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# LAND OF THE MORNING CALM

*It is said that calm precedes a storm.*

*Ongoing tension between North and South Korea keeps political analysts on their toes and defence forces on stand-by.*

*Andrew Ford provides an insightful analysis of Korean people, their history, culture and religion.*

What images do you associate with Korea? Maybe you have heard about the Korean war – the American television series M\*A\*S\*H portrayed a view of the war that could hardly have been further from reality – or maybe you own some clothes or toys made in Korea, or a Korean car. Another common view of Korea is gained from the TV news with images of riot police and students or workers clashing. Or perhaps you have heard that some of the largest Christian churches in the world are in Korea.

Just as kangaroos, beautiful beaches and *Waltzing Matilda* are not all that define Australia, these images are only a small part of the tapestry that is Korea. For years known as the Hermit Kingdom, or now dubbed by its tourism promoters as the Land of the Morning Calm, Korea is one of the most fascinating, forgotten and frustrating countries in the world and one with which I have had a life long association.

When we speak of modern Korea we are actually speaking of one country that has cruelly become two. A tour of the gigantic, grey stoned Korean National War Memorial in South Korea's capital, Seoul, is one of the best places to learn about and understand Korea's 5000 year old history of war which culminated in the Korean war of 1950-53. As you tour the graphic exhibits and descriptions, Korea's many war heroes are honoured – men who have fought bravely to defend the

country against numerous invaders. Sitting on the peninsula jutting out from mainland Asia, Korea has been a constant target for invasion from the Mongols, the Chinese and the Japanese. One of Korea's most famous victories was in the late 16th century when Admiral Lee Sun-shin, though vastly outnumbered, defeated the mighty imperial navy of Japan using tactical manoeuvres and possibly the world's first iron clad battleships.

However, from 1910 until the end of the Second World War in 1945, Japan occupied and ruled Korea. During that time, Koreans were forced to give up their language and their names and adopt Japanese ways. This period of occupation, coupled with a long history of repelling attackers, means that Koreans are survivors who have been forced by their circumstances to stand strong together. Coupled with a strong Confucian ethic, this gives Koreans a fierce sense of loyalty to each other and has produced one of the world's most strongly homogeneous cultures. Koreans have their own language, their own foods and a distinct societal structure, which marks them as different from their near neighbours.

While liberation from Japan came in 1945, as occurred in Germany at that time, the country was annexed into two, arbitrarily using the 38th parallel, with Russia occupying the North and the USA the South. As a result, two opposing political systems emerged. In 1950, the

communist North attacked the South and the Korean war began, one of the most brutal, senseless wars of all time. After three years of constant fighting, with over 2 million lives lost (including 340 of the 8,000 Australians who fought in Korea), a ceasefire was signed which remains in place today. As a result, what was once one nation has become two bitterly opposed rivals, one a symbol of communism and the other a symbol of economic growth, who technically remain in a state of war. A Demilitarised Zone runs the full length of the border of the two countries; a four kilometre wide stretch of vacant land closely watched from both sides.

The South is now one of the world's largest economies – Australia's third largest trading partner – with growing influence in world affairs. The North is one of the world's most closed countries – one of the last vestiges of communism – yet with millions starving due to the mismanagement of this formerly resource rich nation but with one powerful trump card; a large army ruling over a populace mostly loyal to the world's only hereditary communist leadership.

For almost 50 years, both Koreas have

lived under the sceptre of a war that could be resumed at any time. In the South, 37,000 U.S. forces provide a presence and a deterrent against the North to attack. Should they do so, they would face certain defeat at the hands of the combined UN forces. This hasn't stopped an endless litany of provocations from both sides. Through the last 50 years, Korea has retained a key place in the thinking of the world's strategic analysts. Geographically located between three of the world's powers in Japan, China and Russia, the South has been a bulwark against the tide of communism while the North represents a buffer between China and the capitalist nations of Asia.

In the streets of Seoul today, it's often easy to forget the threat of war until another 'incident' briefly reminds the people that Korea has an uncertain peace. The current Government of longtime opposition leader Kim Dae-jung espouses a policy called 'Sunshine' meaning that it is seeking to engage the North in dialogue and relationship. So far, the policy has been mostly unsuccessful, save for a few token visits to the North by one of Korea's top businessmen and some visits by tour groups to a remote mountain resort.

It is often said that Koreans are both the most ardent communists and the most ardent Christians in the world. Christianity first reached Korea in the nineteenth century when a number of Catholic missionaries and local believers were martyred for their faith. Protestant missionaries arrived in the 1880s and since that time, the Christian population has grown to the point where around a third of all South

Koreans consider themselves Christian. The Full Gospel Church in Yoido in Seoul, pastored by Rev. Yonggi Cho, boasts the largest membership of any church in the world. Koreans are also volunteering for the mission field in droves, as mission agencies struggle to keep up with the level of interest. Yet in the North, where the church was once strong, communist ideology has resulted in all but a token representation of the church being crushed.

One thesis is that one of the reasons that Christianity has spread so rapidly in South Korea has been the homogeneity of the people which has made it easier to share the faith. Yet I have been told that this mono-culture and loyalty has meant that Korean missionaries have found it very challenging to adjust on the mission field. Likewise, missionaries from other cultures have found Koreans a challenge. As a result, many mission societies are putting programs in place to better prepare Korean missionaries for the challenges they will face when they leave Korea and enter a new culture, including learning to speak and understand English in a more practical way than is taught in Korean schools.

In many ways, South Korea is still a country emerging from its long history of having to adopt a siege mentality. Up until the last 10 years, South Korea also has not had a democratic Government. Successive Korean Governments adopted tough measures to maintain 'law and order', often using the rationale of the security threat from the North; travel outside the country was largely restricted and the economy was closely 'guided' by the Government, who worked in close association

with big business. The 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul were very much a turning point and a source of great pride for Koreans as their country was showcased to the world. Like many countries, Korea is now succumbing to the inevitable tide of globalisation. The economic downturn of 1997-98 has also provided a sombre reminder of the fallibility of Korea's economic system. As a result the Government is seeking - so far mostly unsuccessfully - to break the nexus between big business, the banks and government.

Korea's faces many difficult challenges – not least the potential that the two Koreas may one day be reunified – a stated policy aim for the governments on each side of the border. Koreans also have a crucial role to play in God's plan for the world, whether it be as missionaries or because of the special place the country occupies in the geo-political-strategic-economic sphere.

A tour of the Korean war memorial in Seoul usually finishes with a visit to the grounds outside, where there is a large monument to those from many nations who fought and died in the Korean war. The monument is topped by a statue called the 'two brothers'. It depicts two soldiers, brothers, embracing as they confront each other on the battlefield. One is fighting for the North and one for the South. My prayer for Korea is that the grand hope encapsulated by this statue will one day become a reality – that Korea and Koreans will practice the ministry of reconciliation, whether it be with each other in their homeland or in countries beyond.

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