



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▶ ASIA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Covering 38,023 square miles (98,480 square kilometers), South Korea is slightly larger than Indiana. Its only border is shared with North Korea at the 38th parallel, where the Korean Peninsula was divided at the end of World War II. At its closest point, South Korea is 123 miles (196 kilometers) from Japan. Around 65 percent of the land is forested and approximately 20 percent is suitable for cultivation. Hills and mountains dominate the east, while plains are found in the west and south. South Korea's climate is temperate, but high humidity makes summers seem hotter and winters colder. The nation experiences all four seasons; spring and fall are the most pleasant times of the year. The monsoon season is from mid-July to mid-August. During this time, South Korea receives half of its annual rainfall. Korea is traditionally known as Chosön ("Land of the Morning Calm").

History. Powerful kingdoms flourished on the Korean Peninsula more than two thousand years ago. Of particular importance were the Koguryō (established in 37 B.C.), Paekche (18 B.C.), and Silla (57 B.C.) dynasties. Silla kings united the three warring kingdoms in A.D. 668 and developed a rich Buddhist culture. By 935, the strong new Koryō kingdom had established itself on the peninsula. The name *Korea* comes from *Koryō*. During the Koryō era, the world's first movable metal-type printer was invented. Koryō general Yi Söng-gye seized power, declared himself king, and established the Chosön (or Yi) Dynasty in 1392. The Yi ruled for more than five hundred years. In the latter part of the Yi Dynasty, China and Japan sought control of Korea, a struggle the Japanese eventually won. They annexed Korea in 1910.

At the end of World War II (1945), the Soviet Union entered Korea from the north and the United States entered the south

to accept the surrender of Japanese troops. The peninsula was accordingly divided (at the 38th parallel) into two administrative zones. After attempts to hold nationwide elections failed, an independent government was established in the south with U.S. support; Syngman Rhee became president. In June 1950, North Korean troops invaded South Korea, triggering a three-year war. The United States and United Nations sent troops to help South Korea. Concerned that the war might spill into Chinese territory, China sent troops to aid North Korea. The war ravaged the peninsula and ended in a stalemate (a peace treaty still has not been signed), with the original border virtually unchanged. Violent border incidents have occurred over the years, and South Korea and North Korea continue to have large military presences at the border.

Rhee resigned in 1960 after student unrest over charges of corruption. Indeed, students have played a vital role in South Korea's democratic evolution. Their demonstrations precipitated a military coup in 1961, and General Park Chung Hee seized power. Elected in 1963, Park implemented some reforms but retained firm control. He was assassinated in 1979. Student demonstrations in Kwangju in 1980 brought down the interim government. Troops sent to halt the demonstrations killed some two hundred students. Kwangju became a center for antigovernment sentiment, and the slain students are memorialized every year. General Chun Doo Hwan was appointed president. The economy steadily improved during the 1980s, but political dissent was still tightly controlled. After more mass demonstrations for greater political liberty, Chun stepped down in 1987. General Roh Tae Woo was freely elected that year, and he began instituting reforms that paved the way for civilian rule.

South Korea

In 1992, Kim Young Sam was elected the first civilian to occupy the Blue House (presidential mansion) in more than 30 years. Kim promised to further reform government and to continue economic progress, but he was plagued by scandals, the Asian economic crisis of 1997, and the bankruptcy of the Hanbo Steel Industry Company, one of South Korea's largest conglomerates.

Elections in 1997 brought former dissident Kim Dae Jung to power as president in 1998. He implemented a "sunshine policy" of constructive engagement with the North in hopes of eventually achieving reunification. While the goal of reunification has long been espoused on both sides of the border, different visions and deep suspicions keep the two Koreas far apart. Roh Moo Hyun, elected president in 2002, continued diplomacy with North Korea, but the North's pursuit of nuclear weapons has escalated tensions between the nations.

