

# FROM PAST TO PRESENT

Korean Culture,  
History, and Politics

EDITED BY MAREK HAŃDEREK





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KOREAN CULTURE, HISTORY, AND POLITICS



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edited by Marek Hańderek



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# Contents

Introduction (Marek Hańderek) .....	7
<b>Culture and History Affecting Politics .....</b>	<b>11</b>
EWA RYNARZEWSKA	
The Dispute over Hyŏmnyulsa: The Political and Social Implications of Korea's First Theater .....	13
ANNA DINIEJKO-WĄS	
The Origin, Development and Aftermath of the Pyongyang Great Protestant Revival of 1907 .....	29
JOANNA HOSANIAK	
Intergenerational Memory and Pursuit of Justice for South Korean Prisoners of War and Abduction Victims to North Korea. ....	57
ROMAN HUSARSKI	
Reaching North Korea through Buddhism: An Overview of South-North Buddhist Exchange. ....	75
<b>Republic of Korea and Its Domestic Problems .....</b>	<b>93</b>
SEUNGIK LEE	
Everyday Life of Koreans under Chun Doo-hwan's Military Dictatorship. ....	95
MAREK ŚWISTAK	
Labor Market Policy in the Republic of Korea: Challenges in the Context of Labor Market Segmentation .....	109
ANDREAS SCHIRMER	
An Analog Parasite of the Hyperdigital Era? The Reading-Aloud Wave in Contemporary Korea .....	131

<b>Korean States, Koreans, and Their Foreign Partners .....</b>	<b>151</b>
SYLWIA SZYC	
The North Korean Diaspora in Poland in the 1950s .....	153
BERND SCHAEFER	
North Korean Unification Policy: Past and Present.....	179
MACIEJ PLETNIA	
Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Its Impact on Japan-South Korea Security Cooperation.....	191
About the Authors .....	207
Index of Names .....	211



## Introduction

Academic studies on the Korean Peninsula in Poland have decades of tradition and started when Poland was ruled by a communist regime and maintained diplomatic relations only with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). However, at that time, only a few scholars conducted research on Korea-related topics, and they focused mainly on culture, literature, and language. The newest history and current politics on the Peninsula became a research subject in Poland only after democratization and rapprochement with the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1989. As a result, linguists and cultural anthropologists interested in Korea have been joined by historians, political scientists, sociologists and representatives of other academic disciplines.

Furthermore, interest in Korean studies in Poland has gradually increased in recent decades and new academic centers have emerged, including Korean Studies at Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Moreover, Polish academics have started cooperation with various research institutions in ROK and other countries. Consequently, Polish scholars took part in international projects, exchanged opinions with colleagues from abroad, and conducted their research projects, often with the participation of foreign academics.

This book is an exemplification of the above-mentioned trend in Polish studies on the Korean Peninsula. A group of scholars of different backgrounds and representing various academic disciplines contributed to the publication on a wide range of topics. The volume consists of ten chapters that fall into three sections.

The first section starts with the study by Prof. Ewa Rynarzewska from the University of Warsaw, who looks at the dispute over Korea's first theater, Hyömnnyulsa, operating from 1902 to 1908. The author argues that as a national theater, a symbol of the court on the one hand and modernization on the other, the Hyömnnyulsa brought about contradictory expectations. She shows that the theater was criticized by conservative officials and progressive intelligentsia as well as ordinary Koreans having

no associations with any political circles. Each group had their own reasons, and the political dynamics in Korea, together with ideological differences, influenced their views on the theater.

The next chapter was also written by a scholar from the University of Warsaw, Dr. Anna Diniejko-Wąs. In her study, she focuses on religious Protestant awakening movements in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea, especially the Pyongyang Great Protestant Revival of 1907. She presents complex reasons for the emergence of these movements in late Joseon Korea and the outcomes of their activities. She proves that not only did they affect the spiritual engagement of many Koreans and significantly increase the number of Protestants in Korea, but they also accelerated social change in the country.

The following chapter by Dr. Joanna Hosaniak was written from the perspective of a human rights activist at the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights and a researcher at Yonsei University. The author indicates that there is a significant gap in the collective memory of South Korean society concerning ROK's citizens who were victims of the North Korean regime. It mainly concerns Prisoners of War who were not repatriated after the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement in July 1953 as well as civilians abducted during and after the war. Joanna Hosaniak emphasizes that while the South Korean authorities have deliberately overlooked these issues or paid little attention to them, the families of the victims and civil society organizations have put a lot of effort into uncovering the truth about the fate of the POWs and abductees, as well as commemorating them and achieving justice and accountability for human rights violations in North Korea.

