

# An Jung-geun

A Short History of a Korean Independence Cultural Icon



*Photo of An Jung-geun, taken in Lüshun prison, 1909. Courtesy of smarthistory.org*

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## Background

An Jung-geun is most known for assassinating Itō Hirobumi. An targeted Itō because he identified him as the person primarily responsible for Japan's colonization and subjugation of Korea. To An, Itō represented more than just a threat to Korean independence, but also to regional and even world peace.

An's actions were ultimately unsuccessful in his goal of convincing Japan to change its policy in Korea to one that would help Korea modernize while respecting its sovereignty. He did, however, kill Itō at a time when Koreans were unable to offer effective resistance to Japanese imperialism and for that reason he is still widely respected today in Korea.

An Jung-geun was born in 1879, three years after Korea was 'opened' to the outside world. Prior to 1876, Korean leaders had instituted a policy of increased isolationism against European powers. The Japan-Korea Treaty of 1876 was signed after Japan used 'gunboat diplomacy'<sup>1</sup> to press Korea into signing an unequal treaty, allowing Japan to open and exert influence on Korea.

Korea opened to the world in an age of imperialism, leading to conflict on the peninsula as China, Russia and Japan competed for influence over the country. At the same time, various Korean political factions with differing visions of reform were also looking to different outside countries for aid in their internal power struggles.

Japan would ultimately come out on top, winning wars against China (1894-95) and Russia (1904-05). In 1906 Japan sent Prince Itō Hirobumi to Korea as Resident-General, cementing their power in the country. Itō used his position to push through what he thought were necessary modernizing reforms and which caused many Koreans, including An, to fear the complete loss of their country's independence<sup>2</sup>.

## Early life

An Jung-geun was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1879 and given the childhood name Ungch'il. The name originated from seven dots on his chest and stomach meaning that he was born in response to the energy of the Big Dipper<sup>3</sup>. As an adult he was given the name Jung-geun, which means 'heavy root' because he was 'rash and impetuous.' Traditionally, Koreans had childhood names and received another name at adulthood. Sometimes the name is chosen to counteract some perceived personality defect, so it was hoped this name would make him more prudent.<sup>4</sup>

An was born into a family of country gentry and his early years were spent in the mountainous village of Ch'ōnggye, in the Sinch'ōn County. An enjoyed hunting, often at the expense of his studies and despite admonishments from his parents and teachers. When taunted by his classmates over his lack of knowledge, he replied that he wanted to be a great man like Xiang Yu,

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<sup>1</sup> Ganghwa Island incident, 20 September 1875. A violent confrontation between Korean forces and a Japanese gunboat, led to the Japanese government to dispatch a naval force to blockade the immediate area around Ganghwa Island.

<sup>2</sup> This fear was not without cause. In the 1930's and 40's Japan banned the teaching of the Korean language and history. Koreans were forced to take Japanese names and land; businesses and infrastructure were confiscated by the Japanese military and government.

<sup>3</sup> Large pattern of seven bright stars of the constellation Ursa Major.

<sup>4</sup> From "The History of An Ŭngch'il", An Jung-geun's autobiography.

a king in China's warring states (232-202 BC) who said, "It is enough to be able to write one's own name."<sup>5</sup>

In 1894 at age sixteen, An's marriage to Kim Aryŏ coincided with the Tonghak Rebellion, a peasant revolt that rejected Western technology and ideology. One of the peasant armies that formed, estimated at 1700 to 2000 men, threatened the Ch'ŏnggye village. An's father, An T'aehun, mobilized a militia of about seventy fighters to defend the village. An Jung-geun led six militia fighters to scout the Tonghak army's position under the cover of darkness. Seeing an opportunity, the small force fired on the enemy encampment, causing chaos. At dawn, seeing how small the group firing on them was, the Tonghak fought back and only a timely counterattack by An T'aehun, with the bulk of the village militia, saved them and forced the Tonghak to rout. An T'aehun claimed weapons, horses and about a thousand sacks of rice as spoils of war.

The following year, two Korean officials accused An T'aehun of stealing the rice and the pressure applied forced him to leave for Seoul, staying in a Catholic church and aided by a French priest. After a few months, the issue over the bags of rice was resolved, but during that time the scholarly An T'aehun read Catholic literature extensively and converted to Catholicism. An Jung-geun converted to Catholicism at his father's request and was baptized on January 10, 1897, receiving the baptismal name Thomas. While his conversion was initially from filial obedience, An soon came to believe firmly in his new faith.