THE PEOPLE

Population. South Korea's population of 48.4 million is growing by 0.4 percent annually. About 80 percent of the population lives in urban areas. Seoul is the largest city, followed by Pusan, Taegu, and Inch'ŏn. Except for small Chinese and Southeast Asian minorities, South Korea is an ethnically homogeneous country. However, regionalism divides the population and creates biases and tensions that have impacted politics and social interaction throughout the nation's history. A person's dialect or accent can identify his or her home region. Inter-marriage between regions is relatively uncommon. Political rivalries between leaders from Kyŏngsang province and Chŏlla province are most pronounced. Voters often prefer to elect someone from their own region, regardless of the candidate's qualifications.

Language. The Korean language plays an important role in national identity. It is written in Hangul, a phonetic alphabet created in 1446 because classical Chinese (the only written language available) was difficult to master. Hangul made it possible for the commoner to read and write. It has 24 letters, 10 of which are vowels. Hangul also instilled a national pride in Koreans that helped them preserve their culture during periods of foreign occupation. The Seoul dialect is the standard taught in school. Korean used in South Korea mixes numerous Chinese characters with Hangul script in newspapers and government documents, but Korean is not closely related to Chinese. Modern Korean has adopted many English and other foreign terms associated with Western culture. English is taught in schools and many people in urban areas can speak it.

Religion. Confucianism permeates all aspects of Korean society, but it is a philosophy and not a religion. It orders social behavior, stressing virtue, morality, and filial piety. Children are expected to show deference to their parents and perform certain duties for them in life and after they die. Confucian rites conducted on behalf of ancestors promote this respect and family unity. Even Christians will perform these cultural rites in honor of their dead. Nearly 50 percent of the population is Christian. Most belong to a variety of Protestant churches. More than 40 percent of South Koreans are Buddhist. Roughly 1 percent of the population engages in Shamanism, including geomancy, divination, avoiding bad luck or omens, warding off evil spirits, and venerating the dead.

General Attitudes. Korean society is vertically ordered according to tenets of Confucian philosophy. Nearly all interaction is determined by one's place in various social groups or one's status in a relationship. One's status is determined by

age, gender, education, family background, wealth, occupation, and/or political ideology. Success depends on social contacts. Koreans often use extreme modesty when speaking about themselves. They are reluctant to accept high honors and graciously deny compliments. Koreans are quick to make friends and they rely on each other for just about anything.

Giving gifts as a means of obtaining favors is common, especially in the workplace, and accepting a gift carries the responsibility of reciprocity. Open criticism and public disagreement are considered inappropriate because they can damage another person's reputation. Out of respect for the feelings of others, Koreans may withhold bad news or adverse opinions or express them in an indirect way. Greater democracy, economic prosperity, and Westernization are changing Korean society for the rising generation. Young people enjoy more material possessions and a broader pop culture than their parents' generation.

Personal Appearance. Most South Koreans, except for the elderly in rural areas, wear Western-style clothing. The youth wear modern fashions, and Korea has an active fashion industry. Clothing often depends on the event. In public, conservative dress is important. Bare feet are inappropriate. In the business world, Western-style suits and dresses are the norm. On special occasions or holidays, however, people often wear a *hanbok*. For women, a *hanbok* is a long two-piece dress that is often very colorful. For men, it includes trousers and a loose-fitting jacket or robe.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Within the Confucian social structure, how one is greeted depends on one's age and social standing relative to the greeter. A bow is the traditional greeting, but it is usually accompanied by a handshake between men. As a sign of respect, the left hand may support or rest under the right forearm during the handshake. Women shake hands less often than men do. Among friends and relatives, a simple nod is acceptable. Children bow when greeting adults. Professionals meeting for the first time exchange business cards, presenting and accepting the cards with both hands after a handshake.

