

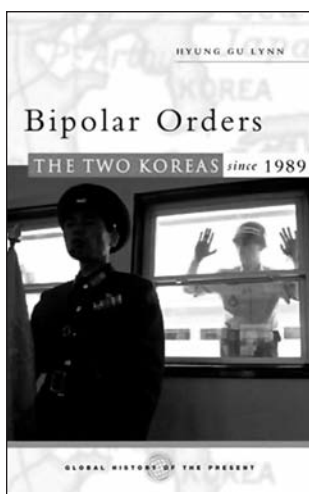
# BIPOLAR ORDERS

## *The Two Koreas Since 1989*

BY HYUNG GU LYNN

NEW YORK: ZED BOOKS, 2007  
210 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1842777435, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Mary E. Connor



Too often we fail to question conventional perspectives on the Koreas. In *Bipolar Orders: The Two Koreas since 1989*, Hyung Gu Lynn challenges us to examine whether reunification of North and South Korea is necessary or inevitable. The author explores how North and South Korea have developed diametrically opposed values and self-perceptions despite their common heritage and racial identities, a condition he diagnoses as “bipolar orders.” His objective is to inform the reader of the existing polarization of the Koreas and what he calls

the “decussation effect”—his term for the contradictory phenomena that, in spite of polarization, the relationship between South and North Korea has improved, while the relationship between South Korea and the United States has deteriorated. The renowned authority on Korean history, Harvard historian Carter J. Eckert, writes that *Bipolar Orders* is the one book he considers to be “a ‘must-read’ for anyone interested in contemporary Korea, professional or layman alike.”

Despite the fact that the narrative essentially begins in 1989, the author provides sufficient historical background for understanding contemporary Korea. His introductory chapter explains how for most of recorded history, the peninsula has been under unified rule, its inhabitants using the same language and sharing most of their customs, despite repeated invasions by foreign powers. He provides a succinct overview of the country’s history from ancient times through the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910) and clearly conveys the remarkable stability of Korea in spite of rebellions, invasions, and unequal treaties with Japan and Western powers. He provides a summary of the colonial period (1910–1945), the causes of division, and the Korean War (1950–1953).

Two chapters are devoted to explaining the democratization process and the socio-economic developments in South Korea. Lynn emphasizes that the advance toward democracy was rooted mainly in Korean history and not so much an export from the United States. In the process of discussing the presidents, from Syngman Rhee in 1948 up to Lee Myung-Bak in 2008, the author discusses the principal events that contributed to the democratization process, such as decades of

protests that were met with repression by authoritarian regimes, the growth of the middle class, and outside pressures from foreign governments. He emphasizes the significant role that students played in the anti-government and pro-democracy demonstrations during the authoritarian administrations of Rhee, Park, and Chun.

The chapter on economic and social change in South Korea begins with a vivid description of Seoul, the fourth largest city in the world, and states that the capital is “dotted with monuments of capitalism and consumerism,” fashionable neighborhoods, billboards, bright lights, department stores, and modern motorized traffic. Lynn describes how South Korea was able to recover from the destruction of the Korean War and how it was able to achieve sustained economic development. In addition to Korean hard work, entrepreneurship, and lucrative US government contracts, the “Miracle on the Han” included effective industrialization policies, government regulation of finances, emphasis on education that created a skilled labor force, repression of labor rights, and an ideology of economic nationalism. The chapter includes a discussion of the Asian crisis of 1997, South Korea’s rapid recovery, and the Korean Wave. The author explains recent developments in society, such as demographic change, labor shortages, a growing income gap, and an aging population.

Two chapters are devoted to North Korean political history and socio-economic issues. Lynn uses the metaphor of the “Holy Trinity,” which he believes captures the dynamics of how Kim Il-Sung (the Father) and Kim Jong-Il (the Son) have created and maintained their power. The Holy Spirit is self-reliance (*juche*), the ideology that permeates the country’s life. Kim Il-Sung, though deceased, is considered “the Eternal President of the Republic” and his mummified body is entombed in a huge mausoleum that was built while millions of citizens

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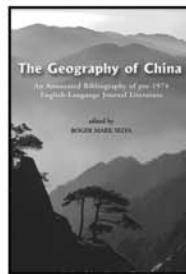
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*Most Americans know little about North Korea, and a common stereotype is that it is a continuation of what was once known as the Hermit Kingdom. Yet, North Korea has diplomatic relations with over 150 other nations.*

starved. Most Americans know little about North Korea, and a common stereotype is that it is a continuation of what was once known as the Hermit Kingdom. Yet, North Korea has diplomatic relations with over 150 other nations.

The description of Pyongyang juxtaposed with a description of Seoul illustrates the striking contrasts between the two Korean states and conveys what this author experienced when visiting Pyongyang. Although approximately three million people live in the capital of North Korea, there are few crowds, and the city is virtually devoid of motor traffic. It is a silent and colorless city, except for revolutionary music filling the street's loudspeakers in the morning and colorful billboards realistically depicting Kim Il-Sung. One does not see thriving commercial enterprises, and hotels and restaurants are nearly vacant. For a country that emphasizes the idea of self-reliance, one notes that many of the items available for purchase are manufactured elsewhere. There are no emaciated or stunted people in the capital because these Pyongyang residents are members of the most privileged class. The members of "the wavering" and "the hostile" classes live elsewhere and suffer from periodic food shortages. The author mentions that the US CIA estimates the North Korean annual per capita GDP for 2006 at around \$1.8K, approximately eight percent of South Korea's \$24K.

In one of his chapters, Lynn describes North-South interaction since 1953. In spite of their bipolar orders, relations improved between 1998 and 2007. At the same time, anti-American sentiment increased in both countries. Lynn addresses reunification and whether it is inevitable or even necessary. If there is to be reunification, he concludes that it will occur only in several stages and perhaps take decades to achieve. Despite state propaganda for reunification in South Korea, eighty-five percent of South Koreans were born after 1945, which makes division their reality. A survey of high school students in 2000 indicated that only twenty-seven percent felt that reunification is necessary. The difficult experiences of North Koreans living in the south indicate the large cultural gaps dividing the two Koreas.

Lynn concludes by saying that unification will not erase the pains of the past, nor should division be viewed as only temporary. He calls for further analyses that do not treat the current situation as a remnant of the Cold War, but as a "state of affairs that has survived for some sixty-plus years as a 'bipolar order.'" ■

**MARY E. CONNOR** taught United States History and Asian Studies for thirty-five years and now serves as President and Program Director of the Korea Academy for Educators, a non-profit organization that informs educators about Korean history and culture and the Korean-American experience. She is the author of *Asia in Focus: The Koreas* (2009) and the recipient of the Peace Corps Association's Global Educator Award and the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award.