

LESSON 2

Historical Overview

For several thousand years, the Korean peninsula has been home to an important civilization. The peninsula lies in a strategic geographic location in northeastern Asia. Korea stands at a world crossroads. It has both influenced and been influenced by China, Russia and Japan.

LINKAGE WITH CURRICULUM

- *East Asian Studies
- *World History

MATERIALS

- *Handouts
- *Web Sites

Purpose of Lesson and Overview

Through this lesson, students will be able to:

- discuss the major periods and events of Korean history in the context of world history;
- discuss the ways in which Korea has influenced its neighbors and has been influenced by them over time.

Content Focus

The Korean peninsula's strategic location has influenced its long history. Political and military events in neighboring lands had profound impact on Korea. At the same time, Korea was a cultural bridge by which it shared cultural and technological advances with its neighbors.

During the prehistoric period, migrating people used the Korean peninsula as a land bridge between the Asian mainland and Japan. Early on Korea was populated by nomadic people who hunted and gathered food. Around 54 B.C., three kingdoms emerged — Koguryo, Paekche and Silla. Buddhism reached Korea during this Three Kingdom period and was eventually carried from Korea to Japan. The stunning Buddhist Sokkuram Grotto, a UNESCO World Heritage Treasure, was built near the Silla capital in 751 A.D. Silla was famous for its land and sea trade. For a time, Silla traders dominated maritime routes between China and Japan.

When the Sung Dynasty gained power in China, Silla was replaced by the Koryo Kingdom (918-1392). Celadon porcelains were developed. The subtle green-blue glaze, simple designs and elegant lines of Korean celadon have drawn the admiration of past and present collectors. Tripitaka Koreana, a UNESCO World Heritage Treasure and the world's oldest remaining collection of wood blocks, was created during the Koryo Kingdom.

General Yi Song-gye established the Korea's last kingdom, Choson (1392-1910), at about the time the Ming Dynasty ruled China. Choson's capital was Seoul and its first building was the royal Confucian ancestral shrine of Chongmyo. This complex includes the world's largest wooden building and is included on UNESCO's World Heritage List. In 1443, Hangul, Korea's alphabet, was invented. It is still used and respected for its rationality and simplicity. Korea used metallic movable type in printing books as early as 1234, at least 200 years before Johannes Gutenberg printed the Bible with metallic movable type in Germany.

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In the 1800's, Korea resisted western pressure to open its ports to trade and became known as the Hermit kingdom. In the late 19th century, however, it became trapped in Japan's military expansion. After the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) and Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), Japan annexed Korea. Japanese occupation lasted from 1910 to 1945. It imposed harsh colonial rule on Korea. Korea suffered severe economic devastation as well as tragic cultural loss. On March 1, 1919, Korean nationalists declared independence, but Japanese forces suppressed the independence movement.

Korea was liberated from Japanese rule on August 15, 1945, when Japan surrendered at the end of World War II. But as the Cold War began, tension rose between the U.S. and Soviet Union over Korea. The U.S. and Soviet Union divided the Korean peninsula into two zones along the 38th parallel. Soviet forces supported communist North Korea, while the U.S. backed non-communist South Korea. In 1950, North Koreans invaded the South, touching off the Korean War (1950-53). North Korea, aided by the Soviet Union and China, fought South Korea, which was helped by U.S. and United Nations troops. An armistice was signed on July 27, 1953 but the war was never officially ended. Today the DMZ, a heavily fortified demilitarized zone separates the two Koreas. The reunification of the two Koreas remains the ultimate goal of Koreans.

During the 1960's, South Korean President Park Chung Hee launched five-year economic plans to rebuild the war-ravaged economy. In time, South Korea then transformed itself from an agricultural economy into an industrial giant. The Republic of Korea (ROK), the official name of South Korea, hosted the Summer Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988. In 1992, the ROK celebrated the successful return to a civilian democracy when it conducted free elections.

In 1997, Korea was plunged into economic crisis as a result of a spreading Asian economic downturn. The government, led by Kim Dae-jung, has taken steps to make reforms and restore prosperity. Despite these changes many Koreans have suffered hardships such as massive lay-offs and bank failures. As the economy slowly improves, Koreans face the future with renewed hope and a firm belief in their legacy of historic achievements.

