



**Philip Jaisohn,
physician-insurrectionist
and a father of
Korean independence**

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A statue of a slightly built and bespectacled diplomat in a double-breasted suit greets visitors to the Korean Consulate in Washington, DC. Coat draped over his arm, his attitude is appropriate to one who conducts the serious business of international relations.



Young Philip Jaisohn.

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The figure is Sŏ Chae-p'il (1866-1951), who anglicized his name to Philip Jaisohn after emigrating to the United States in 1885. His placid image belies his history as a partisan for Korean independence, who had an early role in the violent transformation of a third world backwater into the hottest geopolitical flashpoint of the Cold War.

In 1884, when he was only 18-years-old, Jaisohn was a leader of an unsuccessful armed coup that sought to free the country from its Chinese suzerain. Narrowly escaping capture and certain execution, he made his way to the United States, where he became Korea's first U.S.-trained physician and settled into the life of a respected dermatologist and pathologist in the Philadelphia suburbs, married to a relation of an American president.

Years later, in 1896, he returned to an independent Korea struggling to maintain its sovereignty as another foreign power, Japan, took control of the country. Refusing to be co-opted in a puppet government, he led an opposition group of political activists who protested all foreign influences and urged modern reforms in medicine and women's rights. Threats on his life forced his return to his medical practice in the U.S. in 1898, where he continued his advocacy for Korean independence throughout its time as a colony of Imperial Japan.

In the aftermath of World War II, Jaisohn served as an advisor to the U.S. military, in charge of reorganizing the Korean government. In 1948, three years before his death, he was put forth as a leader that might unite Koreans of all political stripes. He declined, too frail to avert the division of his country and the war that followed.

A subjugated Confucian patriarchy

Bruce Cumings, of the University of Chicago, is one of the leading scholars on modern Korea. His single-volume history, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, provides important cultural and historical context.¹

Originally settled in the first millennium, Korea was a vassal state under Chinese dynasties. It developed a society that was more Confucian than was China, a patriarchy of rigid castes where a father's occupation became that of his sons. Families' lives and fortunes, determined by their station, went unchanged for generations. Butchers and leatherworkers of the lowest caste, the *paekjŏng*, were untouchable because they killed animals and rendered animal products. Holding the uppermost position was the *yangban*, a caste of property, position, and wealth.¹

Women had a subordinate status to men with no social standing apart from rearing children. Girls did not receive a formal education. Girls and women were secluded in the inner chambers of homes, neither seeing nor talking to men who were not family members. In public, unmarried women were veiled from head to foot to protect them from unwanted gazes of men.²

Korea's isolation ended in the 19th century when Western Europe and American imperialism subjugated the Far East. After China's loss to the British in the Opium War of 1839-1842, and the forced opening of Japan to trade by U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853, Korea's turn soon came in 1871.

In a tragicomedy of mixed messages and miscommunication, the U.S. sent a flotilla that included five heavy warships and more than 1,200 sailors and marines in what they professed as a peaceful trade mission to Korea. Taewŏn-gun, who was regent to his teenaged son King Kojong, refused to respond to U.S. proposals because of his engrained hardline stance of isolationism. The U.S. admiral rebuffed Korean efforts at clarifying the Americans' intent because he was insulted by the junior rank of the Korean party, and neither side spoke the other language with enough fluency to clear up misunderstandings.³

On June 1, 1871, the U.S. admiral sent a squadron that attracted fire from strategically positioned forts on both sides of the Han river, setting up an assault on shore that left 243 Korean troops killed, compared to only three U.S. fatalities. Historian, Gordon Chang, senior vice provost and professor of history at Stanford University, wrote that the conflict was "one of the bloodiest battles that Koreans

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have fought to defend their country.”³ Despite losing the battle, the Koreans succeeded in dissuading the Americans from pursuing its goal. The U.S. fleet pulled anchor and the Americans did not return until 1882.

