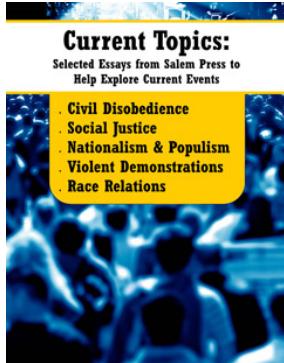


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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Korean Declaration of Independence

by Jacqueline Pak

Date: 1919

Authors: Son Byonghui, O Sechang, Choe Namson, Han Yongun

Genre: Declarative statement/speech

Summary Overview

On March 1, 1919, at Pagoda Park in Seoul, Korea, a student nationalist read aloud to the crowd the Korean Declaration of Independence, giving rise to the nationwide March First Movement. In response to the unjust colonization of Korea by Japan in 1910, the Korean Declaration of Independence proclaimed to the world that Korea had the right to exist as a free and independent nation. Among the thirty-three signers were sixteen Protestant Christians, fifteen leaders of Chondogyo (also called Cheondoism, the “religion of the Heavenly Way”), and two Buddhists. The Chondogyo leaders Son Byonghui, O Sechang, Kwon Dongjin, and Choe Rin were most influential in producing the Declaration. They quietly arranged for Choe Nam-seon, a pioneering poet and publisher-scholar, to draft it, and they reached a consensus on its moderate tone and content, espousing the ideals of peace, humanity, and freedom. They then clandestinely printed the Korean Declaration of Independence and disseminated it among the Korean people.

Since the early 1900s exiled nationalists such as Ahn Changho, the preeminent leader of the independence movement, had created myriad overseas organizations and transnational networks agitating for Korean independence. Foremost was the Korean National Association, which was founded in 1908 and served as the proto-provisional government, with more than a hundred branches in the United States, Manchuria, China, Russia, and Mexico, among other countries. The movement for independence finally came home in 1919. Sparked by the Korean Declaration of Independence, the March First Movement proved unprecedented in magnitude and scope, galvanizing Korean men and women of all ages and backgrounds, with more than two million participants joining over several months. The movement surprised the Japanese police, who reacted with violence against unarmed and peaceful Korean demonstrators, accounting for some 47,000 arrests, 7,500 deaths, and 16,000 injuries. The uprising against the Japanese inspired overseas revolutionaries to form the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in April 1919 in Shanghai, China.

Defining Moment

Following the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), both of which were fought in part over control of Korean territory, Japan's takeover of Korea began in earnest with the forced signing of a protectorate treaty in 1905. The Korean royal military was disbanded in 1907, but a Korean “righteous army”—irregular militias—bitterly fought the Japanese throughout the country. Finally, in 1910, the nation was formally colonized by Japan, effectively ending the Choson Dynasty (1392–1910). According to Japanese statistics, over 2,800 clashes between Koreans and the Japanese army occurred during the period 1907–1910. By 1910 at least 17,600 Korean soldiers had died, though the numbers may have been higher.

When the First World War ended, America emerged as a global leader, setting the agenda for international peace. President Woodrow Wilson expressed his vision for the postwar settlement in his Fourteen Points speech to the U.S. Congress on January 8, 1918. The Fourteen Points would later guide Wilson's approach to the Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles, signed in 1919 to bring the war to an official close. The Fourteen Points advocated, among other ideals, international cooperation and respect for the right of self-determination of people. Koreans were not entirely persuaded that Wilson's statement would soon lead to Korean independence, but the nationalist leadership, both domestic and abroad, was quick to seize upon the statement as an opportunity to appeal for independence from Japan.

On January 21, 1919, King Kojong, the last king of the Choson Dynasty, died, possibly having been poisoned by the Japanese. Following Kojong's death, Korean nationalist activities accelerated. As anti-colonial efforts intensified among exiled revolutionaries in China, Manchuria, Russia, the United States, and Japan, nationalists within Korea began to ponder the course of the independence movement. As most of the nationalist Korean leaders were either exiled or imprisoned, the domestic leadership was centered on religious communities such as Chondogyo and Protestant Christianity, which often served as shelters for covert nationalist activities. Chondogyo is an indigenous religion that teaches values of equality, justice, and brotherhood and incorporates Christian and egalitarian values found within the Korean and Eastern traditions. Confucians did not participate in nationalist activities, because they had incurred severe losses during the fight against Japan before the annexation; the mainstream Buddhist establishment, in turn, declined to participate. With overwhelming numbers of Koreans expected to attend the funeral of Kojong, the nationalist leaders secretly planned demonstrations across the country for March 1. They also agreed to petition foreign representatives in Tokyo and send a message to President Wilson.

