

SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY SERIES
A RECORD OF MY LIFE
MY FIRST VISIT TO SOUTH KOREA
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA

The Republic of Korea — Land of the Morning Calm where the *mugunghwa* blooms.¹ Great cultural benefactor that long ago transmitted Buddhism and a system of writing to Japan. Japan's closest neighbor.

It was after 4:00 p.m. on September 21, 1990, when my Korean Air flight from Tokyo Narita International Airport touched down at Seoul's Kimpo International Airport, thus beginning my first visit to South Korea.

From the car as we headed toward our hotel, we caught a glimpse of the mighty Han River with its proud and eternal flow. The sky towered high above us. Autumn is known to be the most beautiful season in South Korea. Though already late September, it was still quite warm.

An Exhibition of Masterpieces of Western Art in Seoul

In less than an hour, we arrived at our hotel, situated atop a hill. We would stay for only one night, as our departure was scheduled for the following day.

The purpose of this visit was to attend the opening of an exhibition of masterpieces of Western art from the permanent collection of the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum [founded by President Ikeda]. We flew back to Japan almost immediately following the ceremony, which took place at the Ho-Am Art Gallery of the Joong-Ang Ilbo building in Seoul, arriving in Fukuoka that night. It was an intense itinerary.

I had originally planned to be there for three days, but Korea had been hit by the worst typhoon in more than a decade and the Han River had overrun its banks, resulting in severe flood damage. Japan had also been struck, causing my departure to be postponed by a day. However, though the trip promised to be quite exhausting, my spirit was too deep to be daunted.

I had waited a long time for this day, and I was ready. I was determined to use all my strength, slight though it might be, toward developing cultural exchange between South Korea and Japan. This was a vow I had cherished since my youth, a promise I made as a boy.

It takes only two hours to fly from Narita to Seoul. Shortly after takeoff, the majestic form of Mt. Fuji came into view. It was as if I could hear the voice of my mentor Josei Toda calling out: "But where are the young flag bearers? Can you not see Fuji's summit?"² Wherever I go, whether in Japan or around the world, Mr. Toda is always with me.

Struggling Alongside My Mentor

Memories of the days forty years earlier when I struggled alongside my mentor amid harsh trials as we listened to the tragic news of the Korean War came flooding back to me.

President Toda's business had hit difficult times, and everyone else had deserted him. The situation was rough, but at twenty-two I stood by and protected him without retreating a single step as he fought his lonely battle. It was at the height of this intense period that the news came of war breaking out on the Korean peninsula.

Though independence had been restored to Korea after Japan's defeat in the Second World War,³ the country continued to suffer. With the division of the peninsula at the 38th parallel into two new countries — the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) — antagonism mounted, and on June 25, 1950, they plunged into the chaos of war.

In my diary entry for that day, I wrote: “War finally broke out between North and South Korea. Anxious that it might trigger another world war. The world moves, moment by moment. The planet Earth has already become like a small battlefield or a stage. Is humanity to be plunged again into a whirlpool of grief and suffering, loneliness and torment?”⁴

My diary entry two days later reads: “World crisis looms. Will it come to that? Must people steel themselves to do battle to the end? I yearn for peace. The flames of war must not spread. My resolution is as firm as Mount T’aishan. I have nothing to fear.”⁵ These were my youthful thoughts just as they were, but I think they convey the somber mood of the time.

In August of that year it was decided that President Toda’s business would suspend operations.⁶ At the same time, President Toda resolved to step down from his position as Soka Gakkai general director.

The turmoil in Korea was heightening. Foreign troops from seventeen countries had been dispatched to join the fighting in a land that — taking the combined area of both North and South Korea — was smaller than Honshu, the largest of Japan’s four main islands. There were untold casualties. Including those countries that did not have a direct hand in the fighting but were there in a supporting role, the total number of countries involved came to more than twenty.

In May 1951, as the flames of war jumped higher, President Toda expressed his thoughts about the conflict as follows: “I do not intend to speculate about the outcome of the war nor to argue in favor or against any given policy or ideology. All I know is that because of this war, people have lost their husbands and wives and are left searching for children and parents.