World Wide Web

- <http://www.koreaembassyusa.org/>
- <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~korea/index.html>
- <http://www.koreanwar.org/>
- <http://www.korea.net/>
- <http://www.ocp.go.kr/english/indexe6.html>

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The Lesson: Historical Overview

OPENING

1. Students can begin the lesson by reviewing major periods of Chinese history and creating a timeline of as many dates and events in that civilization.
2. Students will learn about the major time periods of Korean history and will see how Korea, China and Japan have interacted.

INVESTIGATIONS

3. Identify the resources available to students for this investigation. These could include your textbook, attached handouts, library resources and the Internet. Divide students into study groups and have each group select one task:
 - a) Have groups select one or more major time periods in Korean history or one of the underlined topics in the Content Focus and become experts on that period. Develop a detailed timeline of the period, describe the characteristics of the period and present this information to the class.
 - b) Have one group review Handout I (Historical Overview) and research and discuss the impact of foreign (in particular Japanese and Chinese) influences on Korean.
 - c) Take the entire timeline and present an historical overview with particular emphasis on the transition between major time periods.

ASSESSMENT

4. After each group has conducted its investigations, students should be organized to make content presentations to one another.
5. Each group can quiz another group on major topics and events underlined in the handout.
6. Each student should be able to use a timeline to identify and describe the major time periods in Korean history.

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Handout I Historical Overview

Prehistoric Period

Location has been a central factor in Korea's long history. Korea is a peninsula strategically situated on the northeastern coast of Asia. It lies south of Russia, east of China and northwest of Japan. Events in these neighboring lands had profound effects on Korea and Korea played an active role as a cultural bridge, sharing important cultural and technological advances with its neighbors.

During the prehistoric period, migrating people used on the Korean peninsula as a land bridge between the Asian mainland and Japan. Early on, Korea was populated by semi-nomadic people who hunted and gathered for food. Their dwelling sites were found near rivers along the coast.

By about 2,000 B.C., farming communities began to emerge as people adopted technological advances like stone sickles. Early Chinese records reveal that numerous tribal states existed across Manchuria and in the Korean peninsula. In a Korean history, Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms (ca. 1280 A.D.), the monk Iryon wrote that a ruler named *Tangun* organized the first Korean state, Ancient Choson, in 2,333 B.C.

As Greek and Roman civilizations were emerging in the Mediterranean, the Chinese were consolidated power across East Asia, China's Great Wall was built to protect its northern boundary, about 215 B.C. During China's Han Dynasty, it sent soldiers and their families to build fortress communities in the Korean peninsula. The local people resisted Chinese rule, but the Chinese communities did introduce advanced technology and elements of Chinese civilization.

Three Kingdoms Period (53 B.C.-668 A.D.)

During the Three Korea Period (53 B.C.-668 A.D.), three kingdoms emerged in Korea: Koguryo, Paekche and Silla. These were military kingdoms that used rigid social structures to control the state. Society was divided into strict classes: the royal family, aristocracy (or nobility) and peasants.

In the north, the Koguryo Kingdom extended into Manchuria. Because it constantly had to fight off the Chinese, Koguryo was a formidable warrior state. Buddhism was brought to Koguryo by a Tibetan monk named Sundo. In time, Buddhism became the state religion. Buddhism created a community that believed in the teachings of Buddha and the promise of enlightenment. Buddhism was also used to reinforce Koguryo's strict social hierarchy.

The Paekche Kingdom was located in central Korea and occupied the most fertile agricultural areas. Paekche was heavily influenced by both Buddhism and Confucianism. Paekche faced frequent military attacks from its neighbor to the Southeast, Silla. As a result, many of its people fled to Japan where they helped spread Chinese and Korean culture.

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The Silla Kingdom, located in the southeast, remained isolated from Buddhist influence for a long time, but it finally accepted Buddhism in 535 A.D. Later, it formed an alliance with China's Tang Dynasty. Together, they destroyed Paekche in 660 and Koguryo in 668. The Silla Kingdom then turned on its former Chinese ally, defeating the Tang. After an eight-year war, Silla triumphed in this Sino-Korean War in 676 and thus ruled the southern two-thirds of the Korean peninsula.