Meanwhile, Korean students in Tokyo were laying the foundations for the Korean Declaration of Independence. Choe Nam-seon based the Declaration on an earlier version, the Tokyo declaration of Korean independence, which was drafted by Korean students and read before an assembled crowd in Tokyo in February 1919. In asserting Korean independence, the Tokyo declaration noted that Korea had a 4,300-year history of sovereignty and had been guaranteed independence in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War, but the Japanese had forcibly reduced Korea to a protectorate following the Russo-Japanese War. The Korean people had unsuccessfully resisted the Japanese protectorate, which was opposed to the wishes of the Korean people. Japan, this declaration asserted, had seen fit to exploit Korea, but the Japanese need for domination over Korea had passed, as Chinese and Russian influences no longer existed in Korea and were therefore no longer threats to Japanese security.

The Tokyo declaration pointed to the series of Japanese lies and deceptions that had led to the annexation of Korea, dating back to the Treaty of Ganghwa, also called the Japanese-Korea Treaty of Amity—an unequal treaty signed by the two nations in 1876 that opened Korean ports and commerce to Japanese domination. The Tokyo declaration presented a long litany of political betrayals and deceptions committed by Japan against Korea and detailed the moral outrage and frustrations of Koreans. Whereas the Korean Declaration of Independence would prove tactful and emotionally detached, the Tokyo declaration displayed the raw emotions of a morally and physically wounded Korea. These emotions would erupt in conflagration in the March First Movement, as sparked by the initial reading of the Korean Declaration of Independence.

Author Biographies

Among the most influential leaders behind the Korean Declaration of Independence was Son Byonghui (1861–1922), the supreme leader of Chondogyo, who signed first on the document. A formidable character and charismatic leader, Son possessed the best-organized and best-financed network of followers within Korea. He had lived in exile in Japan in the early 1900s to avoid persecution—a fate that befell several Chondogyo leaders who opposed what they regarded as an oppressive government. Uprisings in 1894 had led King Kojong to invite Chinese forces into the nation to quell the unrest. Claiming that Korea was in their sphere of influence, the Japanese claimed that the Chinese court should have informed them of their intent to place troops in Korea, which incidentally provided the Japanese with a pretext to invade Korea themselves. These events initiated the First Sino-Japanese War, which in turn paved the way for the Japanese colonization of Korea. This sequence of events created the conditions that allowed Son to become the leader of the Chondogyo and, while still in exile, to spearhead an anti-Japanese movement in Korea.

O Sechang (1864–1953), also a Chondogyo leader, had served as a government interpreter and official and became a journalist after studying in Japan. Having been in charge of the printing and distribution of the Declaration, O Sechang was imprisoned for three years for his involvement in the March First Movement, as was Son Byonghui. Following his prison term, he prepared a series of biographical dictionaries about Korean art and calligraphy, based on the collected art in his family possession. In his later years, he came to be known as the foremost Korean calligrapher, a connoisseur-scholar of Korean paintings and calligraphy, and a seal engraver.

The Korean Declaration of Independence was drafted by Choe Nam-seon (1890–1957), a leading Korean intellectual of his time who was knowledgeable about both traditional Chinese scholarship and new modern learning. He was persuaded to complete the draft by the

Chondogyo leader Choe Rin. A poet whose work *From Sea to a Youth* introduced new Korean vernacular idioms, Choe Nam-seon was a writer, journalist, and scholar. Although he did not sign the Declaration, he was jailed for two and a half years after the March First Movement for his overall involvement. Following his imprisonment, he wrote an encyclopedic multivolume history of ancient and premodern Korea. His works covered a wide range of topics, including Korean origins, folklore, language, culture, history, and ethnography.

