# KOREA People and History in Harmony

**Introduction**

   In the past two decades, Korea has been one of the fastest developing nations in the world - both in economic and social terms. Rapid industrial and economic growth has seen the Republic nearly reach developed nation status in a remarkably short time. The Korean people also find themselves in the midst of a new era of democratic development following the birth of the civilian Administration of President Kim Young Sam on February 25, 1993. This wiped out the negative legacy of decades of military-backed authoritarian rule. The country has since been implementing bold political and economic reforms to eradicate corruption and revitalize and restructure the economy with the goal of building a New Korea - a mature and vibrant industrial democracy.

   This rapid economic and social development has brought Korea increased international exposure and recognition, as the Republic begins to expand its role on the international stage. Testifying to this was the successful hosting of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the largest held in history up to that time. This was following by the 1993 hosting of an international exposition, the Taejon Expo ‘93.  Both the Seoul Olympics and the Taejon Expo played an important role in deepening ties between Korea and countries all over the world and gave an impetus to the Korean economy.

   This era of stability and expanding international ties represents the most exciting period in the country’s history - and yet, in retrospect, Korea has, in its 5,000-year history, quite an enviable record for governments of longevity and stability. The country’s last dynasty, the Yi Dynasty of the Choson Kingdom, lasted 500 years.

   The Koreans of today, while enormously proud of their country’s past, look at Korea’s role and reputation  from a more recent historical perspective; but, in order to understand today’s Korea - its land, people, culture, history, and recent economic and political transitions - it is necessary to look at both the past and the present. “Korea In Focus” aims to give you a brief overview to help in your general awareness of Korea today. More detailed information can be obtained from individual organizations or government offices.

**Land**

   The Korean Peninsula, located in Northeast Asia, is bordered on the north by China and Russia and juts towards Japan to the southeast. Since 1948, the 221,487  square kilometers which make up the entire Peninsula have been divided, roughly along the 38th parallel, into the Republic of Korea in the south and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the north. The Republic of Korea covers 99,221 square kilometers, a land area a little more than twice the size of Switzerland.

   Seoul is the capital of the country which is made up of nine provinces; other major cities include Pusan, Taegu, Inch’on, Kwangju, and Taejon.

   The landscape is spectacular in its variations and about 70 percent of it is mountaneous. The oceans around the Peninsula are a major source of livelihood and recreation for Koreans. The shoreline is dotted by more than 3,000 islands.

   The Peninsula’s longest river is the Amnokkang (790 km) in the North. One of the South’s major waterways is the Han-gang River, which flows through Seoul to the West Sea (Yellow Sea).

**History**

   A look back at the 5,000 years of Korean history reveals triumphs and tragedies, successes and struggles which have been instrumental in shaping the Korea and Koreans of today. One remarkable fact that emerges from such a historical  examination is that Korea has largely been ruled by long-term, stable governments. Korea’s kindoms and  dynasties generally lasted about 500 years or more.

   Although Korea’s traceable history began considerably earlier that the seventh century, it was the Shilla Unification in 668 that Korea, as a historical entity with a cohesive culture and society, came to occuðy most of the Peninsula as it exists today.

   It was almost a decade after the end of the war before the Republic of Korea had recovered sufficiently to establish stability and start the momentum for its now remarkable recovery and development. The three decades since then have been a time of spectacular progress which has seen the creation of a modern, industrialized nation.

**People**

   Korea is homogeneous society, although there have been historic and prehistoric migrations of Chinese, Mongols and Japanese. Koreans are very conscious of the ethnic differences and cultural distinctions which give them their unique identity.

   The population of the Republic of Korea was estimated at 44.1 million in 1993. Its population density is among the world’s highest and Seoul, the capital, has more than 10 million inhabitants. The annual population growth in the Republic has dropped from an average of 2.7 percent in the 1960-66 period to only 0.90 percent in 1993.  The slowdown is also partly the result of the increasing number of young working women.

   The country’s rapid industrialization is responsible for today’s concentration of population in urban centers.  The proportion of Koreans living in cities has jumped from only 28 percent in 1960 to 74.4 percent as of 1990 - very similar to the 73 to 76 percent levels in the United States, Japan and France.

**Language**

The Korean language is spoken  by some 60 million people living on the Peninsula and its outlying islands as well as some 1.5 million Koreans living in other parts of the world.

   Korean belongs to the Ural-Altaic language group, which is found in an narrow band from Korea and Japan across Mongolia and central Asia to Turkey. Korean is a non-tonal language, with agglutinative and polysynthetic elements.

**Religion**

Religion in today’s Korea covers a broad spectrum of faiths and beliefs. Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam and numerous other indigenous religions exist in Korea. Although none of them dominates, they all influence contemporary culture.

**Education**

   Education has been at the heart of Korea’s growth by training and supplying the manpower needed for rapid industrial and economic expansion.

   A multi-tiered educational system is currently in use, encompassing elementary school (six years), middle school (three years), high school (three years), and college (four years), as well as various graduate and professional programs.

   The government has eased regulations on overseas study. This new policy also encourages those in the teaching profession to take advantage of opportunities for training abroad.

**Transportation**

The tremendous pace of domestic economic growth in the past two decades has been reflected in the expansion of transportation facilities and the increases in Korea’s annual passenger and cargo volumes. The annual volume of passenger transportation rose from 1.6 billion persons in 1996 to 14.24 billion in 1993.

   Seoul has a well-developed mass transit system of subways, buses, and taxis. Airport shuttles or city buses are conveniently available and operate throughout the city. The subway system is the eighth longest in the world, carrying 1,388 million people in 1993. Its four lines reach most major locations in the city.

   Korea has three international airports in Seoul (Kimpo), Pusan (Kimhae) and Cheju (Cheju), all of which are equipped with modern air traffic control facilities and support systems. Korean Air’s worldwide network serves 43 cities in 24 nations, including recently inaugurated flights to Rome. The newly launched Asiana Airlines recently started international flights with regular service to fourteen cities in Japan, the U.S., Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei and Bangkok.

   All expressway system also connects Seoul with provincial cities and towns, putting any place in mainland South Korea within a one-day round trip of the capital. Express buses transport passengers to and from all principal cities and resorts in the country.

   The railway also serve the entire country through an efficient and extensive network. The super-express train, Saemaul, runs 444.5 kilometers from Seoul to Pusan in four hours and 10 minutes. There are also ordinary express and local trains.

   Ocean liners, cruise ships, and passenger-carrying freighters visit Korean ports. A ferry service links Pusan with Chejudo Island and the Japanese ports of Shimonoseki, Kobe and Hakada. Another ferry service recently started between Inch’on and Tianjin China.

**Telecommunications**

Telephone services have rapidly expanded  during the last decade, particularly during the last 5 Years (1988-”92). During these years, with the investment of US$2.64 billion in communications annually, 1.76 million new telephone circuits were installed each year, increasing the total number of telephone lines to 10.14 million as of 1993. Virtually every home in the country now has its own telephone and all the telephone circuits are connected by automatic switching systems.

   Also, through the launch of KOREASAT scheduled in 1995, Korea will be able to provide satellite communication services by using its own satellite from October 1995.