it will rise with the increasing number of international marriages and produce a community of Koreans of mixed ethnicity. The discrimination they are still experiencing today will decrease, as the community will have reached a considerable size within the foreseeable future. While foreigners still represented a rarity in South Korea a few years ago, they will become a permanent part of the population in the near future.

Another factor blurring the picture is the fact that the intensity of nationalism differs by age group. While nationalism does exist among Korea's young people, it no longer plays a primary role for them.<sup>75</sup> The younger, media-networked generation has not experienced Korea's dark times and did not have to suffer Japanese oppression, American foreign rule or gnawing hunger and grinding poverty. Instead, it was born into a globalised world, in which foreigners are gradually becoming a normal part of everyday life. Young people no longer suffer from contact anxiety; they have foreign school friends, who ultimately become friends and partners. In addition, they have opportunities that were denied their forefathers. While South Korea was a country cut off from the outside world until the end of the dictatorship, today's young people have the opportunity to travel, to gain work experience abroad or to conduct part of their university studies in another country. This gives them a totally different perspective onto the world and onto their own nation.

The fact that nationalism continues to be deeply rooted in Korean society can be explained partly by the influence of the older generation. The levers of power in politics and society are still in the hands of those who think the world is not giving South Korea the recognition it deserves. There are, however, indications that a gradual decline in nationalism has begun, which will probably continue for the foreseeable future. Joining the open global society is not just an opportunity but a necessity for the Republic of Korea. It would mean Korea would also truly become the cosmopolitan country it purports to be in its campaign to enhance its image in the eyes of the world.

75 | Tudor, n. 11, 270.