“Many young people have died without even knowing why. And I am certain many elderly people have also been killed as they proclaimed their innocence.”⁷

President Toda was always most concerned about those who were sad and suffering. He consistently put his own troubles aside. Even at the time of his inauguration as second Soka Gakkai president (in May 1951) and the formation of the young men’s division (in July 1951), his sole prayer was to send the light of peace of Buddhism to Japan’s neighbors and the other countries of Asia. Upholding the ideal of global citizenship, Mr. Toda adamantly opposed Japan’s narrow-minded nationalism and arrogance, keeping his gaze ever-focused on the future of humankind.

Today there are SGI members throughout Asia and in 148 countries and territories.⁸ And the efforts of members living in South Korea to contribute to society are a model for the entire world.

The people of South Korea rose up from the devastation of the Korean War and accomplished an economic revival so remarkable it has been hailed as the “Miracle of the Han River.” How my mentor must rejoice at the wonderful recovery and rebirth achieved by the Korean people.

The Taebaek Mountains

The epic novel *The Taebaek Mountains* — a towering work describing Korea’s modern history — is currently being translated into Japanese and published in ten volumes. It has elicited a strong response in Japan.

In South Korea, the book has become a runaway bestseller with sales exceeding five million, and is a must-read for students and young people. The book’s author, Cho Jeong Lae, is one of South Korea’s leading writers who has received numerous prizes for modern literature, Korean folk literature and fiction. Last autumn, Mr. Cho sent me an autographed copy of the first volume of the Japanese edition of his book to commemorate its publication.

How deep must be the scars that were left on the Korean people by Japan's barbarous invasion of their land. Why, though united by race, did they have to suffer the tragedy of division? Addressing these issues, Mr. Cho's novel is a masterpiece that shines with his integrity, conveying his love for the people and his absolute condemnation of the reckless abuse of power.

As a token of my deep appreciation, I sent Mr. Cho a collection of photographs and poetry of mine. On the inside cover I inscribed a Korean phrase which says that a wonderful idea has been conveyed wonderfully.

I immediately received a kind letter of thanks from Mr. Cho in which he related his impressions of the anthology I had sent him, calling my photography and poems "life-affirming." It is Mr. Cho himself who has consistently looked upon those who have survived this tumultuous century with a warm, profound, life-affirming gaze.

The Korean Script

Setting foot in Seoul and taking in its vibrant streets, filled with rows of modern buildings that seem to fuse beautiful tradition with modernity, I felt I had landed in a "sea of Hangeul."⁹ A Japanese person visiting Seoul for the first time is at once taken aback and somewhat lost to find himself surrounded by such foreign script in a place so close to home. I imagine the expression "sea of Hangeul" was coined to express such a feeling.

Both Korea and Japan were recipients of Chinese-character culture. And later on they each produced unique scripts of their own: Hangeul in the case of Korea and *kana*-syllabary in the case of Japan. Hangeul was created in the mid-fifteenth century by a group of scholars assembled by Sejong the Great (1397–1450), the fourth king of the Yi (Choson) dynasty.¹⁰ It is an outstanding achievement of which the Korean people can be very proud.

The Japanese scholar of Chinese literature Yoshimi Takeuchi¹¹ said of Hangeul: "Since it is written with combinations of sound elements or 'phonemes,' you can tell how something is supposed to be pronounced far more easily than with Japanese or any European language."¹² He also credited it with being "the newest script in the world, and one of the most logical."¹³ One scholar goes so far as to say that if beings from outer space were to visit Earth, Hangeul would probably be the first script they could understand.

The Japanese had tried to eradicate Hangeul when they annexed Korea. In their extreme arrogance, the Japanese imperialists attempted to completely wipe out this treasure of humanity, which had been in use for hundreds of years. They prohibited the teaching of Hangeul in 1938, banned the use of the Korean language in schools and aggressively enforced a movement for the universal adoption of Japanese. Scholars working to compile an authoritative Hangeul dictionary were arrested on charges of violating the Peace Preservation Law,¹⁴ and subsequently tortured and driven to their deaths in prison.

A Yearning for Friendship with Korea

My father was once drafted into the army and stationed in Seoul. That was during the most tragic and dark time in the history of relations between Korea and Japan. He was a seaweed farmer from the Omori coast in Tokyo. Though a person of few words, once he had set his mind on something, he was absolutely unwavering.