A common greeting between peers or for subordinates is *Annyong haseyo?* (Are you at peace?). Children often greet each other with a simple *Annyong?* To show respect for a social superior, one adds an honorific: *Annyong hashimnikka?* A Korean name typically consists of a one-syllable family name followed by a one- or two-syllable given name. Kim, Lee (*Yi*), and Park (*Pak*) are the most common family names. Women retain their maiden names when they marry.

Gestures. Proper courtesy is shown with gestures. Items are passed with both hands or the right hand grasped by the left at the wrist or forearm. Feet are not placed on a desk or chair. When yawning or using a toothpick, one covers the mouth. Koreans beckon by waving the fingers together with the palm down. Beckoning with the index finger is rude. Facial expressions are often more important than body language in communicating unspoken messages. When embarrassed, a person may respond by laughing. People may also laugh if they are uncertain of how to respond. Eye contact is important in conversation among peers, but a person may avoid eye contact in conversation with a person of a different age group.

Visiting. Guests invited to a home remove their shoes upon entering. While Western furniture is common, in traditional Korean homes guests are seated on floor cushions. Men sit cross-legged and women tuck their legs to one side behind

them. The guest receives the warmest or best position. When visiting relatives, men and women usually separate to socialize. For example, the women gather in the kitchen. Refreshments usually are served. Guests invited for a meal customarily bring a small gift, often something that can be served at the gathering. Wrapped gifts are not opened in front of the giver. At the end of a visit, the host accompanies the guests to the door or outside. Older South Korean men socialize in *Tabang* (teahouses).

Eating. South Koreans eat three meals a day, though busy schedules make it difficult for the family to always dine together. Chopsticks and spoons are the most commonly used utensils. At a dinner party, the meal usually is served before socializing begins. People pass items and pour drinks with the right hand, supporting the forearm or wrist with the left hand. Eating while walking on the street is not considered appropriate for adults.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The family is bound by a strong sense of obligation among its members. The father is the head of the family; he and the oldest son receive the greatest respect. The oldest son is given the best opportunities for education and success. Although women comprise slightly more than half of the labor force, their social status is lower than men's in the workplace and at home. Gender roles are well-defined, but urban women enjoy greater equality with men than do rural women. Mothers supervise the household and children, while men are the primary providers and final decision-makers.

On a person's 60th birthday (a milestone rarely reached in the past), extended family members gather for a grand celebration (*hwan'gap*). Families may save money for months to pay for the event. Similar lavish attention is afforded to babies. After one hundred days of life, a small feast is held in honor of the child's survival to that point (also a date often not reached in the past). A much larger celebration (*tol*) is held at the first birthday. From the many gifts offered, what a child picks up first is thought to signal his or her fortunes in life.

Though Koreans traditionally lived with members of the extended family, it is now more common to live in nuclear family arrangements, especially in urban areas. However, sons still expect to care for their aging parents. Most Koreans live in high-rise apartment buildings. Many families own their apartments. It is also possible to lease an apartment using the *chunsae* system, in which a large deposit is placed with the owner in lieu of rent. The owner profits by investing the *chunsae* money, which must be surrendered at the completion of the lease term (usually one or two years). Paying monthly rent is another possible, but less popular, option.

Because of the Confucian emphasis on family hierarchies, Koreans keep detailed genealogies. These records date back many centuries and include a person's birth, relations, achievements, and place of burial. In clan gatherings, families that rank higher in the genealogy are treated with greater respect by lower families.

Dating and Marriage. Young South Koreans enjoy going to movies, hiking, taking short trips, meeting at coffee shops, or joining friends at fast-food restaurants. They may meet in karaoke rooms, arcades, or "video rooms" (establishments that show movies on videotape). Couples might hold hands on a date, but kissing in public is not appropriate. While trends are changing, most South Korean youth rarely have time for serious dating before they enter college or the workforce. In some

cases, rural families still arrange marriages for couples who have met but not dated in the Western sense. Traditional wedding ceremonies were rather elaborate, but today they often take place in public wedding halls; couples wear Western-style clothing instead of traditional Korean wedding attire.