Through his new religion, An studied French with Father Hong, one of the eight Catholic missionaries who lived in Hwanghae Province. He lamented the lack of education of many Korean Catholics and, with the help of Father Hong, petitioned Bishop Min<sup>6</sup> to establish a Catholic University to educate Koreans. Bishop Min rejected the request, fearful that education would make Koreans indifferent to their faith. Angered by this rejection, An gave up learning French, deciding that while he could continue to believe in Catholicism, he did not want to learn the language of a foreign nation which would, in his eyes, make him a slave to that nation.

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<sup>5</sup> The Story of An Chunggun, [www.asianstudies.org](http://www.asianstudies.org).

<sup>6</sup> Bishop Min was the Korean name of Bishop Gustave-Charles-Marie Mutel who came to Korea in 1880, was ordained as a Bishop in 1890 and led the Catholic Church in Korea until his death in 1933

## A political awakening

For the next several years, An Jung-geun worked as a missionary and studied further with the foreign missionaries serving in Korea. Over this time, Japan began to exert increasing control over Korea, with protocols and treaties signed between the two countries in 1904 and 1905. When the Russia – Japan War ended in 1905, Itō Hirobumi forced the Korean court to sign the Five-Article Agreement, also known as the Eulsa Treaty, on November 17, 1905. This made Korea a protectorate of Japan and appointed Itō Hirobumi as Resident-General in charge of Japan's interests in Korea.

At this time, An Jung-geun's father's health deteriorated and political concerns led An to contemplate leaving with his family for China. An visited Shanghai in China to explore how to relocate his family and while there had a chance encounter with Father Kwak<sup>7</sup>, a French missionary whom he had worked with in the past, who convinced him to return to Korea. His discussion with Kwak made him realise that if he and other Koreans left, Korea itself would cease as a nation. With Father Kwak's support, he made a four-point plan to build the strength of Koreans in Korea:

1. Develop education.
2. Develop the beginnings of associations.
3. Unite the hearts of people.
4. Build up our strength.

On his return to Korea, An's father's health had deteriorated further and in December 1905 he passed away. An spent the winter with his family mourning his father's death, making an oath to give up alcohol until the day Korea became truly independent.

In the spring of 1906, An moved his family to Chinnamp'o and used his resources to establish two schools to educate promising young Koreans. An also participated in fundraising efforts to support independence activities including the National Debt Repayment Movement<sup>8</sup> which he led in P'yongyang.

Under the leadership of Itō Hirobumi, the Seven-Article Agreement was signed in 1907, forcing the abdication of the Korean emperor and further reducing Korean sovereignty. In response to the signing of the 1907 treaty "Righteous armies began to rise up everywhere."<sup>9</sup> The deteriorating situation led to An leave his family and travel north to the Russian-controlled town of Kraskino in Manchuria. There he joined, and was active in, independence associations before joining a Korean guerilla army operating in the area, where he was made a lieutenant-general. In June 1908, the guerilla army was divided into several commands and crossed into northern Korea where they clashed with the Japanese army several times. In one victorious battle under An's command, several Japanese soldiers were taken prisoner. An followed what he understood to be the civilized rules of warfare and released the prisoners. The freed prisoners subsequently provided their comrades with the information needed for the Japanese army to re-engage and destroy An's army. This defeat forced An and two of his men on a weeks-long journey through the mountains of North

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<sup>7</sup> Kwak Wollyang (1876-1914) was the Korean name of Charles Joseph Ange Le Gac, an ordained French minister sent to Korea in 1899.

<sup>8</sup> The members of the National Debt Repayment Society realised that the money owed by Korea to Japan could be used as a pretext for Japan to further infringe on Korean sovereignty and endeavoured to raise the money from the Korean people to repay the debt.

<sup>9</sup> From "The History of An ũngch'il", et al.

Korea back to Kraskino. While disappointed at the loss of his army, An was convinced that his survival was ‘Heaven sent’ and that God had saved this life so that he could perform some ‘great deed.’

Early in 1909, after recovering from the escape back to Kraskino, An met up with some of his revolutionary compatriots. The twelve men decided to form an organization dedicated to Korean independence. To seal the mutual oath, the men severed the ring finger on their left hands above the knuckle and wrote “Korean Independence” in their blood on a Korean flag.



