

FAMOUS KOREANS: FOUR ADDITIONAL PORTRAITS
(Submitted for publication to “Education About Asia”)

PORTRAIT #1: WANG KON (877-943)

In 918 I found the Koryo dynasty, a unified kingdom that is to last over four and a half centuries. Even though my reign is brief, what I do achieve is very impressive.

My name is Wang Kon. Because I am the founder of a great dynasty, when I die my reign title becomes T’aejo, meaning Great Progenitor. I come from a rich family. My father is a merchant and has a very successful business trading with China. We live in Kaegyong, now Kaesong, in what you call North Korea. While my childhood is financially secure, the times are very difficult. Warfare is constant and continues on the peninsula for nearly 50 years. Unified Silla, founded in 668, one of the most advanced nations in the world, is now weak, and rival kingdoms are again warring against each other on the peninsula. I become a well-known rebel leader and challenge the power of Silla.

I fight with Kungye, a former monk turned soldier, in a contest for domination of the Korean peninsula. In 901 I help to found the Kingdom of Later Koguryo, and Kungye becomes king. When I impress him with several important naval victories, he appoints me his chief minister. Kungye, however, becomes a tyrant and commits many cruel acts. He even kills his wife and children. With the backing of my generals, we overthrow him.

I become king in 918 and establish a new kingdom with the capital in Kaesong. I name it Koryo, a shortened form of the name of Koguryo. It means “high mountains and sparkling waters.” The name of Korea comes from Koryo.

Even though I am king, my biggest challenges are yet to come as I desire to unify the Korean peninsula. By 936 my armies defeat Later Paekche and Silla. When another kingdom Parhae is destroyed by invading Khitan armies, many of the ruling families flee to Koryo. I know that in order to build a kingdom and maintain power I have to treat people with generosity. To secure my position I give land to the Parhae nobles. For this I know I will obtain their lifelong support. After I defeat Silla, I give the king a high government position and large landholdings in Kyongju. People from defeated Later Paekche and Silla serve in important positions in the bureaucracy. I even marry a Silla princess. In this way I bring order and establish a unified kingdom.

Still, I have to be wary of the castle lords who are used to being quite independent. These people have helped me gain victories on the battlefield. To ensure their support I arrange many marriages between families throughout Koryo, and in some cases I give them the royal surname to establish new ties.

After consolidating my power, I incorporate Cheju Island into my kingdom and enlarge the territory to the north toward the Yalu River. Many military forts are constructed and public works programs begin. Before I die, I leave my successors my final testament, “The Ten Injunctions,” a list of rules to guide the nation. Here are a few of them:

1. The success of our state depends on the favor and protection of Buddha.
2. Temples and monasteries are to be built according to the principles of geomancy.
3. If the eldest son is not worthy of the crown, it should be given to the second son. If he is not worthy, choose the brother the people think is the most qualified.
4. It is very difficult for the king to win over the people. For this reason, give heed to sincere criticism and banish those with slanderous tongues. If sincere criticisms are accepted, there will be virtuous and wise kings.

5. In preserving a household or a state, one should always be on guard to avoid mistakes. Read widely in the classics and in history; take the past as a warning for the present.

PORTRAIT #2: SHIN SAIMDANG (1504-1551)

Famous people are not necessarily kings, queens or military heroes. My pen name is Shin Saimdang and I am perhaps the most respected and famous women in Korean history. I am primarily admired for being the ideal mother, wife and daughter. I am also famous because I am a recognized painter, calligrapher, embroiderer and poet. My son, Yi Yi (Yulgok), is one of the most celebrated Confucian scholars in our history.

I grow up in a city on the east coast of Korea. Most of my life is lived during the reign of King Chungjong who is a benevolent ruler. My father has an aristocratic heritage. I have no brothers, but I have four sisters. I am the second oldest. My name is Shin Yi-son. I take a pen name Saimdang (pronounced Sa-Im-Dang) from a famous story about a Chinese woman who is known for her honesty and wit.

My parents are determined to educate their daughters. When I am very young, they are convinced that I have artistic talent. I have a classical education; that is, I am schooled in the Confucian classics. I am particularly interested in the Confucian philosophy, which teaches me the value of knowledge and influences me greatly. I will instill this value in my children. Today in America one still witnesses the impact of Confucianism on students of Asian descent in their dedication to their studies.