The “Three Open Pledges” at the close of the Korean Declaration of Independence were added by Han Yong'un (1879–1944). Prior to Han's becoming an avid patriot, his father and brother were involved in anti-colonial activities. A leading Buddhist reformer, he wrote a book of poetry, *Silence of Love*, which is one of the most representative and beloved works in Korean literature. At the heart of his poetic conception was the yet-to-be liberated Korea. Han Yong'un and Choe Nam-seon disagreed over the Declaration's tone and content, as Han wanted it to be more ardent. In the end, a more moderate tone was adopted. Han was jailed for three years for his role in the March First Movement.

Historical Document

We hereby declare that Korea is an independent state and that Koreans are a self-governing people. We proclaim it to the nations of the world in affirmation of the principle of the equality of all nations, and we proclaim it to our posterity, preserving in perpetuity the right of national survival. We make this declaration on the strength of five thousand years of history as an expression of the devotion and loyalty of twenty million people. We claim independence in the interest of the eternal and free development of our people and in accordance with the great movement for world reform based upon the awakening conscience of mankind. This is the clear command of heaven, the course of our times, and a legitimate manifestation of the right of all nations to coexist and live in harmony. Nothing in the world can suppress or block it.

For the first time in several thousand years, we have suffered the agony of alien suppression for a decade, becoming a victim of the policies of aggression and coercion, which are relics from a bygone era. How long have we been deprived of our right to exist? How long has our spiritual development been hampered? How long have the opportunities to contribute our creative vitality to the development of world culture been denied us?

Alas! In order to rectify past grievances, free ourselves from present hardships, eliminate future threats, stimulate and enhance the weakened conscience of our people, eradicate the shame that befall our nation, ensure proper development of human dignity, avoid leaving humiliating legacies to our children, and usher in lasting and complete happiness for our posterity, the most urgent task is to firmly establish national independence. Today when human nature and conscience are placing the forces of justice and humanity on our side, if every one of our twenty million people arms himself for battle, whom could we not defeat and what could we not accomplish?

We do not intend to accuse Japan of infidelity for its violation of various solemn treaty obligations since the Treaty of Amity of 1876. Japan's scholars and officials, indulging in a conqueror's exuberance, have denigrated the accomplishments of our ancestors and treated our civilized people like barbarians. Despite their disregard for the ancient origins of our society and the brilliant spirit of our people, we shall not blame Japan; we must first blame ourselves before finding fault with others. Because of the urgent need for remedies for the problems of today, we cannot afford the time for recriminations over past wrongs.

Our task today is to build up our own strength, not to destroy others. We must chart a new course for ourselves in accord with the solemn dictates of conscience, not malign and reject others for reasons of past enmity or momentary passions. In order to restore natural and just conditions, we must remedy the unnatural and unjust conditions brought about by the leaders of Japan, who are chained to old ideas and old forces and victimized by their obsession with glory.

From the outset the union of the two countries did not emanate from the wishes of the people, and its outcome has been oppressive coercion, discriminatory injustice, and fabrication of statistical data, thereby deepening the eternally irreconcilable chasm of ill will between the two nations. To correct past mistakes and open a new phase of friendship based upon genuine understanding and sympathy—is this not the easiest way to avoid disaster and invite blessing? The enslavement of twenty million resentful people by force does not contribute to lasting peace in the East. It deepens the fear and suspicion of Japan by the four hundred million Chinese who constitute the main axis for stability in the East, and it will lead to the tragic downfall of all nations in our region. Independence for Korea today shall not only enable Koreans to lead a normal, prosperous life, as is their due; it will also guide Japan to leave its evil path and perform its great task of supporting the cause of the East, liberating China from a gnawing uneasiness and fear and helping the cause of world peace and happiness for mankind, which depends greatly on peace in the East. How can this be considered a trivial issue of mere sentiment?

Behold! A new world is before our eyes. The days of force are gone, and the days of morality are here. The spirit of humanity, nurtured throughout the past century, has begun casting its rays of new civilization upon human history. A new spring has arrived prompting the myriad forms of life to come to life again. The past was a time of freezing ice and snow, stifling the breath of life; the present is a time of mild breezes and warm sunshine, reinvigorating the spirit. Facing the return of the universal cycle, we set forth on the changing tide of the world. Nothing can make us hesitate or fear.