Silla remained a kingdom until 891. During this time, Buddhist art reached great heights, producing the Sokkuram Grotto with its huge stone Buddha and carved reliefs of his guardians. The Silla Kingdom was part of an expanding network of land and sea trade, which extended into the Indian Ocean. Chinese, Japanese and Korean maritime trade routes were dominated for a time by Silla's traders. They linked up to Arab and Indian merchants with vast commercial and shipping intersects in the Indian Ocean.

In time, the Silla Kingdom declined and was replaced by the Koryo Kingdom (918-1392). Early Koryo rulers maintained diplomatic, commercial and cultural relations with China's Sung Dynasty. They adopted some Chinese government institutions such as the civil service examination system. Koryo rulers favored Confucian ideals for governing, but the people remained loyal to Buddhism.

Preserving Korean Culture

Koreans produced beautiful artwork over the centuries. These include gold crowns during the Silla Kingdom, bronze bells and other ornaments.

In the 1200's, the Koryo Kingdom was a target of the Mongol invaders. These nomadic herding people from Central Asia conquered a vast empire stretching from north China and Russia. During these invasions, Koreans created the Tripitaka Koreana. These 81,258 wood blocks contain the entire Buddhist canon or scriptures. In 1232, Mongol forces burned the wood blocks. In a great effort of faith and craftsmanship, Koreans recarved again the Buddhist scriptures. Today the Tripitaka is the world's oldest surviving collection of wood blocks and a UNESCO World Heritage Treasure.

By 1270, the Mongols dominated Koryo, requiring Koryo kings to marry Mongol princesses. Their offspring half-Korean, half-Mongol, ruled Koryo until the Mongols were driven from Korea in the 1350's. Mongol ruler, Kublai Khan saw Korea as a bridge to Japan and forced Koreans to participate in his disastrous invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281.

Most celebrated of all Korean artistic creations are the celadon porcelains developed during the Koryo Kingdom. The subtle green-blue glaze, simple designs and elegant lines of celadon have drawn the admiration of collectors. The special techniques used by Korean potters to make their celadon were lost during the invasion. In the late 1500's, Japanese invaders kidnapped Korean potters and took them to Japan. The Japanese forced the potters to produce fine celadon, saving the Japanese from importing expensive ceramics from China.

The Choson Kingdom

As the Koryo Kingdom influence declined, Koreans leaders competed for power. Japanese pirates, known as waegu, raided the coasts of Korea. General Yi Song-gye rose to prominence due to his successes against the waegu. He gained enough support to establish a new Korean kingdom, Choson (1392-1910). About the same time, a brilliant new dynasty, the Ming, gained power in China.

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In Korea, Yi Song-gye moved his capital to Seoul, where he built a royal ancestral shrine called Chongmyo. This huge complex contains the world's largest wooden building and is included in UNESCO's World Heritage List. The Choson Kingdom adopted Confucianism as its official doctrine, replacing Buddhism as the state religion.

About this time, both China's Ming rulers and Korea's Choson rulers began to close their borders to foreigners and to trade. Korea's sealed borders earned it the name of The Hermit Kingdom and few outsiders knew much about Korean life and culture.

Under the Choson Kingdom, Korea became a model Confucian state. During the reign of King Sejong the Great, a significant breakthrough in communication occurred — the invention of Hangul in 1443. Hangul is a phonetic Korean script based on an alphabet. The Korean alphabet has earned great respect internationally for its rational simplicity. An emphasis on education and learning led to a growth of scholarly and popular literature. Korea also made advances in printing. The Chinese had invented non-metallic movable type in the eleventh century. Koreans improved on this invention, creating metallic movable type in print books as early as 1234. This invention occurred 200 years before Johannes Gutenberg printed the Bible with metallic movable type in Germany.

Korea Faces Foreign Pressure

In the late 16th century, 200 years of peace ended with Japanese invasions. Korea's Choson and China's Ming rulers eventually defeated the Japanese, but neither regained its former prosperity. In 1644, Manchurians overthrew the Ming Dynasty and established a new dynasty, the Qing. The Qing demanded and received Korean allegiance as a tributary state.

Korea's isolation grew stricter and social structure became more stratified. In 1653, 36 Dutch sailors were shipwrecked off the coast of Korea and were captured. Hendrik Hamel, one of these sailors, escaped from captivity in Korea and wrote an eye-opening account about Korea for western readers called Description of the Kingdom of Corea.