Confucius also teaches me about filial piety. What does this mean? First, it means that one should respect one's parents. Children should respect their parents and follow their wishes in their attitude and behavior. Second, children should care for their parents. Children owe their lives and upbringing to parents, and when they become adults, they should support and wait on their parents. Third, when parents die, filial piety is practiced again in the form of funeral rituals and ancestral memorial rites. Fourth, carrying on the family line is essential for filial piety. The Korean family system is patrilineal. For a son, the most important filial act is marrying and producing a son. Filial piety is the behavioral norm of traditional life and remains the foundation of Korean behavioral norms.

At an early age I prepare for the responsibilities of being a wife and mother. I marry when I am nineteen. My husband, who is distantly related to the great naval hero Admiral Yi-Sun-shin, becomes a scholar and serves as a government official. Even though I am very happily married, I am deeply saddened in my first year of marriage because my dear father dies. According to custom I will mourn my father for three years. After this my husband and I will move to live with his family some distance away from my village and my widowed mother. It is difficult, but I travel the countryside between these two villages in order to fulfill my obligations to my mother.

I have seven children: four sons and three daughters. My son Yulgok is my third child. I am thirty-two years old when he is born. I realize immediately that this child is brilliant and commit myself to his education in the Confucian classics. He masters the classics by age seven and is writing beautiful poetry when he is eight. He continues to amaze me into his teens with his fascination for the classics and his dedication to learning. When I am forty-seven, my husband is given a position as tax official in another province. He takes Yulgok and his brother with him. While they are gone, I become very ill and die.

Even though I am a celebrated poet in my day, only two of my poems survive. One of them is about my mother. I am famous for my calligraphy and seven pieces of my work still exist.

My landscape paintings are widely praised. Today they are still appreciated and are considered to be great Korean treasures.

A statue now honors me in Sajik Park in downtown Seoul and a street in Seoul is named after me. There is a shrine to my son and me near my home. Even though my accomplishments may seem small to you, I take pride in the fact that I have served as a role model for the women of Korea for nearly 500 years.

PORTRAIT #3: KIM KU (1876-1949)

I am Kim Ku. I am known as one of the most famous of Korea's independence fighters. I am well known for my role in the March 1, 1919 Independence Movement, my role in the creation of the provisional government in Shanghai, China during the Japanese occupation of Korea, and for my anti-Japanese activities during the colonial occupation from 1910-1945. I am also remembered for my autobiography written under my pen name Paekpom; this book has become a classic.

I am born in 1876 in a province that is now part of North Korea. My parents are quite poor, but they are determined that I, their only son, will get a good education. As a child I learn the Chinese classics to prepare for the government examinations. I should have passed these exams but failed through no fault of my own. At this time in Korean history, the Choson dynasty is very corrupt. Many people who have money bribe the authorities in order to pass the exams. I am very disillusioned by the conditions that exist in my youth, so I become politicized at an early age.

I become a member of the Tonghak (Eastern Learning) movement, which is a quasi-religious founded movement in the late nineteenth century in reaction to government corruption, social injustice and the poverty of the peasants. Tonghak combines concepts of Daoism, Neo-Confucianism, Catholicism and Shamanism. Since the founder's activities appear threatening to the Choson dynasty, he is brutally murdered. His death occurs before I am born, but I am sensitive to what is happening to my country and become involved in the Tonghak Rebellion in 1894. I am only eighteen at the time, but I become part of a peasant army, the largest peasant rebellion in Korean history. Our army fights to protect the country from foreign incursions and to create a more egalitarian society by abolishing the *yangban* (aristocratic) class system, but the Choson government and the Japanese army defeats us in a series of battles. There are many casualties and our leaders are put to death.

The following year, 1895, the Japanese brutally murder our ruler, Queen Min. She is a shrewd and powerful woman who tries in these desperate times to gain the support of Russia to protect Korea from exploitation by Japan. I am in Manchuria at the time she is murdered, but I am so incensed that I return to Seoul to avenge her death and I kill a Japanese soldier. I am arrested and imprisoned in Incheon but escape a year later. In 1909, I am again imprisoned for being involved in the assassination of a Japanese official, who in 1905, played an active role in forcing us to sign an agreement by which Korea became a protectorate of Japan. We lose our freedom because of this agreement, and it paves the way for our colonization by Japan. I spend the next five years in jail. When released, I spend the next few years conducting anti-Japanese activities throughout my country.