The first section ends with a piece by Dr. Roman Husarski from Jagiellonian University in Kraków. The author presents a subject virtually absent from English-language academic research: the interaction between South Korean Buddhist Non-Governmental Organizations and Buddhists in North Korea. He emphasizes that the engagement of South Korean Buddhist NGOs was one of the activities promoting the unification of the Peninsula. Moreover, he proves that this cooperation was quite fruitful, especially when South Korea implemented the so-called "sunshine" policy.

The second section opens with a chapter by Dr. Seungik Lee, a Korean academic working at Jagiellonian University in Kraków. He portrays everyday life and social changes in the Republic of Korea ruled by Chun Doo-hwan. Significantly, the author focuses more on the perspective of selected individuals and their memories of the ROK under Chun than on society as a whole. To a certain extent, his approach is unusual because Korean researchers have traditionally focused on state leaders or the collective population rather than individual people.

In the subsequent chapter, Prof. Marek Świstak from Jagiellonian University in Kraków examines the issue of labor market segmentation in the Republic of Korea

and the challenges it poses. He points out and characterizes groups that are particularly affected by segmentation. Moreover, he portrays the efforts of South Korean authorities to increase the protection of irregular workers, on the one hand, and to guarantee the interests of employers, on the other. Shedding light on the segmentation of the ROK labor market in recent years fills an important gap in the academic literature.

The chapter by Prof. Andreas Schirmer from Palacký University Olomouc closes the second section. In his study, the author focuses on a new phenomenon in contemporary South Korea that is a spreading and increased popularity of audio books. He shows that this trend might be seen as a kind of rediscovery of a traditional practice since reading aloud used to be common in pre-modern Korea. On the other hand, he also points out that in the past, reading aloud in Korea was supposed to be done in a monotonous way (unlike, for example, in German-speaking countries), but has now evolved into more expressive form. This tendency, in turn, led to the boom of guidance towards proper practices of reading aloud.

The last section starts with the chapter by Dr. Sylwia Szyk from the Institute of National Remembrance in Poland. Her study concerns the North Korean diaspora in Poland in the 1950s. The author focuses on war orphans, and high-school and university students from the DPRK. Importantly, she clears up misunderstandings that sometimes arose over the number of Korean War orphans, as some researchers put high school and college students in the same category with them. Moreover, as the first scholar researching Korean orphans in Poland, she provided some information on their educators from the DPRK.

The following chapter was written by Prof. Bernd Schaefer, a Global Fellow at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He provides a comparative look at the development and evolution of the unification concept in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the German People's Republic, highlighting similarities and differences. He argues that such a study could help explain the motives behind North Korea's recent moves culminating in the revision of the DPRK's traditional approach to the idea of unification with South Korea. In 2023, instead of repeating the claims about one divided nation, Kim Jong Un announced that unification with the Republic of Korea would never happen.

Finally, the third section and the entire volume closes with a chapter by Dr. Maciej Pletnia of Jagiellonian University. The subject of his research is the security cooperation between the Republic of Korea and Japan after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The author claims that the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war affected many countries, changed the international system, and became one of the main factors contributing to the recent rapprochement between South Korea and

Japan. The author argues in particular, that the more aggressive policy of North Korea and China after the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in closer ROK-Japan security cooperation.


I hope that all the chapters will help to shed light on unknown or lesser-known issues, or provide new perspectives on subjects previously described by other scholars. I am also certain that the publication of this volume will be further evidence of the dynamic development of Korean Studies at the Jagiellonian University and its contribution to international research and debate on various issues concerning the Korean Peninsula. This development is generously supported by the Seed grant provided by the Academy of Korean Studies, the book being one of its outcomes.

Unless stated otherwise, Korean terms, names and surnames in this volume are written in the Revised Romanization of Korean. The exception are names with widespread non-standard spelling, Korean authors' names, which follow their original romanization, and North Korean names, which use the Rules of Latin Alphabetic Transcription of Korean Language.