I have memories of my father teaching me some Korean words when I was in elementary school. "'*Nara*'—that means 'country,'" he told me. "'*Gyeran*'—that means 'egg.'" He also wistfully remarked: "The view at night in Seoul is the most beautiful in the world. It's a million-dollar skyline." Though Korea was the only foreign country he had ever visited, I think

that by calling it the most beautiful in the world he wanted wholeheartedly to convey to his children just what an incredible place he thought it was.

He had a remarkably humanistic way of thinking for the time and was indignant about the cruel and condescending treatment that the people of Korea suffered at the hands of the Japanese. His words, so filled with anger, are deeply etched in my mind. I think it was then that a yearning for friendship with Korea began to grow in my heart.

An Exhibition of Seventy-four Western Masterpieces

The Joong-Ang Ilbo newspaper, the Samsung Foundation of Culture, the Ho-Am Art Museum and the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum sponsored the exhibition of masterpieces of Western art shown in Seoul on my first visit to Korea. South Korea's Ministry of Culture, the Korean Broadcasting System and the Japanese Embassy in Seoul also supported it.

The Joong-Ang Ilbo building, where the exhibition was held, is located near the Namdaemun Gate, a structure representative of architecture from the Yi dynasty. The oldest surviving structure from that period, the gate is two stories high and sits atop a foundation of granite. It proudly communicates a sense of Korea's past glory.

The exhibition opened in the Ho-Am Gallery of the Joong-Ang Ilbo building, where it remained on display for one month. It was then shown for another month at the Ho-Am Art Museum in Yongin City, Kyonggi Province.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony marking the exhibition's official opening was performed by General Director Shin Hyun Hwak of the Samsung Foundation of Art, Minister of Culture Lee O-Young, Director Kim Dong Ik of Joong-Ang Ilbo, Director Lee Kyung Sung of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Director Han Byong Sam of the National Museum of Korea, Professor Kim Won Yong of Hallym University, Ambassador of Japan Ken'ichi Yanagi, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Min Bok Ki and Advisor to the Samsung Foundation of Culture Chu Un Hwa.

The exhibition consisted of seventy-four items selected from the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum's permanent collection of Western art, which had never before been loaned overseas. It provided a comprehensive introduction to Western painting from the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century to the present.

The works included such examples of the best of European art as Ruben's *Constantine's Marriage*, Goya's *Portrait of Don Sebastien Marie Gabriel of Bourbon-Bragance*, Millet's *The Goosegirl*, Corot's *Pensive Girl*, Manet's *Promenade*, Monet's *Water Lilies* and Renoir's *Young Woman in Red Dress*.

In a letter to an earnest believer and her child, Nichiren Daishonin says of the Lotus Sutra, "Loaded with a hoard of rare treasures and carrying a hundred or a thousand passengers, it can sail all the way to the land of Korea" (WND, 613).¹⁵ In accord with this passage, I felt there was profound significance in the realization of my own visit to Korea, bringing with me artistic treasures and taking an initial step toward repaying a debt of gratitude.

One week before my departure for Seoul, I welcomed Chairman Lee Kun Hee of the Samsung Group to the Seikyo Shimibun building in Tokyo. Citing the Korean saying that a path begins with a single step, I suggested that the upcoming exhibition of paintings would be an important step in opening a path of cultural and popular exchange between our countries. Mr. Lee replied, "With its initiation, the task is already half completed."

The Greatness of President Makiguchi and President Toda

I spoke with Mr. Lee about the humanistic philosophy of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the first Soka Gakkai president, and President Toda, and shared how I came to be Mr. Toda's disciple.

I told him: “Peace is my prime point and friendship is my belief. Culture is a necessary weapon for achieving these ends.”

Mr. Lee remarked that there are three types of people: those who live to eat, those who live to contribute to society, and those whose mere existence is of tremendous value. If I may be permitted to elaborate, this third type describes those whose existence transcends any boundary of nationality or race and whose spiritual light illuminates all humanity.

President Makiguchi and President Toda were two such individuals. But in a country of small-minded nationalism, which went so far as to annex Korea and which upheld an ideology similar to that of the Nazis in Germany who perpetrated the Holocaust in an attempt to wipe out the Jewish people, these great men “whose mere existence was of tremendous value” were suppressed and persecuted as criminals.

Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda were arrested and imprisoned on charges of violating the Peace Preservation Law and for lèse-majesté.¹⁶ Mr. Makiguchi died in prison, and Mr. Toda was robbed of his freedom for two years until just before Japan’s defeat in the war. They had been persecuted as enemies of the state. Even after his release, Mr. Toda continued to be defamed and criticized.