In 1910 Japan annexes Korea. For the next thirty-five years Japan occupies Korea and to this day there is bitterness between the two countries. In the first period of colonization, newspapers are suspended, political parties abolished and public assembly made illegal. All authority is invested in the governor-general who is appointed by the emperor of Japan. He controls the military and civil police, makes all laws, oversees the judicial system, has control over finances and makes all appointments. Koreans who are well educated and experienced in government no longer can serve. The Japanese are convinced that control over Korea is vital to their defense and the economic well-being of their nation.

In 1919, as part of the Independence Movement, I travel to Shanghai to help create a provisional government in exile. In 1927 I am made leader of this body. I also help to form the Korean Independence Party and am selected as the chairman of its executive council. In addition, I help establish an army to help the Allies defeat Japan during WWII. I have little patience with Communism and its revolutionary programs. After the war I work hard to influence postwar development. I am absolutely opposed to the division of Korea.

My ideas of government and methods to maintain unity on the peninsula clash with those of Syngman Rhee. While I have the credentials to be the president, I am less tolerant than Rhee of people who have collaborated with the Japanese during the occupation. In 1948, I seek to resolve the problems between North and South and meet with Kim Il-sung. These talks are considered a failure. When I return to Seoul, I am intent on boycotting the U.N. sponsored elections. I oppose these elections because they will lead to the permanent division of Korea. I continue to argue with Syngman Rhee, but he prevails and is elected president in May 1948. A month later I am assassinated by an army lieutenant. I am shot in the head and in the stomach. Not until 1992 does someone come forth and admit government involvement in my death.

Today there is a large statue of me on Namsan Mountain in a park in central Seoul. An association works to keep my name alive, supports an extensive library and displays material related to my life and efforts to keep Korea free and unified.

PORTRAIT #4: CHUNG JU YUNG (1915- 2001)

My story is one of rags to riches. My father is a simple farmer who thinks his eldest son, the oldest of eight children, will someday take over the family farm. I have other ideas. I run away from home at a very young age and ultimately become a billionaire and the richest man in Korea. I achieve success because I take great risks and work very hard to build a business empire. I am the founder of Hyundai Company. My accomplishments make me rich, famous and at times controversial; but most importantly I contribute greatly to what is called "the miracle on the Han River." One of the poorest countries in the world only a generation ago, South Korea is now the United States' eighth-largest trading partner and is the eleventh-largest economy in the world!

Korea has been a backward agricultural country until very recently. When I am a child most Koreans are farmers. In spite of that fact, my father is able to give his children a basic education. I study Chinese until I am ten and then attend a local school for five years. This is essentially my only formal education. Our farm has been in the family for many generations. Since I do not want to spend my life on a farm, I decide to run away to Wonson, a city that is now in North Korea. I get work in construction, building roads and railways. Even though the days are long and hard, I take some classes at night. All this ends when my father finds me and takes me back to the family farm.

When I am nineteen, I run away again. This time I take the little bit of money I have saved and ride the train to Seoul. I cannot find a job in Seoul, so I travel to Incheon, a large port city, where I find work on the docks. After awhile, I return to Seoul and work as a delivery boy at a rice mill. I advance in the company and eventually become a bookkeeper; this position turns out to be invaluable for me when I go into business myself. I open my own rice store, which is quite successful. Unfortunately Japanese colonial policies establish a rice rationing system; this forces me out of business.

In 1938 I am twenty-three years old. I marry a young woman, Byun Joong-suk, who is then just sixteen. We begin a family and ultimately have eight children. Then, when I am twenty-five, I return to Seoul and work hard and establish an auto repair business in 1940. Shortly after I began to be successful, a fire destroys my business. I am unemployed, in debt and have a family to support. Determined to be successful, I open another auto repair shop in

1945, the year of Korean liberation and the year that World War II ends. This time my financial success is to be permanent. I now open a bigger shop, the Hyundai Auto Repair Company.

I remember from my work experiences as a youth that the construction business can be very profitable. I also recognize the golden opportunity that postwar construction will bring. In 1947, I decide to branch out and start the Hyundai Construction Company, which over the years grows into a highly profitable and highly regarded business. During Syngman Rhee's presidency (1948-1960) I get some really big breaks. During the Korean War, I carry supplies to American bases on half-ton trucks, build Quonset huts, and refugee settlements. After the war I land some major construction projects, including the rebuilding of the Han River Bridge which was destroyed during the Korean War.