*Marek Hańderek*

# **Culture and History Affecting Politics**



EWA RYNARZEWSKA   
University of Warsaw

# The Dispute over Hyŏmnyulsa

## The Political and Social Implications of Korea's First Theater

### Abstract

The research purpose of this article is to demonstrate the political and social implications of the Hyŏmnyulsa theater. It went down in history as Korea's first theater and, just as importantly, a national theater. It operated from 1902 to 1908, thus during an extremely dramatic period when the fate of the country was at stake. The peculiar political situation in which Korea found itself determined the activities of the Hyŏmnyulsa and ignited fierce disputes involving different social groups, especially both supporters of state modernization and conservative officials. This article attempts to describe this dispute and show that it was rooted in political and social grounds.

**Keywords:** theater, Hyŏmnyulsa, Hŭidae, Korea's first theater, function of theater

### Introduction

For many centuries, the entire Korean performing culture developed in court and aristocratic residences, as well as in the open air, primarily in squares, bazaars and markets, around Buddhist temples and village shrines.<sup>1</sup> The Western concept of theater building was foreign to Koreans. So it should come as no surprise that until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when cultural exchanges with Western countries took off, there was “no theater,”<sup>2</sup> even in the Korean capital that was the center of political and cultural life.

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<sup>1</sup> Korean terms, names and surnames are written in the McCune-Reischauer transcription. Taking into consideration the repetitive nature of Korean surnames, the full version of the first and last name was provided. Unless otherwise noted, all source text excerpts cited in the article are from the author. The article is a revised and expanded version of the text from the book: Ewa Rynarzevska, *Teatr uwikłany. Koreańska sztuka teatralna i dramatyczna w latach 1900–1950* [*Theater Entangled: Korean Theater and Drama 1900–1950*], Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Isabella B. Bishop, *Korea and Her Neighbours*, Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1970 [1898], p. 60.

The first Korean theater was established in 1902. It was regarded as a national theater and was called Hũidae (literally, “performance stage”)<sup>3</sup>. Along with it, the Hyömnnyulsa (literally, “cooperative group”) office was established. This office took over the function of the building manager and was responsible for the administrative and organizational affairs of the ensemble. Very soon it began to be identified with the theater itself, and the name ‘Hyömnnyulsa’ was applied to the theater company and even to the building. It continues to function in this context in common and academic discourses.<sup>4</sup>

The establishment of the Hyömnnyulsa theater was a great achievement. Enjoying the patronage of the Korean court, it became a symbol of Emperor Kojong’s (Rul.: 1864–1907) power.<sup>5</sup> However, the theater’s high status did not protect it from problems; on the contrary, it exposed it to even more serious problems, which it had to face from the very beginning. The roots of these problems was the political and social conflicts that had been growing since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; these problem were also caused by the rapid social and cultural changes which resulted from the political situation. Entangled in the dilemmas of its era, the Hyömnnyulsa theater became a field of clashing interests of various social groups that discovered the potential of theater and intended to use it for their own political and social goals. This should not come as a surprise. It only proves the social embeddedness of theater in general and confirms a widely recognized belief formulated by John Gassner, who already in the 1930s claimed: “... the fate of the theater arts is inextricably associated with the fate of the society in which they exist. As goes society, so goes the theater.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “Hwangsöng Sinmun” (1902.8.5), In Ŭn-gyöng Yi, *Kükchang [Theater]*, In *Han’guk kũn – hyöndae yöng’gũk 100 nyönsa [100 Years of Korean Theater History]*, ed. Süng-hun Ch’ae et al., Seoul: Chim-mundang, 2009, p. 491; Nam-sön Ch’oe, *Chosön sangsik mundap [Essential Questions and Answers about Korea]*, Seoul: Tongmyöngsa, 1947, pp. 344-345, In Han-gi Chang, *Han’guk yöng’gũk sa [History of Korean Theater]*, Seoul: Tongguk Taehakkyo Ch’ulp’anbu, 1986, p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> Han-gi Chang, *op. cit.*, p. 170; Min-yöng Yu, *Uri shidae yöng’gũk undong sa [History of the Theater Movement of Our Century]*, Seoul: Tan’guk Taehakkyo Ch’ulp’anbu, 1990, p. 13; Yöns-ho Sö, *Han’guk kũndae hüggok sa [History of Korean Drama of the Kũndae Period]*, Seoul: Koryö Taehakkyo Ch’ulp’anbu, 1996, p. 29; Yöns-ho Sö, *Han’guk yöng’gũk sa – kũndae p’yöns [History of Korean Theater – Kũndae Period]*, Seoul: Yöng’gũk-kwa In’gan, 2003, p. 49; Hyöns-mi Paek, *Han’guk ch’ang-gũk sa yöng’gu [History of Classical Ch’ang-gũk Opera]*, Seoul: Taehaksa, 1997, p. 39; Ŭn-gyöng Yi, *op. cit.*, p. 491.