Just four years after the American adventure in Korea, a newly industrialized and militarized Japan arrived in 1875 to claim its hegemony over the country.¹ Under Japanese gunsights, Korean King Kojong (1852-1919; r. 1863-1907) avoided hopeless defeat by giving the Japanese unrestricted access to Korean markets and ports (Treaty of Kanghwa, 1876). Distrustful of the Japanese and threatened by Russia to his north, Kojong looked to the U.S. for protection (Shufeldt Treaty, 1882). The Americans, however, would prove to be a duplicitous ally when President Theodore Roosevelt negotiated the peace terms between Russia and Japan after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) that left Korea under total domination by the Japanese (Treaty of Portsmouth, 1905).⁴

Teenaged revolutionary

As a *yangban*, Jaisohn’s life of privilege was assured, a story he recalled in his memoirs published at the end of his life.⁵ His father was a magistrate and his uncles, ministers to the king. When he was five-years-old, he had an augury of a different future during the 1871 U.S. strike on Seoul, where he witnessed the firing of Korean and American cannons over the Han River.⁵

Appropriate to an advantaged lifestyle he was educated in the Chinese classics, with top marks for the entire school when he was just 13-years-old.⁶ He disdained his *yangban* peers not because he was smarter, but in his view, they were effete and desultory.⁷

Jaisohn came under the influence of the young and charismatic Kim Ok-jyun, the leader of the early reform movement in Korea. Kim believed that Korea’s future lay in emulating Japan’s strategy of westernization and industrialization. Part of his plan was to send promising young men to Japan for training in Western science.⁷

In 1882, Jaisohn, just 16-years-old, was one of 10 students selected for military training. Upon his return in 1884 as a cadet, still a teenager at 18-years-old, he and three of his young colleagues approached the king and proposed the establishment of a military academy like the one they had just attended. Still dominated by Chinese ministers and wary of alienating them, Kojong equivocated in his support.⁶

Impatient and frustrated, Kim, Jaisohn, and their allies plotted to overthrow the government (Gapsin Coup, 1884). The occasion was an official dinner celebrating

the opening of a new post office building. The plotters set nearby buildings on fire with explosives as a pretext to evacuate the king and his family to a safehouse. Other attendees were attacked, and several were killed as they fled. The leader of the royal guard, Min Yong-ki, somehow escaped (minus an ear) and alerted Chinese forces.⁶

Taken hostage the king was forced to name Kim and his fellow collaborators to important positions in the cabinet and promise broad terms for reform, notably the abolition of caste privileges and restrictions. Their victory lasted only until the following morning, when a Chinese squad overwhelmed the insurrectionists and rescued the royal family.⁵

As summary executions began, Jaisohn, Kim, and two others escaped to Japan in the hold of a merchant ship.⁵ In their absence, their families were punished. Jaisohn’s parents and wife were forced to commit suicide, and his brother was killed for not doing the same. His two-year-old son starved to death for want of surviving family members to care for him.⁶

Exile in America

On their arrival in Japan the would-be revolutionaries were shunned. The young exile found shelter with American Protestant missionaries to whom he gave Korean language lessons. In return, they taught Jaisohn English.⁵

In 1885, the Americans helped him emigrate to San Francisco, where he did odd jobs while perfecting his English by reciting Biblical passages at the YMCA and during church services. In 1887, he entered the Hillman Academy, a private school run by Presbyterians in Wilkes-Barre, PA. An American benefactor offered to pay for his baccalaureate education at Lafayette College if he would return to Korea as a missionary. He refused, knowing that in Korea he was considered a criminal.⁶

He instead adopted an Anglicized name and embraced a new life in the U.S. In 1888, he became the first Korean to become a naturalized American citizen. After graduation from Hillman in 1890, he planned to work his way through college. Unable to find a job locally, Jaisohn, with unshakable optimism, went to Washington, D.C., to see President Grover Cleveland about employment in his administration.