*The handprint of Ahn Jung-geun*

## The assassination of Itō Hirobumi

In An Jung-geun’s eyes, much of what was wrong in Korea lay at the feet of Itō Hirobumi. An believed Itō did not follow the mandate of the Japanese government and that if the Japanese emperor could be made aware, then Korean sovereignty would be ensured. He felt that unless he killed the man he considered the architect of a policy that had already killed many Koreans and promised to kill many more “the peace in the East would be disturbed and relations between Japan and Korea would be strained.”<sup>10</sup>

Itō was retired from his role as Resident-General of Korea, however, An heard that Itō would be travelling to Russian-controlled Harbin, Manchuria to meet the Russian Minister of Finance, to discuss the sharing of power with the Russians.<sup>11</sup> An, along with three other men (only one of

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<sup>10</sup> From the *The Trial Records of An Chunggŭn*, Wu Tōksun, Cho Tosŏn, Yu Tongha: *the Trial Records of the An Chunggŭn Incident*] (Seoul: Ch’aeryun, 2010)

<sup>11</sup> The fact that Japanese and Russian representatives were meeting on Chinese territory administered by Russia highlights the Imperialism power of the day.

whom seems to have fully understood what An intended to do), travelled through Manchuria to intercept Itō.



From left to right, An Jung-geun, U Tökson and Yu Tongha <sup>12</sup>

On the morning of October 26, 1909, Itō's train arrived in Harbin, China to be greeted by an honour guard of Russian military police lined up on the platform. When Itō disembarked from the train, An walked up behind the Russian guards and fired three times between them at Itō, fatally wounding him. Three other Japanese officials were fired upon and wounded. According to later testimony, An wasn't sure what Itō actually looked like and fired at the man he judged most likely to be Itō. The other three officials were wounded when, in a moment of doubt that he had fired on the wrong man, An looked behind his first target and fired three times and "the most dignified looking [man] walking in the front"<sup>13</sup>

After firing, An shouted "Hurrah for Korea!"<sup>14</sup> three times and was promptly arrested by the Russian guards.



Pak Yöngsön's painting of An Jung-geun shooting Itō Hirobumi

## Trial, Imprisonment and Execution

Although An had killed Itō on Chinese territory administered by Russia, following his arrest he was almost immediately handed over to Japanese authorities, where he was moved to Lüshun prison. The killing of Itō was an international incident, meaning An was subject to a public trial that had

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<sup>12</sup> This photo was taken in Harbin on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1909, three days before An killed Itō. It was customary for Korean independence fighters to take a picture of themselves before implementing their plans. They had resolved to sacrifice themselves, so they wanted to leave a memento for this world.

<sup>13</sup> From "The History of An Ŭngch'il", et al.

<sup>14</sup> This is a translation from the word "manse!", the Korean equivalent of the Japanese "banzai!"

to at least appear to follow the norms of civilized society. For instance, An was not tortured<sup>15</sup> and was provided Japanese defense lawyers<sup>16</sup>.

At trial, An listed the fifteen reasons why he believed killing Itō was justified:<sup>17</sup>

1. The crime of killing Empress Min of Korea.<sup>18</sup>
2. The crime of forcing the emperor of Korea to abdicate.
3. The crime of forcing the conclusion of the Five and Seven Article Treaties.
4. The crime of slaughtering innocent Koreans.
5. The crime of forcibly seizing political power.
6. The crime of seizing railroads, mines and land.
7. The crime of forcing the use of the paper money issued by the First Bank.<sup>19</sup>
8. The crime of disbanding the Korean army.
9. The crime of obstructing education.
10. The crime of preventing Koreans from being educated overseas.
11. The crime of confiscating and burning textbooks.
12. The crime of deceiving the world by saying that Korea wanted to be protected by Japan.
13. The crime of tricking the emperor [of Japan] into thinking that things in Korea are peaceful and without incident, when in fact between Korea and Japan there is no end of war and slaughter.
14. The crime of destroying peace in the East.
15. The crime of killing his Imperial Majesty of Japan's father, the former emperor.<sup>20</sup>

An was put on trial along with three other defendants who had travelled with An to Harbin, U Tōkson, Cho Tosōn and Yu Tongha. While An's lawyers offered a competent defense, it was one that did not challenge Japan's power over Korea, which was not what An wanted. An's lawyers did not question the legitimacy of Japanese colonial rule in Korea. An had hoped to use the trial as an opportunity to indict Ito for his destruction of Korean independence and to convince Japan to change its policy.

Instead, the main defenses revolved around jurisdiction and applying Korean law and that while An had committed an offence, he had acted patriotically. The trial was conducted in Japanese, which An did not speak and only limited translations were offered. The prosecution's position was that An had misunderstood Itō and Japan's role in Korea as a benevolent partner protecting Korea from Russian and Chinese aggression. When An was permitted to speak the judge cleared the

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<sup>15</sup> This treatment was unlike what other Koreans who violently resisted Japanese authorities experienced at the time. They were often tortured, starved and degraded before being executed without trial.