<sup>5</sup> In August 1897, under the pressure of the Independence Society (Tongnip Hyöphoe), King Kojong (1852–1919; reign: 1863–1907) established the Empire of Korea (kor. Taehan Cheguk), and announced himself the emperor, recognizing that “raising the country’s rank to an empire ... would at least symbolically place Korea among the countries of Asia on equal terms.” See Joanna P. Rurarz, *Historia Korei [History of Korea]*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, 2005, p. 300.

<sup>6</sup> John Gassner, *Dramatic Sounding: Evaluations and Retractions Culled from 30 Years of Dramatic Criticism*, ed. Glenn Lonely, New York: Crown Publisher, 1968, p. 227.



In the history of Korean theater, however, this was a new phenomenon. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theater had been developing in the folk culture and was addressed mostly to the lower classes. Traditional theater troupes were isolated from mainstream society, stayed on the sidelines and enjoyed a certain amount of freedom. They were criticized by the social elite, especially by Confucian scholars, but this had no effect on them: neither on the convention of their performances nor their content.

The situation of the Hyŏmnyulsa theater was a radically different one. This was only natural since the theater's status was completely different. As a public theater, a national theater, a symbol of the court, moreover, a symbolic evidence of the modern state, it aroused enormous and often contradictory expectations. These expectations intensified a dispute that was evidence, first, of the radical reevaluation of theater as such, second, of the enormous social, historical and cultural transformations taking place in Korea, and finally, the dramatic situation in which the country was thrown at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dispute over the Hyŏmnyulsa, thus, went beyond the realm of art and included political and social implications. The aim of this article is to describe these political and social implications and to showcase their decisive impact on the activities of Korea's first theater.

## The Construction and Activities of the Hyŏmnyulsa Theater

The Hyŏmnyulsa was a public theater built under the patronage of the Korean emperor, who covered all the expenses related to its construction, organization, equipment and maintenance. The Korean court allocated a huge sum of forty thousand *wŏn* for this great project and, moreover, placed the southern wing of the court's Pongsangsi building, where the equipment and props used in ceremonial nuptials and funerals of members of the royal family were stored, at the disposal of the theater's management.

The theater was built as a rotunda, roofed with a cone-shaped dome. The construction apparently involved "architects from the West,"<sup>7</sup> but their actual names remain unknown. The Hyŏmnyulsa was supposed to be modeled after the building of the Roman Colosseum,<sup>8</sup> however, the Korean theater was far less monumental and could accommodate no more than six hundred spectators.<sup>9</sup> Despite its many

<sup>7</sup> Chin Pak, *Sixty Years of New Drama in Korea*, "Korea Journal" March 3, 1969, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Nam-sŏn Ch'oe, *op. cit.*, pp. 344-345.

<sup>9</sup> The size of the Hŭidae theater's auditorium was a subject of dispute for a long time. Ch'oe Nam-sŏn, recalling his childhood memories years later, only stated that the theater was "small," but did not specify the number of seats in the auditorium. Kim Chae-ch'ŏl, the first historian of Korean theater, declared that the Hyŏmnyulsa could accommodate more than two thousand people – see: Chae-ch'ŏl Kim, *Chosŏn yŏn'guk sa [History of Korean Theater]*, Seoul: Tongmunsŏn, 2003 [1933], p. 195.

This book consists of ten chapters written by scholars affiliated with research institutions in Poland, the Republic of Korea, Czechia, and Germany. The contributors are specialists in various academic disciplines, including cultural studies, history, political science, and linguistics. As a result, the volume offers an interdisciplinary approach to the Korean Peninsula and addresses a wide range of issues.

It provides readers with a valuable opportunity to explore lesser-known or overlooked aspects of Korean culture, history, and politics from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Each chapter presents either an unexplored topic or a new perspective on subjects previously examined by other scholars.

This volume makes a meaningful contribution to the international development and dissemination of Korean Studies and represents one of the significant achievements of the Department of Korean Studies at the Institute of the Middle and Far East of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in this field.



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