Intercepted by a civil service worker, Jaisohn was directed to a position in the Army Medical Museum to translate oriental medical texts for John Shaw Billings.⁵ The work inspired him to pursue a medical degree at George Washington University where he served as an assistant to Walter Reed. Jaisohn graduated in 1895, the first Korean physician educated in the U.S.⁵

During his stay in Washington, he married Muriel Armstrong, daughter of Colonel George Armstrong, the Superintendent of the U.S. Railway Mail Service, and niece of the late President James Buchanan.⁸

Jaisohn continued his training at the Wistar Institute of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania in pathology and dermatology. Settling in private practice in the Philadelphia suburbs with two daughters, he became a member of the local rotary, and later in life a 32nd degree Mason.⁸ His life in America as a well-connected doctor was so comfortable that a Korean visitor noted, "Dr. Jaisohn has almost entirely forgotten his native tongue, written and spoken."⁴

Return to a hotbed

As Jaisohn prospered in America, his native country was roiled by a peasant rising (Tonghak rebellion, 1894) and open conflict between the occupying Japanese and Chinese forces (First Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895). In a display of its transformation from sword-wielding samurai to a mechanized military force, the Imperial Army dispatched its Chinese adversaries in just nine months.¹

Now in control of the government, the Japanese transmuted Korean society and government through sweeping reforms that eliminated castes and family privilege. Two of Jaisohn's fellow escapees from the Gapsin Coup were

installed in high positions in the new government.¹ (Kim, their leader, had been assassinated in Shanghai in March 1894 during the prologue to the war.⁵)

Jaisohn was invited to join the new government as minister of foreign affairs. He declined the offer. "I did not see much difference between the conservative government under Chinese influence and the new one under Japanese domination," he wrote.⁵

With the destruction of the old Confucian patriarchy, Jaisohn saw the opportunity to establish an independent Korean polity based on individual rights. On January 1, 1896, he and his wife quietly arrived in Seoul.⁵

Jaisohn received funding from the government to publish *The Independent* (*Tongnip sinmun*), Korea's first public newspaper. An advocate for public education, he published in *onmun* Korean characters in common usage among native Koreans, not the *hanmun* Chinese characters in classical texts studied by the upper classes. He and his supporters organized a political arm, the Independence Club, to promote their views on Korean self-rule. Jaisohn became the face of the Independence movement, speaking widely and disseminating his views.⁷

Medical and social reformer

In addition to politics, public hygiene was a major issue for Jaisohn's Independence movement. As a U.S.-

trained physician, he knew that hygiene, sanitation, and public health were absent in 19th century Korea. People dumped garbage and routinely relieved themselves in streets. Korea was beset by major outbreaks of cholera throughout the century, including one that followed the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 that killed 5,000 of Seoul's population of 220,000 and required a quarantine on all ships berthed in its ports.⁹

Jaisohn decried traditional Korean medical practices as ineffective and dangerous. *Chim* involved pricking the skin with a large needle to improve



House of Philip Jaisohn, a founding father of South Korea. The House is in Media, Pennsylvania, where he worked for many years. Public Domain

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circulation or cure internal ailments. The *chim* needle was seldom washed and used from patient to patient. A *mudang* (sorceress) chased out evil from the homes of the afflicted using drums, songs, cymbals, and dance. After the exorcism, a feast for family and neighbors featured raw vegetables that routinely spread dysentery.⁶

Women's rights were also a major issue. "The degraded lives of Korean women simply proved Korea's backwardness," wrote Hyaewol Choi of the University of Iowa and gender historian of modern Korea.² Jaisohn and advocates for Korean independence saw equal status for women in the new nation as a necessary step toward modernization and its full political and economic development.²

Exiled again

Growing popular support for Korean independence met increasing resistance from the Japanese. Offices of the Independence Club were set on fire and deliveries of *The Independent* were stopped by secret edict. Threats against Jaisohn's life were commonplace, driving him and his wife back to America in the spring of 1898. He resettled in his old home in Media, PA, and rebuilt his medical practice.⁷ In his absence the Independence Club was disbanded by the end of the year; its newspaper was shuttered a year later.⁶

After its total victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) the Japanese dominated Korea. "The Japanese were concerned during the early years of the rule with the subduing of their new subjects," wrote Donald S. McDonald, a former Foreign Service officer and Korea authority at Georgetown University, "not with soliciting their opinions."¹⁰ The people responded with demonstrations, riots, and bombings. When the new governor arrived in Seoul an unexploded bomb was discovered at the rail station.



