



# SOUTH KOREA

A COUNTRY PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

## GEOGRAPHY

The Republic of Korea, with 38,000 square miles of land, is slightly larger than Indiana. Situated on the southern half of the Korean peninsula in East Asia, the country is bounded by water on three sides—the Yellow Sea to the west, the East China Sea to the south, and the Sea of Japan to the east.

To the north, South Korea shares a border with rival North Korea. The country lies about 100 miles west of Japan, and south and east of China.

The Korean peninsula is mainly mountainous, especially in the east. Plains can be found to the south and west.

Three thousand islands and hundreds of inlets dot the country's south and west coasts. A little more than 20 percent of

South Korea is arable, while two-thirds of the country is forested.

The Han River, which flows through the capital of Seoul, is the most important of the country's many rivers. Mount Halla, on the southern island of Cheju, is the tallest point at 6,398 feet.

The climate is temperate and humid. Korea has four distinct seasons, with summers hot and rainy, and winters dry and cold. It receives half its rainfall during the month-long monsoon in midsummer.

## PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

More than 99 percent of South Korea's over 49 million people are of Korean ancestry. Some 20,000 Chinese constitute the largest minority group.

South Korea has one of the world's largest population densities, although the growth rate has been slowed to around .66 percent.

Korean, the country's official language, is used by virtually all South Koreans. English is also taught in South Korean schools.

**Although there are more than 200 family names in Korea, more than half the population answers to Kim, Park, or Lee.**

The introduction of the Korean alphabet in the fifteenth century was significant for two reasons: First, it is easy to learn. And second, it replaced the usage of Chinese phonetic characters, helping to reinforce Korea's distinctness from its northern neighbor.

## MAJOR CITY CENTERS

One in every four South Koreans live in the capital of Seoul, one of the world's largest cities with 20 million people. Having had many of its buildings destroyed during the Korean War, Seoul has been rebuilt as a modern city.

Other major cities include Pusan (3.6 million) on the southeast coast, Taegu (2.5 million) in the southeast, Incheon (2.6 million) on the northwest coast, Kwangju (1.4 million) in the southwest, and Taejon (1.4 million) in the west-central section of the country.

Over forty years ago, more than half the population lived in rural settings. Now seven out of ten citizens reside in urban areas, causing housing shortages in many areas.

## POLITICAL HISTORY

The Korean peninsula had been united under a single government since A.D. 688 until the end of World War II. The Shilla Kingdom reigned from 688 until the tenth century, when the Koryo Kingdom gained control. Koryo, where the word “Korea” came from, gave way to the Chinese Kingdom in the late fourteenth century.

These three kingdoms managed to fend off frequent foreign invasions and maintain their political independence as well as the area’s cultural and ethnic identity—until this century. Japan annexed Korea in 1910 and instituted colonial rule until the end of World War II.

Korea was liberated from Japanese rule after Japan’s surrender following the war. The influence of the U.S. in the south and the occupation of the Soviet Union in the north, however, prevented Korea from establishing an independent government. The country was eventually split along the 38th parallel, and the government of the Republic of Korea was inaugurated in the South on August 15, 1948.

On June 25, 1950, North Korea launched a full-scale invasion of the South. The U.S. and

other United Nations members helped defend South Korea. The war lasted three years before a cease-fire was signed in July 1953.

The war devastated the country and left millions homeless. The psychological scars caused by the separation of the Korean peninsula and the subsequent war still linger on both sides. South Korea’s hub, Seoul, lies only 25 miles from the tension-filled demilitarized zone.

Both Koreans seek unification, each on their own terms. Only recently, however, have the two governments even engaged in dialogue. Both countries maintain robust armed forces; South Korea’s availability of military manpower is 14-million strong.

Syngam Rhee served as South Korea’s first president from its inception to 1960. Now the president, who acts as the executive head of the government, is elected for one five-year term.

Legislative power is vested in the 200-plus-member National Assembly, the majority of which is elected by popular vote. All other officials are appointed by the central government. Perhaps the most important two weeks in the country’s recent history occurred in the early fall of 1988, when

Seoul hosted the twenty-fourth Olympic Games. More than 13,000 athletes and officials along with more than three million spectators gathered, making it the largest Olympic Games in history.

The event allowed the rest of the world glimpses of the country’s rapid development and modernization. This was especially significant in light of South Korea’s self-imposed isolation from the West beginning in the nineteenth century, for many years earning it the nickname of the “Hermit Kingdom.”

The U.S. has been a close ally of South Korea since Korea was divided. In recent years, some anti-U.S. sentiment has developed on the part of those who want U.S. military presence in the area to end.

## ECONOMY

South Korea’s economic growth in the last 40 years has been consistent and spectacular. During that period, the country’s gross national product increased by a factor of 100. One of the poorest agrarian societies a few decades ago, South Korea now has a standard of living rivaling that of Taiwan and Japan.

The economic growth is due largely to the country’s export-oriented strategy during that time. With limited resources and a small domestic market, South Korea has made shrewd use of its educated and industrious work force. Important exports include electronics, steel, automobiles, ships, textiles and clothing, and footwear. The U.S. is South Korea’s largest trading partner.

After a burst in agricultural production in the 1960s and 1970s, output has leveled off somewhat. Agriculture, though, still accounts for 11 percent of South Korea’s gross national product; industry accounts for 41.6 percent and services account for 54 percent.