Diet. Korean food is generally spicy. Rice and *kimch'i* (a spicy pickled cabbage) are staples at almost every meal. Various soups are common. Rice sometimes is combined with other ingredients, such as red beans or vegetables. *Pibimbap* is rice mixed with seasoned vegetables; an egg is usually put on top, and sometimes bits of meat are added. Chicken and beef are common meats. Favorite delicacies include *pulkogi* (strips of marinated and barbecued beef) and *kalbi* (marinated short ribs). Koreans also eat large amounts of fish, seafood (clams, oysters, squid, octopus, sea cucumbers), and *ddök* (pounded rice cake). Barley tea and *soju*, a common alcoholic drink made from rice, are served with most meals. *Magolli*, another rice-based alcoholic drink, is more popular in rural areas. Fruit is often served as dessert.

Recreation. The most popular spectator sports in South Korea are baseball, basketball, soccer, and volleyball. Some South Koreans swim, play tennis, bowl, or golf. Children enjoy training in *taekwōndo* (a martial art), and most men have some experience with it from their military service. Badminton, table tennis, and billiards are popular games. Unique to Korea is a form of wrestling called *ssrōm*, in which contestants hold on to pieces of cloth tied around their opponent's legs during their match. Mountain climbing and hiking are favorite activities for weekends and vacations. Music and television attract the attention of the youth. Computer games are especially popular among young people.

The Arts. Prose, poetry, legends, folktales, and plays were either passed down orally or recorded in the Chinese language until Hangul was developed in the mid-15th century. Poetry was originally performed through song; *sijo* (an ancient poetic form) has endured in popularity. Themes included Confucian principles, love, and nature, while current renditions also include political topics. Folk music and dance continue to be popular. *P'ansori* is sung by a soloist accompanied by drums. Mask dances, drum dances, masked theater (*sandae*), and puppet theater (*kkoktukaksi*) are performed at festivals. Movies, art exhibits, and theaters also provide entertainment.

Calligraphy is an important art and has influenced traditional painting. Every brush stroke represents an object in nature. Art forms are distinctly Korean but have been influenced by China as well as Buddhism and Shamanism. The government actively supports and preserves the arts.

Holidays. For the New Year (1–3 Jan.), families gather to exchange gifts, honor the dead, and enjoy large meals. People often dress in traditional clothing, though this is becoming less common in cities. After the memorial services, family members bow to each older person in a show of respect. Games are played and fortunes are told. South Koreans celebrate the Lunar New Year (January or February) by visiting hometowns or vacationing in resorts. The other major family holiday is *Ch'usōk* (Harvest Moon Festival, held in September or October), when family members visit ancestral tombs to clean the grave site and leave food offerings in honor of the dead. Larger family reunions are common during this festival.

Other holidays include Independence Movement Day (1 Mar.), Children's Day (5 May), Buddha's Birthday (in April or May, observed according to the lunar calendar), Memorial Day (6 June), Constitution Day (17 July), Independence Day

South Korea

(15 Aug.), National Foundation Day (3 Oct.), and Christmas. Arbor Day (5 Apr.), Armed Forces Day (1 Oct.), and Korean Language Day (9 Oct.) are marked by various celebrations but are not public holidays.

Commerce. Small, family-owned stores are usually open every day from early in the morning until 10 or 11 p.m. In many cases, the family lives above or near the store. Businesses are generally open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Banks and government offices close earlier. Department stores and other retail businesses may stay open until 8 p.m.

SOCIETY

Government. The Republic of Korea's head of state is the president (currently Roh Moo Hyun), who is directly elected and may only serve one five-year term. The president appoints a prime minister (currently Lee Hae Chan). Though technically head of government, the prime minister is largely a ceremonial figure. The State Council, an executive cabinet, is comprised of the president, the prime minister, and 15 to 30 ministry heads. Members of the 299-seat National Assembly (*Kuk Hoe*) are elected to four-year terms. The voting age in South Korea is 19.