Independence Gate, Seoul, South Korea. Public Domain

Japanese repression became severe and brutal. Meiji authorities deposed King Kojong in favor of his feeble-minded son, Sunjong, then dispensed with the royals altogether. Japan formally annexed Korea as a colony on August 29, 1910, "the darkest day of any subsequent year for Koreans."¹

The climax of Korean resistance was the March First Uprising in 1919, familiarly known as *samil*, a date that is celebrated today as a national holiday. An estimated two million persons of all ages and walks of life participated in nearly 1,500 demonstrations countrywide.¹¹

"The size and number of the demonstrations, caught the Japanese police by complete surprise," wrote Michael Robinson, professor emeritus at the Indiana University Institute for Korean Studies and scholar of the decolonization of Korea in the 1950s.¹² "The Japanese response bordered on hysteria; they used brutal force to contain the demonstrations and Koreans fought back in kind."¹² During the demonstrations and riots an estimated 7,500 Koreans died, another 15,000 were injured, and more than 40,000 were arrested, many of them children.¹²

In the aftermath, the Korean nationalist movement split between those who remained in Korea and those who went into exile in Manchuria, China, and America.¹ In April, in Shanghai, a government-in-exile formed that allied with Sun Yat-sen and his Chinese Nationalist Movement (*Kuomintang*), fighting in China and Southeast Asia during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945).¹²

Korean guerillas ran operations against the Japanese from bases in Manchuria and Siberia. They had extensive contact with Soviet communists and formed Korean communist parties in Shanghai in May 1920, and in Korea proper in 1921.¹³ In the mid-1930s, a significant guerilla leader emerged in Manchuria, one regarded by the Japanese as especially formidable: Kim Sŏng-ju, who later changed his name to Kim Il Sung. Although he was

closely connected with communists in both China and Russia, he was under no one's command, and was above all a fervent nationalist.¹

An advocating expatriate

Jaisohn was among Korean expatriates in the U.S. advocating American support for an independent Korea. After news of the March First uprising reached the West, Jaisohn and protégé Syngman Rhee organized the First Korean Congress in April in Philadelphia. The Congress exposed the injustices and brutality of the Japanese occupation to an international audience, with Jaisohn presiding as chair.¹¹

Jaisohn lectured widely to American audiences on behalf of his cause, a crusade that nearly bankrupted him. To rebuild his practice after neglecting it for several years, he mortgaged his house and skipped meals to cover two years of medical school to refresh his knowledge.⁷

As defeat of Imperial Japan neared, political maneuvering for control of postwar Korea began in earnest, each side claiming legitimacy. Many saw Jaisohn as one who might unite the opposing factions because of his roles in the original Gapsin coup and the Independence movement.

However, Jaisohn made his reputation as a revolutionary in a different century. He was a citizen of a different country in a bourgeois Philadelphia suburb, married to a relation of an American president, and no longer fluent in his native tongue. He was simply out of touch and too old to enter the fray. He understood this and remained aloof. In anodyne pronouncements he reminded Koreans of their common goal of defeating Japan. He hoped that their wartime cooperation would extend into forming a common postwar independent republic.⁷

A U.S. military advisor

After the liberation of Korea in 1945, Jaisohn served as an advisor to Lt. General John R. Hodge, commander of the U.S. military government in Korea. On his arrival in 1947, Jaisohn received a warm welcome, especially by those who held hopes he would lead the postwar government.⁷

He shunned all offers of leadership. After elections for the government of South Korea were held in the summer of 1948, he considered his work done. Already suffering from cancer that would eventually kill him, Jaisohn returned to his Pennsylvania home and continued his private practice.

When the Korean War (1950-1953) broke out in June 1950, "his grief was so great that it undoubtedly affected his health," wrote Channing Liem, a historian at the

Pennsylvania College for Women in Philadelphia, and writer of a hagiography for Jaisohn's eponymous memorial foundation. "He told a friend: 'I wonder what the boys would do to me if I went to Pyongyang today to urge peace upon them. I certainly would do anything if it would only result in peace.'"⁷ He died at age 85 in January 1951.

The statues on Embassy Row symbolize the ethic of their countries. Gandhi in ascetic garb striding purposefully to protest the Salt Tax embodies India's tradition of justice through non-violent confrontation, and Commodore John Barry in full military dress standing over the figure of Liberty personifies American steadfastness in war. For Korea, the physician and diplomat in a double-breasted suit projects a commitment to peaceful diplomacy in a world threatened by nuclear conflagration.

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