They were so great that it may just be that the tiny country of Japan was too small a vessel to contain the water of compassion and wisdom welling forth from their lives. The general knowledge of the age and society at the time was simply too narrow and immature for their greatness to be understood. From that standpoint, it is only natural that they were persecuted and slandered. But now, people who truly understand their spirit are appearing in countries neighboring Japan as well as around the world.

Forging a Network of Humanity

During my childhood and youth, I met many Korean residents living in Japan. These were people who had been driven from their homes in Korea by Japanese oppressors, and had experienced all kinds of persecution and discrimination living in a foreign land. Also, their children were born and grew up in Japan. Given what we have learned from the history of Korea–Japan relations, the most natural course for Japan to follow from a humanistic standpoint is to take care of and treat these people with the utmost respect.

A very bright Japanese-born Korean from the first graduating class of Soka University [in Japan] sent me a recording of South Korean folk songs. In response, I sent her a poem I had composed to express my appreciation:

*Listening to the songs of friends
the dark night shines with the light of happiness.*

This young woman was deeply pained by the history of Japan’s persecution of her country, and by the terrible treatment suffered by her parents and compatriots at the hands of Japanese. As we spoke one spring day on the Soka University campus amid blooming cherry trees and forsythia, I presented her with a photo of the university, on the back of which I wrote: “Originally, people were not separated by national boundaries; borders were created by human hands at some point in time. Let us never forget that we have the mission to transform the world into a place of beautiful human solidarity that goes far beyond manmade borders.”

On that first trip to Seoul, with the hopes of many people held firm in my heart, I set out to begin a new dialogue aimed at forging such a network of humanity.

Art Is a Treasure to Be Shared by All Humankind

At a commemorative reception that followed the ribbon-cutting for the exhibition in Seoul, I delivered the following remarks: “Korea is a great cultural benefactor of Japan. Since ancient times, just how fresh and rich has been the brilliant culture with which this ‘Land of the Morning Calm’ has illuminated Japan. We hope that this first overseas showing of our collection of Western paintings will serve as a small repayment of our enormous debt of gratitude.”

Among the works in the exhibition was Monet’s *Water Lilies*, a masterpiece from the later years of this great Impressionist. I went on to share my thoughts on a discussion I had with the French art critic René Huyghe (1907–97) regarding this painting, and concluded my remarks saying: “I believe that the exchange of culture — the sharing of humanity’s wonderful treasures — stimulates a profound resonance of the spirit in the depths of people’s hearts that expands a fresh force of vitality, brilliant like a new dawn.

“It has been my dream since childhood to someday visit Korea. In that sense, I am filled with deep emotion to be taking this first step toward the development of friendship with your country, embraced in the broad spirit of friendship of all gathered here today. I am determined to work wholeheartedly to build a path of culture between our countries.”

The Importance of Cultural Exchange

That day I met Samsung Foundation of Culture General Director Shin Hyun Hwak for the first time. In addition to serving as prime minister of South Korea in 1979, Mr. Shin has held a number of important posts, including minister of rehabilitation, minister of health and social affairs and minister of the economic planning board. He has made enormous contributions to South Korea’s development.

Born in 1920, during his impressionable early years he saw his country being heedlessly trampled by the Japanese. I imagine he had many unpleasant experiences.

Nevertheless, in his remarks at the reception as the representative of the exhibition’s sponsors, Mr. Shin stated: “It could be said that culture expresses the spiritual connection between ethnicity and nationality in any given age. However, that is not limited to one particular ethnic group or nation; it penetrates the hearts of people everywhere, eventually becoming a new foundation for the humane treatment of all.

“Japan and Korea are geographical neighbors who share a long history and have engaged in numerous cultural exchanges. Despite this fact, however, until now a genuine spirit of sincerity has not been shown and instead misunderstanding has arisen.

“I therefore hope that this exhibition will in some way stimulate genuine exchange between our countries. I believe that carrying out such exchange will be crucial in enabling our countries to maintain mutual goodwill, as well as contribute to enriching the lives of many.”

As I listened to Mr. Shin’s speech, I was moved by his magnanimous spirit and his unswerving focus on the future of Korea-Japan relations.

