Introduction

This reader presents fifty selections from Korean newspaper articles that appeared between 2004 and 2007. Half the articles are from North Korean sources, half from South Korean ones, and they alternate in that order on the same subject matter, or at least on similar themes, throughout the reader. The main focus has naturally and inevitably been on the tense military and political situation of the divided peninsula, but an effort has been made to include as broad a range of other topics as this limited space will permit.

The North Korean articles have all been taken from the Naenara site, a mirror of the state-run central news agency that pools articles from other main sources such as the Pyongyang Times and the Workers’ Newspaper. South Korean journalism is more abundantly accessible and somewhat more variegated in tone depending on the individual source. The South Korean articles in this reader have been taken from three main sources, namely the DongA, HanKook, and JoongAng Dailies. It is hoped that the selections will be judged to give a representative sample of the state of Korean journalism at the beginning of the 21st century. Blatant typos and electronic posting or scanning errors in the articles have been corrected. Each selection has its own vocabulary list, in which the words are listed in order of appearance. The vocabularies for all the selections have been grouped into a general alphabetical glossary at the end of the book. There are many lengthy compound words in Korean, and it is often difficult for students to determine where one element begins and another ends, so they have been separated by hyphens in these lists. Those words in the North Korean selections that are likely to strike a South Korean reader as unusual or as being spelled differently have been indexed in red, and in many cases the equivalent South Korean form has been provided side by side.

An effort has been made to group the articles by length and estimated difficulty according to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) assessment scale. Selections 1-6 are estimated to be suitable for level 2 (limited working proficiency), while selections 7-18 are at level 2+; selections 19-44 are at level 3 (minimum or general working proficiency), and the final six editorials (selections 45-50) are estimated to be at level 3+.

According to the same ILR criteria and data, Korean is a “Group IV” language, that is, one of the most difficult languages for a native English speaker to master. To get to level 2 generally requires the equivalent of a 44-week intensive course at the Defense Language Institute, which entails 1,320 hours of classroom instruction plus an estimated 660 hours of individual study, review, homework, and so on, or a sum total of 220 days of full-time 9-hours a day language study. To get to level 3 requires doubling this amount of work. Thus, this reader is probably most suitable for those who are at what is generally considered to be a relatively “advanced” level of independent or university study of the language. A narrative grammatical sketch and some comprehensive charts listing the most common grammatical elements by category have been included for reference and review purposes, but this book is not a teaching manual for learning the structure of Korean, and in order to use it to build up their thematic vocabulary, students should already be able to read the script fluidly, and have already made a thorough study of the mechanics of the language.

Students of any foreign language generally find news articles to be the most accessible type of authentic material because they can familiarize themselves with the general content by keeping abreast of the news in their own language, and because the vocabulary of journalese tends to be relatively restricted and repetitive. This is as true of Korean as it is of any other language. Furthermore, because newspaper articles are aimed at a general audience, the verbal
endings employed are generally restricted to the “plain formal” level of speech. Now, one of the most difficult aspects of the Korean language is its many speech levels, and in particular, the many alternate, “nuanced” verbal endings that justified my earlier publication with Dunwoody Press (A Handbook of Korean Verbal Conjugation). Thus, because they will only be encountering a relatively small percentage of the many hundreds of endings that are used in speech and in other forms of writing, students of Korean will probably find it especially appropriate to begin reading Korean by reading news articles.