The country has attained self-sufficiency in the production of rice, its staple food. Other important crops include barley, vegetables, and wheat. South Korea also has become one of the world’s leading fishing centers in the last couple of decades.

South Korea’s limited natural resources include coal, tungsten, and graphite, as well as hydropower from its abundant rivers.

## EDUCATION

Education, the engine

behind the country's astounding economic growth, is highly esteemed in South Korea. Parents push their children to succeed academically. In addition, the government finances more than 75 percent of the country's educational expenses.

Schooling is compulsory for six years of elementary school, with middle school attendance also required in some areas. More than 90 percent of South Korean teenagers attend high school.

Competition for college admission is intense. High school students are only allowed to apply to one university each year. If their grades on the entrance exam are too low, they must wait until the following year to reapply.

South Korea has more than 100 colleges and universities, with an excess of one million people enrolled in institutions of higher learning. Demonstrations by college students protesting social injustices—some of which have turned violent in recent years—are common.

More than 20,000 South Korean students, two-thirds of whom are graduate students, attended colleges and universities in the U.S. in the 2002/2003 academic year.

## CULTURE

South Korea's literacy rate is over 98 percent. South Koreans possess a fierce nationalistic pride. The people are friendly yet aggressive and highly competitive.

Confucian decorum colors South Korean culture. At home, order is maintained by showing respect to authority—children obeying parents, wives their husbands, and servants their masters.

Traditionally, several generations of families lived together, although that trend is disappearing. Newly married couples tend to live on their own, and they are having smaller families. As late as the 1960s, South Korea had an annual growth rate of around three percent.

Family loyalty, however, is still a common and cherished trait. Faithfulness to friends and spouse, and to a lesser degree, respect for teachers and loyalty to the ruler and one's employer, are also characteristic of South Korean society.

Status plays a large role in social interactions. This is reflected even in the language, which contains different verb endings depending on if one is speaking to another of higher or

lower status. Males are generally accorded preferential treatment.

Participatory sports are a part of everyday life in South Korea, and spectator sports are drawing larger followings. Soccer, baseball, basketball, volleyball, table tennis, and jogging are all popular.

Some traditional Korean sports have also retained their favor. Foremost among these is *taekwondo*. *Ssirum*, a native form of wrestling, is another favorite. Picnics, hikes, and scenic trips are popular weekend activities.

## HOLIDAYS

The following are some of the national holidays in South Korea:

- New Year's Day—Families gather the first two days of January to exchange gifts, honor ancestors, and feast.
- Independence Movement Day—Observance of the March 1, 1919, Independence Movement against Japanese rule.
- Children's Day—May 5.
- Buddha's Birthday—Celebrated in May.
- Constitution Day—July 17 commemoration of the adoption of the constitution in

1948.

- Liberation Day—August 15 remembrance of Korea's liberation from Japanese rule in 1945.
- Ch'usok—Harvest Festival Day in September.
- National Foundation Day—October 3 marks the traditional founding of Korea by the mythical Tangun in 2333 B.C.
- Christmas Day—Celebrated as in the West.

## RELIGION

Buddhism has maintained a strong following in Korea since its fourth century introduction. For many years, Buddhists constituted the largest religious segment in Korea, although recently Buddhism may have been eclipsed by Christianity in that regard. Still, 47 percent are Buddhist.

Another traditional Korean religion, Shamanism, also maintains a sizeable following, primarily in rural areas. Shamanism involves the worship of thousands of spirits believed to dwell in objects of nature. Many of its beliefs and practices have been assimilated into the country's other religions.

Similarly, Confucian philosophy underlies

much of Korea's society and is still very much in evidence, although its actual adherents are limited in number. Much of this influence stems from the fact that the peninsula was ruled by a Confucian dynasty from the late 1300s until 1910.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

## CHRISTIANITY

The Christian church in South Korea has undergone tremendous growth in the last century, and the number of believers continues to swell. The first Protestant church in Korea was planted in 1884; now South Korea has roughly 44,000 churches and 18 denominations. Christians account for about 49 percent of the population. Most South Koreans have been exposed to the Gospel.

Catholic missionaries first reached Korea in the eighteenth century, followed the next century by Protestants, who brought with them modern education, agriculture, and medicine.

Two million Catholics are among South Korea's Christian population. During a 1984 visit to South Korea, Pope John Paul II can-

onized 93 Korean and 10 French missionary martyrs. The canonization service—the first ever held outside of Rome—gave the country the fourth highest number of Catholic saints in the world.

South Korea has what is said to be the world's largest church—Paul Yonggi Cho's Yoido Full Gospel Church—with roughly 780,000 members. In addition, Seoul is home to 10 of the world's 20 largest churches.

Pastors are respected in South Korea. The country's theological institutions include some of the largest seminaries in the world.

Christianity has gained acceptance particularly among the country's youth and also with a number of government officials. The South Korean government has been favorable toward Christianity, viewing it as an ally in fending off the threat of communism.

In decades past, however, Korean Christians have undergone persecution and martyrdom for their faith—at different times by the Communists, the Japanese, and the Chinese.

The church in South Korea is not without problems, however.

Included among them is the fact that the scores of new believers have been only partially disciplined. Formality, legalism, and authoritarian leadership are also evident in many churches. The body of Christ in South Korea also suffers from a lack of unity and divisions within major denominations.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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