Creating Memories with Soka University Exchange Students

On the evening before the event, a gift I will never forget was delivered to my hotel. It was from three Soka University students studying in South Korea at the time who had learned of my visit. The package consisted of Korean citron tea, a ceramic teacup and a tape recording of Korean folk songs, and was garnished with a sprig of Japanese pampas grass. The three students were all members of the Soka University Korean Club.

I savored the tea that they had sent with deep appreciation. To express my gratitude for their sincere gifts, I composed a poem and dedicated it to all three of them.

*How delighted I am to savor the flavor
of culture and your profound consideration —
wonderful memories created
together with you in Seoul.*

I keenly felt that healthy friendship among the youth of South Korea and Japan was developing.

Expand the Current of Friendship into a Great River

Twenty-four years prior to my first visit, on January 6, 1966, I attended a gathering of Soka Gakkai high school division members at Tokyo's Taito Gymnasium. On that occasion, I spoke about a Korean student named Yu Kwan Sun (1904–1929), who became a martyr in the struggle for Korean independence. Despite being severely pressured and tortured by the Japanese authorities, she did not retreat a single step. In sharing her story, I hoped to inspire these young people to lead lives of steadfast conviction like this “Korean Joan of Arc,” who fearlessly dedicated herself to the cause of justice.

Spotting a statue of Yu Kwan Sun on that trip to Seoul in 1990, I placed my palms together in reverence. Seventy years had passed since she had died a martyr. In that time, the light of her noble life had come to shine with increasing brilliance.

She had been cruelly robbed of her future. Yet her vibrant youth continues to emit an eternal glow, imparting courage and hope not only to the people of Korea but to the Japanese as well.

For the sake of the future and generations to come, it is the duty of we who have witnessed the tragedy of the twentieth century to expand this current of friendship between Korea and Japan into a mighty river like the Han that never ceases its flow.

That first trip to the Republic of Korea was extremely brief. There wasn't even time to visit the SGI-Korea Culture Center and meet with the members. I sent them my sincerest prayers, however, and determined wholeheartedly to realize another visit.

The return trip from Seoul to Fukuoka took just an hour and a half. Our countries are so close — truly neighbors. As we soared above the Sea of Genkai separating Japan and the Korean peninsula, I vowed to work to bring them even closer — for Korea has been a cultural benefactor to Japan, and is like an older sibling.

Footnotes:

1. *Mugunghwa*: Rose of Sharon, the national flower of Korea.
2. Lyrics from “Song of Comrades” (Doshi no Uta), in which Mr. Toda expressed his hopes for the appearance of young people to whom the mission of kosen-rufu could be entrusted.
3. Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910, and continued to control Korea as a colonial possession until it was defeated in 1945.
4. Daisaku Ikeda, *A Youthful Diary: One Man's Journey from the Beginning of Faith to Worldwide Leadership for Peace* (Santa Monica, CA: World Tribune Press, 2000), p. 36.
5. *Ibid.*
6. The company that Mr. Toda ran fell on hard times in 1950, and went out of business on August 22 of the same year. Working under his mentor, Mr. Ikeda worked hard to put the firm's outstanding obligations into order and meet the demands of creditors.
7. *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda) (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1983), vol. 3, p. 74.

8. As of June 2001, the number is 165.
9. Hangul: the Korean alphabet.
10. Yi (Choson) dynasty (1392–1910): Yi Song Gye established the kingdom of Choson (Korea) in 1392.
11. Yoshimi Takeuchi (1910–77): Noted for his formidable achievement in the study and translation of modern Chinese literature, particularly the writings of Lu Xun. He was also one of the few scholars in Japan to voice support for Mr. Ikeda's 1968 proposal calling for the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China.
12. *Takeuchi Yoshimi Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Yoshimi Takeuchi) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1981), p. 258.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
14. Peace Preservation Law: Enacted in 1925 and completely revised in 1941, this law was used to suppress thought in the name of protecting the Japanese “national polity” and preserving peace. The law provided for harsh punishment of persons found to be in violation, including the death penalty.
15. Editor's Note: All quotations of Nichiren are from the newly published translation *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (abbreviated as WND) (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), unless otherwise stated. The number indicates the relevant page number.
16. When Japan was under militaristic rule, actions deemed disrespectful toward the imperial family or Shintoism were treated as crimes.