<sup>16</sup> Legal defence funds from Korean independence groups paid for English and Korean lawyers, however the Japanese court rejected them and installed Japanese defence lawyers instead. Japanese laws at the time required all trial lawyers to be Japanese.

<sup>17</sup> From "The History of An Ŭngch'il", et al. There are many differing translations of these fifteen reasons, however, I have chosen to use the version from An's autobiography because these appear to be the most reliable.

<sup>18</sup> An blamed Itō for Queen Myōngsōng, known as Empress Min's death because he was prime minister at the time. However, it was the Japanese Consul to Korea, Miura Goro who ordered the attack. An believed Miura was acting on Itō's orders because he was not punished for his action.

<sup>19</sup> The First Bank was a Japanese bank given power over Korea's monetary system.

<sup>20</sup> Emperor Komei died unexpectedly at a young age following a short illness, which was publicly declared as smallpox, however, some believed he was poisoned. If he was poisoned, it is unlikely Itō was involved as he had no contact with the emperor at the time.



courtroom when some of his rhetoric veered into territory unflattering to the Japanese government.

With the outcome of the trial having been decided in advance<sup>21</sup>, there was little doubt as to the verdict. On February 14, 1910, An Jung-geun was sentenced to death. The three other men on trial were sentenced to prison for between three years and eighteen months for their parts in the plot. Although he expected it, An was angered by the sentence because he had hoped to be viewed as a prisoner of war instead of an assassin. He also requested that he be executed as a prisoner of war, by firing squad, but it was instead ordered that he would be hanged as a common criminal.

Following the verdict, An spent time writing his autobiography and producing works of calligraphy on request as mementoes for officers of the court and prison guards. Although not formally trained in calligraphy, his work was highly respected and he would sign and mark his work with a handprint of his left hand with its missing ring finger. Some of his calligraphy works have been subsequently designated as national treasures.<sup>22</sup>



*An Junggeun, Calligraphy, March 1910, 137.4 x 33.4 cm (The National Museum of Korea, Treasure 569-7)*

Also while awaiting execution, An began working on his essay “On Peace in East Asia”. An’s vision for Asia included a Pan-Asianism union of the three major countries in East Asia, China, Japan and Korea, to ‘fight off’ the threat posed by European colonialism. He wrote that the continued policy of Japanese control over Korea (which he blamed on Itō) Korea and Japan. With the death of Itō, An hoped that Korea and Japan could become friendly because of the traditions they

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<sup>21</sup> A series of then-secret telegrams between the judiciary in Lushun and the Japanese foreign minister reveal that had Ahn not been so sentenced, he would have been retried until he was.

<sup>22</sup> Treasure No.569 of the Republic of Korea.



shared and that further good relations with China would be a model for the world to follow.<sup>23</sup> An was so passionate about this work that he asked for a stay of execution to allow him to finish. However, the Japanese government ordered prompt action and An was executed in Lüshun prison on 26 March, 1910, before he could finish his essay.

Despite a request from An's family to return his body and fearing that his tomb would become a memorial site for Korean nationalists, An was buried in an unmarked grave near Lüshun prison.

In 2010 the Korean government tried to locate his remains but were unsuccessful in getting the necessary cooperation from the Japanese government.



*An Jung-geun memorial in Hyochang Park, Seoul. Courtesy of <https://tbs.seoul.kr/>*

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<sup>23</sup> A model that it could be argued was eventually realized when the European Union was formed more than 80 years following An's death in 1993.

## Aftermath

Following Itō's assassination, Western media, already sympathetic towards Japan, accepted Japan's presentation of the events. Japanese propaganda portrayed the killing as the act of a barbarous Korean and used it to provide continued justification for the policy of colonization of Korea.

On August 22, 1910, only five months after An's execution, Japan formally annexed Korea with the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1910. Korea was not an independent nation again until Japan unconditionally surrendered to the Allies at the end of World War II on August 15, 1945.