During the Park Chung-hee administration (1961-1978) I impress the president and receive contracts to build dams, power stations and major highways. By 1962, Hyundai is the largest construction company in Korea. I am particularly delighted when we are selected to build the Seoul-Pusan Expressway, the main road linking the capital to the major southern port in South Korea. During the Vietnam War, Hyundai and other Korean construction companies become the chief contractors for the U.S. army in South Vietnam and later make use of their Vietnam contacts and experience to expand into the international construction business in the Middle East. By 1972, the company is worth \$64 million and splits into six subsidiaries. Between 1974 and 1979, our construction sales in the Middle East amount to more than \$6 billion. Later, I expand into the automobile, petrochemical and semiconductor industries. Hyundai enterprises continue to flourish. By the mid-1980s Fortune magazine reports that Hyundai is one of the fifty largest firms in the world.

In 1977 I am elected Chairman of the Federation of Korean Industries and am reelected to four more two-year terms as the head of the Korean business community. Realizing that I am very lucky to achieve such financial success, I establish the Asan Foundation and give a large portion of Hyundai stocks to fund it. This foundation funds scholarship for research and works to improve health care for the underprivileged. I also help Seoul win the right to host the 1988 Olympic Games.

In the 1990s, in spite of my advancing age, I decide to enter politics. While I am defeated for the presidency against Kim Young-sam, I do surprisingly well in winning a seat in the National Assembly.

My wife and I live in a rather modest home near the ancient Kyongbok Palace in downtown Seoul. If you are interested in my career, you might want to read my autobiography *Many Trials, But No Failures*. My philosophy has always been that "whenever there are difficulties, you grip your teeth and go on, and this is how I have lived my life." My book will provide a fair amount of insight into my character and business methods that make me one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Korean history.

Since the Asian financial crisis of 1997, Hyundai and other family owned monopolies or conglomerates (*chaebols*) experience great pressure from the government to restructure. I help Korea become a world industrial power. Since the Asian financial crisis of 1997, Hyundai and other family owned chaebols experience great pressure from the government to reduce debts and force the founding families to remove themselves from active management. For this reason I decide to retire in 2000. Nevertheless, Hyundai still encompasses fifty-two affiliated companies and its combined annual revenues are about \$150 billion.

Meanwhile, I am committed to improving North and South Korea relations and assisting North Korea in its food crisis. In 1998, I herd 500 head of cattle to North Korea through

P'anmunjom. I negotiate an agreement with North Korean officials who agree to an unprecedented multi-billion dollar tourism deal with the Hyundai corporation. Since 1998 more than 86,000 South Korean citizens travel by Hyundai-operated passenger ships to scenic Mount Kumgang in the North as part of this tourism initiative. My efforts are contributing to improved North-South relations and paved the way for the summit meetings in June 2000, the most hopeful meeting between the regions since the end of World War II.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Cummings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997.

Eckert, Carter J., Ki-baik Lee, Young Ick Lew, Michael Robinson, and Edward W. Wagner. *Korea Old and New: A History*. Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers, 1990.

Im, Hyung-Baeg. "North-South Korean Relations" (Lecture presented at the Korean Studies Workshop, Korea University, July 2000)

Kim, Hong Nack. "Foreign Relations under the Kim Dae-Jung Government." in Korean Briefing: 1997-1999. Kongdan Oh, ed. Armonk, NY: ME. Sharpe, 2000.

Kim, Yung-Chung. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. Seoul: Ewha Women's University Press, 1976.

Korea Foundation. *Korean Cultural Heritage, Vol. 4*. Seoul: Samsung Moonhwa Printing Co., 1997.

Korean Overseas Information Service. *A Handbook of Korea*. Seoul: Samhwa Printing Co., 1993.

Lee, Peter H. *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization, Vol. 1 and 2*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Nahm, Andrew C. *A Panorama of 5000 years: Korean History*. Seoul: Hollym Corporation, 1987.

Park, Innwon. "The Korean Economy" (Lecture presented at the Korean Studies Workshop, Korea University, July 2000)

Saccone, Richard. *Koreans to Remember: Fifty Famous People Who Helped Shape Korea*. Seoul: Hollym Corporation, 1993.

Suh, Dae-Sook. *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

http://hcs.harvard.edu/~yisei/backissues/fall_98/charles_armstrong.html
Charles Armstrong, "Challenges of the Kim Dae Jung Administration," Columbia University.

www.cnet.ta.ne.jp/juche/worke70.htm

Kim Jong Il, "The Workers' Party of Korea Is the Party of the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung," 1995 and Kim Il Sung, Reminiscences, "Looking Forward to a Bright Future."