We shall safeguard our inherent right to freedom and enjoy a life of prosperity; we shall also make use of our creativity, enabling our national essence to blossom in the vernal warmth. We have arisen now. Conscience is on our side, and truth guides our way. All of us, men and women, young and old, have firmly left behind the old nest of darkness and gloom and head for joyful resurrection together with the myriad living things. The spirits of thousands of generations of our ancestors protect us; the rising tide of world consciousness shall assist us. Once started, we shall surely succeed. With this hope we march forward.

Three Open Pledges

Our action today represents the demand of our people for justice, humanity, survival, and dignity. It manifests our spirit of freedom and should not engender anti-foreign feelings.

To the last one of us and to the last moment possible, we shall unhesitatingly publicize the views of our people, as is our right.

All our actions should scrupulously uphold public order, and our demands and our attitudes must be honorable and upright.

Document Analysis

Simply titled “Declaration” (Seon-eon-seo), the Korean Declaration of Independence is written in poetic language. Although it is fresh and modern for 1919, the Sino-Korean literary form used for the Declaration manifests established Confucian educational traditions. It also reveals the authors’ classical scholarship, intellectual resources and frame of reference, and literary aesthetics, as well as their moral outrage and political intuition. With majestic words that echo the emerging new world order of the postwar era, the Declaration reads like a poem of self-determination, championing national freedom, equality, and justice. With idealism and optimism, it rests its case upon universal claims of humanitarian ethics and humanistic values in search of Korean freedom, independence, and self-determination.

In proclaiming independence and the right of national survival, Choe and the leaders of the March First Movement who drafted the Declaration were clearly deeply aware and proud of the long history, culture, and civilization of Korea—the strength of five thousand years of history.” The basis of the moral right to independence and democratic sovereignty of Koreans is thus understood to be the principle of equality of nations and the historical authority of Korea’s five thousand years of existence. The most spiritual phrase in the Declaration appears early: “This is the clear command of heaven, the course of our times, and a legitimate manifestation of the right of all nations to coexist and live in harmony.” Certainly, the Chondogyo and Christian figures who comprised the March First leadership and led the drafting of the Declaration purposefully invoked the command of “heaven” or God in the inspirational beginning of the document. The Sino-Korean character *chon* can actually be translated as “heaven,” “God,” or “sky”; the Neoconfucian or Chondogyo notion of heaven is akin to the Christian notion of an omniscient and omnipresent moral God. Therefore, the phrase “command of Heaven” also implies the will of God.

The main point of the second paragraph can be found in the first sentence: “For the first time in several thousand years, we have suffered the agony of alien suppression for a decade, becoming a victim of the policies of aggression and coercion, which are relics from a bygone era.” Being a small nation surrounded by larger neighbors—China, Russia, and Japan—Korea had been repeatedly invaded in its long history. Yet this was indeed the first time in “several thousand years” that it had been annexed or colonized by another country. For Koreans, it was infuriating and particularly humiliating to be colonized by Japan, which had long been considered a culturally inferior nation. Throughout history, the peninsular Korea had been a vital source of cultural and intellectual transmission to the islands of Japan, such as with Buddhism, a writing system, printing technology, and pottery-making methods, among other ideas and advances.

The original Korean language of the Declaration has both denotative and connotative aspects. For example, the Korean text uses the word *chimnyak*, which can be translated as “invasion” or “aggression,” with a connotation of “territorial expansionism.” The word *kanggeon* can be translated as “coercion” or “force,” with connotations of “military force” or “brute might.” The word *jui* means “principle” or also “ideology.” The drafters wanted to express the awful reality of imperialism or colonialism for the colonized and highlight the associated aggressive, repressive,

and coercive positionings as immoral and illegal strategies of a bygone era. That bygone era can be understood to be the sixteenth century, when Japan's invasion of Korea was repelled by Admiral Yi Sunshin's navy during the early Choson Dynasty.

The third paragraph describes the tragic plight and suffering of the colonized, with which all Koreans could empathize. Myriad reasons for Koreans to struggle for independence are listed in a long, oratorical sentence. Directly addressing the Korean people, the second sentence builds up to the ultimate message: "The most urgent task is to firmly establish national independence." The highlight of the paragraph comes at the end in the reminder to Koreans that the collective conscience of humanity is now on their side. Adopting martial language, the Declaration affirms that Koreans are assisted by "the forces of justice and humanity" and that independence can be achieved if "every one of our twenty million people arms himself for battle."