An's actions are still controversial to this day. In Korea, he is celebrated as a heroic independence activist who sacrificed himself for his country. There is a memorial museum in Seoul, South Korea dedicated to his life. In Japan, he is considered a terrorist. When China opened a memorial in 2014 commemorating An Jung-geun in Harbin, China, the Japanese government criticized China, describing the opening as "regrettable."<sup>24</sup>

Itō's own legacy is equally controversial. His policies, particularly in Korea, are criticized for their imperialist nature and the suffering it caused. In Japan, he is celebrated as a visionary leader who modernized the nation and set it on the path to becoming an empire. His role in drafting the Meiji Constitution laid the groundwork for Japan's modern state apparatus.<sup>25</sup>



*Itō Hirobumi on Japan's 1000 yen banknote in circulation between 1963 to 1986*

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<sup>24</sup> Japanese government voices disapproval of Ahn Jung-geun memorial

[https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/620717.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/620717.html)

<sup>25</sup> Inspired by his study of Western legal systems, Ito envisioned a constitutional monarchy that balanced the emperor's sovereignty with a two-chamber legislature. The Meiji Constitution of 1889, with its blend of autocracy and democracy, was instrumental in centralizing power and establishing a governance framework that facilitated Japan's aggressive expansionist policies in the decades to follow.

## Family

An Jung-geun was born in Haeju, Hwanghae Province, Joseon in what is now part of present-day North Korea. He is the first son of (father) An T'aehun (unknown – 1905) and (mother) Cho Söngnyö (1862 -1949) better known as Cho Maria and had two younger brothers. Cyril An Chönggün (1885 – 1949) was an independence activist like his older brother and participated in education activities and the National Debt Repayment Movement. His youngest brother, John An Konggün (1889 – 1940 est.) also worked for Korean independence. Konggün had a natural talent for languages, speaking six languages allowed him to find work in foreign consulates where he could obtain useful information for his independence activities. After Japan invaded China in 1937, he attempted to evacuate the An family from Japanese controlled Shanghai. On May 30, 1940, he mysteriously disappeared, and his body was never found. An Konggün was awarded the Order of Merit for Independence and National Foundation in 1991.

An Jung-guen's wife, Agnes Kim Aryö (1878 – 1946) had two sons and a daughter with An. Their oldest son, An Usaeng (1905 – 1911), more popularly known as Pundo, died mysteriously after eating a cookie given to him by a stranger in 1911.<sup>26</sup> Pundo's younger brother, Matthew Chungsaeng (1907 – 1952) grew up in Shanghai and supported his family as a violinist in the Shanghai Orchestra and working at a pharmacy. Their daughter, Theresa Hyönsaeng (1902 -1959) was raised in a convent by French missionaries after her mother left Korea with her two brothers. She was reunited with her family in Vladivostok, Russia when she was 13, later moving to Shanghai. She returned to Korea in 1946 where she taught French at a Catholic University. An Jung-geun's cousins and nephews also participated in Korean independence activities. Fourteen members of An's family are designated as national heroes at the Ahn Junggeun Memorial Museum in Seoul.



*An Jung-geun's family photo taken in October 1909, by the Japanese police following An's assassination of Itō and given to him while in prison by Sonoki Tsueyoshi, his acting interpreter. Courtesy of [www.koreatimes.co.kr](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr)*

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<sup>26</sup> It is popularly believed that the stranger was a Japanese spy, however, there is no evidence to support this theory and he may simply have died of an illness.

## From the Author

Like many, I first became aware of An Jung-geun through the blue-belt pattern that bears his name. Korean independence appears to have been on General Choi's mind when creating his patterns. While some patterns are named for concepts, places or figures from Korean antiquity, many are named for comparatively modern figures. Do-San, Joong-Gun, Eui-Am, Sam-Il all represent figures in the Korean Independence movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

General Choi's own history resisting Japanese occupation, imprisonment by the Japanese and near execution for treason<sup>27</sup> have many parallels with An Jun-guen's life, so it is surely no accident that his story is represented by a pattern in his name.

I have always found An Jung-geun to be a fascinating part of Taekwon-Do's history. An is a relatively modern figure and his life and family history are relatable today in a way that other figures from antiquity are not. It is important to remember that he lived during one of the most turbulent times in Korea's history and his life and actions should be viewed in that context.

He dedicated his life to independence for his country and culture. He had a keen sense of injustice with the headstrong passion to attempt to solve problems that others simply endured. His life embodied the tenets of Taekwon-do and no matter how you view his actions in assassinating Itō Hirobumi, his commitment and dedication to his country, culture and people must be admired.



*The author at Ahn Junggeun Memorial Museum, Seoul. Tul Tour 2024*

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<sup>27</sup> General Choi was due to have been executed on August 18, 1945, three days after Korea was liberated at the end of World War II.

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[China Opens Memorial Honoring Korean Independence Activist](#)

[Japan protest over Korean assassin Ahn Jung-geun memorial in China](#)

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