

Preface to *The Koreas, Second Edition*

Korea in modern times has been at the center of global transformations like no other place on earth. From colonialism to the Cold War, capitalist industrialization to totalitarian involution, “Third Wave” democratization to the Internet revolution, the Korean peninsula has experienced world-altering events with unique intensity and in an extraordinarily compressed space and time frame. To understand how the world has changed Korea, and vice versa, and to express this with concision and clarity while still conveying the richness and complexity of Korea’s interaction with the modern world, was the challenge I faced in writing this book. Whether or not I have succeeded in meeting that challenge is up to the reader to judge. But as events in and around the Korean peninsula continue to prove, the world still needs to understand Korea, and the “Korea problem” needs to be resolved once and for all. Through this book I hope to have made a small contribution to that understanding.

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2007, the contradictions of globalization on the Korean peninsula have, if anything, become even more acute. Korea is still divided into two mutually hostile states, and after 2008 North-South Korean hostility rose sharply, with the two sides coming perilously close to military engagement in late 2010. South Korea, like many of its Asian neighbors, weathered the global financial crisis relatively unscathed. It continues to be a thriving economy, a leader in such areas as mobile phone technology, and is now a producer of popular music that has gained a worldwide following. North Korea, on the other hand, reversed some its tentative steps toward economic reform initiated in the early 2000s, and by the end of 2011 appeared to be as hardline and isolated as ever under the leadership of the third generation of the Kim family that has ruled the state since its founding in 1948. South Korea, after five years under the conservative presidency of Lee Myung-bak, elected as President a member of the same conservative party (re-named the Saenuri dang or “New Frontier Party”) in December 2012. South Korea’s new president was Park Geun-hye, daughter of former president Park Chung Hee, whose iron-fisted rule from 1961 to 1979 oversaw the emergence of South Korea’s “economic miracle.”

Sixty years after the armistice that ended the fighting in the Korean War, North and South Korea continue to confront each other across the de-militarized zone. Both governments are led by the offspring of former leaders, but the societies they rule over could hardly be more different. South Korea’s economy is among the world’s most affluent, its political system contentious but undeniably democratic, its culture globally recognized and increasingly diverse. North Korea remains one of the world’s poorest and most isolated countries. Its political system is rigid and opaque and its human rights record appalling, while it continues to produce and test nuclear weapons despite the condemnation of much of the world. The extraordinary divergence of what was just three generations ago a unified nation, with a single language and common sense of history and cultural identity, may be the most striking example in the world of how different responses to forces of global change can produce diverse, and even dangerous, results.