An intriguing part of the Korean Declaration of Independence, this paragraph is an artful rhetorical exercise. From the outset, the authors choose not to criticize or attack Japan directly for the annexation of Korea or the exploitation of Koreans; instead, they attempt to take the moral high ground by stating, "We do not intend to accuse Japan of infidelity for its violation of various solemn treaty obligations since the Treaty of Amity of 1876." They also include an admission of collective self-blame for the colonial predicament: "We shall not blame Japan; we must first blame ourselves before finding fault with others." However, the paragraph stresses that "Japan's scholars and officials, indulging in a conqueror's exuberance, have denigrated the accomplishments of our ancestors and treated our civilized people like barbarians." The concepts of civilization versus barbarism are juxtaposed to emphasize the barbarically debased and humiliated state of subjugated Koreans and to remind Koreans of the history and beauty of their civilization. Here, the Korean intelligentsia's acute awareness of the underlying political significance of scholarship and discourse on history and civilization is revealed. The writers of the Declaration observe that the sins of distorting history and truth by Japanese scholars and historians have consequences that are just as grave as the sins committed by Japanese officials, whether politicians or military officers.

Shifting the focus to the Korean people as an audience, the authors state that the task at hand is "to build up our own strength, not to destroy others." A new beginning to shape a new destiny for the future of Korea is championed: "We must chart a new course for ourselves in accord with the solemn dictates of conscience, not malign and reject others for reasons of past enmity or momentary passion." Rather astutely, the Japanese leaders are described as actually being victims, as they are "chained to old ideas and old forces and victimized by their obsession with glory." A number of dichotomies appear in this paragraph: build versus destroy, conscience versus glory, natural versus unnatural, just versus unjust, and old versus new. Drawing on postwar optimism about a coming new world order and on perceptions of opportunity for change, the Declaration implies that the constructive and future-oriented task for Koreans is not necessarily anti-colonial but rather is pro-democratic. The foremost task of Koreans is to build a new order, new society, new culture, new civilization, and new democracy.

From the outset, this paragraph intends to clarify the situation of the annexation of Korea by Japan, which clearly "did not emanate from the wishes of the people." As such, the outcome was "oppressive coercion, discriminatory injustice, and fabrication of statistical data," which in turn has deepened "the eternally irreconcilable chasm of ill will between the two nations." While the opening of the Declaration is addressed to all nations of the world, the text has thus far been directed to Koreans and Japanese. Here, the targeted audience is expanded to include the greater Far East, especially China, with whom Koreans have long shared historical ties. Japan's militarist ambitions extended not just to the Korean Peninsula but also to continental China and Southeast Asia, so the Declaration broadly calls for "peace in the East." The entwined historical destiny and political fate of Korea and China as well as their brotherhood and shared victimhood at the hands of Japan are narrated: "The enslavement of twenty million resentful people by force does not contribute to lasting peace in the East. It deepens the fear and suspicion of Japan by the four hundred million Chinese who constitute the main axis for stability in the East."

Essentially, the core message of the paragraph is an urging of Japan to "correct past mistakes and open a new phase of friendship based upon genuine understanding and sympathy," as a way to "avoid disaster and invite blessing." Perhaps the most forthright statement of moral and intellectual logic in the Declaration is found in the statement that independence will enable Koreans to lead normal lives and also will help Japan "leave its evil path" and bring stability to the East by freeing China from fear.

In the most poetic and metaphorical of the paragraphs, the Declaration speaks of the arrival of the "new world" and a "new spring" in which the "days of force" are being replaced by the "days of morality." With March 1 being the date of the collective uprising, the double meaning of

"spring" dominates the paragraph, lending heightened connotations to such phrases as "rays of new civilization," "myriad forms of life to come to life again," "breath of life," "mild breezes," "warm sunshine," and "reinvigorating the spirit." The rhythm of the poetic language reinforces the image of a "universal cycle" characterized by the "changing tide of the world" between good and evil and between right and wrong. The notion of the "universal cycle," in this sense, connotes not only the seasonal cycle but also historical cycles of morality and justice.

