

REPUBLIC OF KOREA (대한민국)



QUICK FACTS

Population: 49 million

Area: Southern half of Korean peninsula (38,375 sq mi); surrounded by the Yellow Sea, East Sea, Korean Strait, and East China Sea

Capital: Seoul (11 million)

Language: Korean

EDUCATION

The education system in Korea is highly competitive and considered crucial for success. About 98% of students finish secondary education. The literacy rate for age 15 and over is 97.9%. Middle School grading is on a letter point system similar to American schools. In High School, students are ranked from 1-9 based on their standing amongst their class that semester. Korean parents spend a significant investment in after-school classes and private education with the average child spending 13 hours a day studying. Though placing 2nd in reading, 4th in math, and 6th in science, according to PISA, South Korea ranks 24th out of 30 developed nations in "study effectiveness," prompting intuitional reforms reducing emphasis on rote teaching and test taking.



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Children in traditional Korean clothing

The name Korea derives from the Goryeo period (918-1392) and refers to the Korean dynasty first visited by Persian merchants. Originally called Goryeo the name was later changed to Goguryeo (37 BC-668 AD) to differentiate between dynasties. South Koreans refer to their country as Hanguk, which means "People of the Han Peninsula." While largely mountainous, southern Korea traditionally produced rice and other agricultural products. However now it is largely known for its technological achievements, including conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai, POSCO, and LG.

RELIGION

According to the 2005 national census, 25 million people (53%) profess religious affiliation with 22.8% following Buddhism, and 29.2% practicing Christianity (18.3% Protestant, 10.9% Catholic). About 1.7% of the population follow indigenous shamanistic practices or "new religions" such as Cheondoism and the Unification Church. First introduced in 372 AD, Buddhism thrived through periods of state sponsorship and oppression. Catholicism arrived in the late 18th century but was seen as suspicious and a gateway for imperialism. Many were martyred during the Catholic Persecution of 1801. In 1871, the government reversed its stance and allowed open religious practice as well as missionaries—both Catholic and Protestant. Christian membership, especially Protestant, rose slowly at first and then rapidly starting in the 1960s. Many prominent Korean nationalist and social activist leaders claim religious affiliation.

ETHNICITY

Though one the most ethnically homogenous nations in the world, the second half of the 20th century attracted an increasing number of migrant workers. The highest percentages come from China, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. In 2005, 14% of marriages were to foreigners due to urban migration that increased foreign contact and decreased birth rates, which also led many farmers to seek foreign brides.

FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS

Traditionally, Korean families consist of a nucleus family and extended family with a structured hierarchical relationship based on Confucianism. The eldest son and his wife are expected to live with and take care of the son's parents and ancestral graves. Koreans remove their shoes when entering homes and give gifts, like fruit, when first visiting. Instead of items as was past custom, money is now given at weddings, funerals, and birthday celebrations. Major holidays include: New Years Day (1st day of lunar calendar); Children's Day (May 5); Buddha's Birthday (8th day of 4th month of lunar calendar); Memorial Day (June 6); Liberation Day (Aug 15); Chuseok (15th day of the 8th month of lunar calendar); National Foundation Day (Oct 3); Christmas Day (Dec 25).



THE HENRY M. JACKSON
SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON



CONTEMPORARY SOUTH KOREA

In the 20th Century, Korea was annexed by Japan and held under colonial rule from 1910 to 1945. Under Japanese occupation, Korean infrastructure was modernized and an attempt was made to assimilate Korea into their empire. Some benefitted from the occupation but the majority suffered under censorship, land tenancy, and second-class citizenship. Education was conducted in Japanese, and 80% of Koreans were forced to adapt their surname to a Japanese style. During WWII, Japan conscripted over 5.4 million Koreans as laborers, soldiers, and sexual slaves (“comfort women”).

Korea was immediately divided at the 38th parallel following liberation. Caught between Cold War rivalries and after a failure to hold a unified election in 1948, the South established the Republic of Korea (ROK) under Syngman Rhee while Kim Il-Sung formed the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North. Civil war broke out on June 25, 1950 with the North invading the South. The UN interceded and sent 341,000 troops, primarily from the US, to assist the ROK; over 1.2 million died on all sides during the conflict, primarily from starvation. The fighting concluded with an armistice on July 27, 1953. The two nations remain technically at war, separated by a heavily fortified area. The war destroyed much of the country’s industrial infrastructure and left it dependent on US aid. Starting in the 1960s, a series of successful industrial recovery plans were initiated to rebuild the economy though at a cost of labor personal freedoms. For forty years, South Korea suffered under dictatorships and harsh security laws until achieving democracy through a student-led popular movement in the mid-1980s. Now South Korea boasts one of the most vibrant democracies and economies in the world. Korean pop and dramas are followed by millions world-wide.



Seoul at Night

KOREANS IN THE USA

The first Korean-Americans arrived in the early 1900s as political exiles or laborers. This would practically halt due to Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910 and US Immigration Act of 1924. After the Korean War in 1953 and passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, many students, professionals, war brides, and adoptees started to immigrate. There are roughly 1.7 million Korean descendants in the US today.



Originally designed and adopted in 1883, the colors of the Korean flag symbolize the three parts of the nation: land (white), people (red and blue), and government (black).



Anapji Pond in Gyeongju

NAMES

Surnames generally consist of one syllable followed by a two syllable given name. Traditionally, given names are made of a generational name syllable shared by all members of an extended family followed by an individual name, though this practice is declining. Women retain their family names when marrying and children inherit their father’s names. Over half of the Korean ethnic population have the surnames of Kim, Lee, and Park. Only about 250 Korean family names are currently in usage with most of these names further divided into clans of origin.

FAMOUS SOUTH KOREANS

A few famous Koreans include: Lee Byung-hun, Kim Yu-Na, Psy (“Gangnam Style”), and Moon Sun Myung (founder of Unification Church). Some famous Americans of Korean heritage include: Sandra Oh, John Cho, Linda Sue Park, and Hines Ward.

KOREAN WORDS

Hello.....Annyeonghaseyo
Hi/Bye (to friends)..... Annyeong
Good morning Joh-eun achim
Yes Ye, Ne
No Aniyoo
Thank you Kamsahamnida
How are you? Eotteohke jinaeseoyo?
I do not understand ...Jal moreugesseoyo
Do you understand? ...Arasseoyo?
What is your name?.....Ireumi moaseyo?
My name isJe ireumeun...
Where are you from? ..Eodiseo osyeosseoyo?

USEFUL LINKS

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