Economy. South Korea experienced rapid economic growth after the 1960s to earn a position as one of the Four Dragons of East Asia. In just one generation, South Korea rose from poverty to relative prosperity and the real gross domestic product per capita rose from less than US\$700 to nearly US\$12,000. Most families came to identify themselves as part of the middle class. In the late 1990s, strikes, a large budget deficit, political scandals, bankruptcies, and competition from other nations made South Korea vulnerable to the economic crisis that swept Asia. The *chaebol* (huge conglomerates that dominate the economy) had not followed sound fiscal policies and began to fail. With the economy near collapse, the standard of living fell dramatically. The government has pursued a restructuring campaign that, among other things, is to make the *chaebol* more responsible. Due to heavy dependence on international trade, the economy has become more vulnerable to global and regional economic downturns. Despite these challenges, the country's economy has continued to grow, often at a high rate.

Chief agricultural products include rice, barley, vegetables, and fish. About 6 percent of South Korea's labor force is in agriculture and lives in rural villages, cultivating small plots or collective farms. Around 40 percent of the labor force works in mining and manufacturing. More than half is involved in service occupations. Major industries include textiles and clothing, chemicals, steel, electronics, and automobiles. The currency is the *wŏn* (KRW).

Transportation and Communications. Air, rail, and bus connections provide a good transportation network between cities. A bullet train travels between Seoul and Pusan in two and a half hours. Roads are paved and in good condition. Buses, private cars, and taxis handle urban transportation. Seoul has an efficient subway and a quality express bus system, in addition to regular buses. Taxis are plentiful and inexpensive. Drivers will often stop for additional passengers during busy hours. Driving habits are aggressive and accidents are common. South Korea has many daily newspapers, numerous radio and television stations, and efficient postal and telephone systems.

POPULATION & AREA

| | |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Population | 48,422,644 (rank=25) |
| Area, sq. mi. | 38,023 (rank=106) |
| Area, sq. km. | 98,480 |

DEVELOPMENT DATA

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Human Dev. Index* rank | 28 of 177 countries |
| Adjusted for women | 27 of 140 countries |
| Real GDP per capita | \$17,971 |
| Adult literacy rate | 99% (male); 99% (female) |
| Infant mortality rate | 5 per 1,000 births |
| Life expectancy | 73 (male); 81 (female) |

Education. Education is the most valued aspect of Korean culture, a virtue rooted in Confucianism. It is a key to success, respect, and power. Schooling is compulsory between the ages of six and twelve, and nearly every child completes primary schooling. Most continue to secondary schools, which demand long hours and high performance. To enter a university, applicants must pass extremely competitive and rigorous entrance exams. Students prepare intensively for months to pass exams, often hiring private tutors. Political demonstrations usually occur every spring and are considered part of the students' duty to protect the people against social injustices. Though sometimes violent, these activities have been part of university life for much longer than the republic has existed. However, they have decreased in frequency since 1992.

Health. All segments of the population have access to good health care. The best medical facilities are in Seoul. Care progressed with economic growth; most people now have safe water and adequate nutrition. Nearly all women receive prenatal care and medical attention during delivery. More than 90 percent of all children are immunized.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- In March 2006, military leaders from South Korea and North Korea met in the village of Panmunjom in the demilitarized zone that separates the two nations. They were the nations' first bilateral military talks in nearly two years. Negotiations centered on preventing naval clashes in the Yellow Sea, establishing a joint fishing area, and improving security for cross-border transportation.
- North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons remains one of the South Korean government's major concerns. Since 2003, South Korea, North Korea, the United States, Japan, China, and Russia have held joint talks on the issue. In the September 2005 round of talks, North Korea agreed to eliminate its nuclear weapons program in exchange for economic aid and security guarantees. However, the agreement broke down when North Korea said it would not dismantle its weapons program until it received a light-water nuclear reactor. The United States has demanded an end to the weapons program first.

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