The final paragraph of the Declaration reiterates the Korean will for independence: "We shall safeguard our inherent right to freedom and enjoy a life of prosperity; we shall also make use of our creativity, enabling our national essence to blossom in the vernal warmth." The reference to an inherent right to a "life of prosperity" is reminiscent of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, with Thomas Jefferson's assertion of the rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Through the metaphor of growth, on the other hand, what is evoked is the national culture rather than the more politicized concepts of democracy or national self-determination. This focus originates from the drafters' worldview and pride in Korea's long history and civilization as well as their conception of a new national culture as a new political order. Empowering the Korean people with words of moral strength, the Declaration pronounces, "Conscience is on our side, and truth guides our way." Then it calls for all people, of all ages, to "head for joyful resurrection together with the myriad living things." Incorporating the imagery of nature in springtime, "resurrection" is, of course, an allusion to Christ's miraculous rise after his sacrificial death on the cross. Announcing that "the spirits of thousands of generations of our ancestors protect us," the Declaration ends with assurances of success.

Appended to the Declaration are three pledges for the future. The first notes that the Declaration is a demand for freedom and dignity, not a document to create anti-foreign feeling. In the second pledge the drafters assert their right to communicate the Declaration to the people of Korea. Finally, the drafters reject violence and urge their followers to maintain public order.

Essential Themes

As sparked by the Declaration, the March First Movement demonstrated Koreans' desire for independence and democracy. The demonstrators marched into the streets not only in Seoul but, indeed, in virtually every town, village, and county. People who had come to Seoul for the funeral of King Kojong joined the movement with shouts of "Long live Korea!" and "Long live Korean independence!" while waving forbidden Korean flags. The demonstrations were peaceful, for no armed revolt or violence had been planned by the organizers; in spearheading the movement, the Chondogyo leaders espoused three principles: popularization, unification, and nonviolence. The thirty-three signatories of the Declaration made no attempt to hide and allowed themselves to be arrested. The subsequent nationwide demonstrations lasted for months. Even by conservative estimates, the nation witnessed some fifteen hundred demonstrations in the first three months, with the participation of over two million people. Among those arrested, about ten thousand, including 186 women, were tried and convicted.

On March 17, 1919, the Korean National Council was created in Vladivostok, Russia, to represent more than half a million Koreans in Manchuria and Siberia. Although a provisional government could not be openly established within Korea, an underground meeting named a roster of leaders and adopted a constitution in Seoul in April. Korean nationalists also emerged one by one in Shanghai, and many committed revolutionaries from Korea, China, and Japan gathered there. During this time, collective efforts to unify the nationalists in China, Manchuria, Siberia, and America began. The nationalists in Shanghai declared the formation of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea on April 9, 1919. The next day, the Provisional Assembly was created by representatives from eight provinces in Korea and from Russia, China, and America. At the meeting of the Provisional Assembly on April 11, the formal name of the sovereign nation was proclaimed as Taehan Minguk (Republic of Korea), and the initial outline of the constitution was drafted. The constitution's preface included the Korean Declaration of Independence.

The March First Movement did not lead to Korean independence from Japanese colonialism, yet it was significant in that it exposed to the world the abuses of Japanese colonial rule. Rising publicity and criticism worldwide led to Japan's "cultural policy" of appeasement in the 1920s under a new governor-general. However, from the late 1930s through the Second World War, Japan essentially tried to exterminate Korean culture. Japanese colonials forced the people to adopt Japanese religious practices and Japanese names, forbidding the use of the Korean language in publications, and destroying or stealing Korean artifacts. One of the horrors of the war was Japan's conscription of some two hundred thousand Korean women to serve as "comfort women," or sex slaves, for Japanese troops. Korea remained under Japanese control

until the end of the war and Japan's unconditional surrender to Allied forces on August 15, 1945. In the war's immediate aftermath, the country was divided into North Korea and South Korea, with the south under U.S. control and the north under the control of the Soviet Union. The arrangement was intended to be temporary, but cold war tensions between the Communists and the West led to the outbreak of war between North Korea and South Korea in 1950, with the south backed by the United States and the north eventually receiving support from China. The war ended in a stalemate in 1953 with the establishment of the two-mile-wide Korean Demilitarized Zone at latitude thirty-eight degrees north. The peninsula continues to be divided between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Communist "North Korea") and the Republic of Korea ("South Korea") in the twenty-first century.

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