During the next 200 years, French, British, Russian and American ships tried to open the Hermit Kingdom to trade but without success. *The General Sherman*, an American merchant schooner, was burned when it sailed up the Taedong River in Korea. In 1876, Japan forced Korea to sign the Kanhwa Treaty, giving it trading rights. Soon other imperialist powers also imposed treaties on Korea.

By the late 1800's, Japan was expanding its military power in Asia. After the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5), Japan gained a free hand to expand into the Korean peninsula. In 1910, it ended the Choson Kingdom, annexed Korea and began a harsh 35-year rule over the peninsula.

Japanese colonial rule lasted from 1910 to 1945. Japan expanded railroad transportation so that it could support Japanese military forces fighting China and Russia. Korean-owned companies were forced to send products like rice to Japan, causing severe hardships to Koreans. Koreans had to work dangerous jobs under conditions of forced labor. Culturally, Koreans suffered as well. The Korean language was forbidden in schools and Koreans had to adopt Japanese names. Thousands of Korean girls and women were sent to serve as, "comfort women," or sex slaves for Japanese soldiers.

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During the Japanese colonial period, Koreans struggled at home and abroad to regain independence. On March 1, 1919, Korean nationalists declared independence, setting off widespread demonstrations against the Japanese. Koreans refer to these events as the March 1 Movement. Korean exiles in Shanghai created a provisional government in China. Koreans in the U.S. raised money to help the independence movement. Japan responded to nationalist demands with harsh crackdowns, killing many civilians.

Korea Divided

Korea was finally liberated on August 15, 1945, when Japan surrendered at the end of World War II ended. But the Cold War began, tensions rose between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In 1945, U.S. policy planners in Washington, D.C. divided the Korean peninsula along the 38th Parallel into two military occupied zones. U.S. forces would occupy the southern half of the peninsula and Soviet force the northern half. In that way, the U.S. hoped to prevent Soviets from occupying all of Korea. The two occupation zones were supposed to be united later on. Instead, the Cold War deepened the division.

In August 1948, the non communist Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south was born. Its first president was Dr. Syngman Rhee. In September 1948, the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea was proclaimed. Its first leader was Kim Il-sung.

Cold War tensions over Korea erupted into war in 1950 when North Korean forces invaded South Korea. Aided by the Soviet Union and China, North Korean forces pushed deep into South Korea. United Nations and U.S. forces commanded by General Douglas MacArthur helped South Korea drive back the invaders. The Korean War dragged on until 1953 when an armistice was signed. The fighting cost the lives of 3 million Koreans, about 900,000 Chinese communist and 54,000 American soldiers. The Korean people had fought the war primarily to reunify their divided country. However, the war left Korea divided. Two rival regimes in North Korea and South Korea became heavily armed states and Korea remains a divided land today.

Modern Times

Since 1948, North Korea and South Korea have developed along very different lines. Communist North Korea became a socialist state ruled by a totalitarian dictator, Kim Il-sung. In the 1960's and 1970's, it achieved steady economic growth. However, this growth then stagnated due partly to Kim Il-sung's strict policy of *juche*, or self-sufficiency. Under this policy, North Korea rejected foreign assistance, preferring instead to create a generally isolated itself from the world. North Koreans were not allowed to travel abroad and received little or no information about the world except what the government chose to give.

Since the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union in the early 1990's and Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, North Korea has experienced many setbacks. Since the mid-1990's, it has suffered from floods and droughts that have caused one of the worst famines in this century. Because North Korea is a closed society, no one knows how many millions of people have died from starvation and disease. International relief agencies have been allowed to provide some aid, but their access has been limited. South Korea has offered help, but North Korea has been reluctant to accept it. Today, North Korea remains a closed country with an economy on the edge of collapse and struggling to survive.

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South Korea, too, has faced a sometimes rocky path since 1948. In general, it backed the principles of democracy, open diplomacy and free enterprise capitalism. At times, however, it was ruled by military dictators. During the 1960's, under the military dictator Park Chung Hee, South Korea achieved what has been called the miracle on the Han River. The country transformed its war-ravaged agricultural economy into an industrial giant. By the 1980's and 1990's, its automobile and electronics exports were known around the world.

The Republic of Korea successfully hosted the 24th Summer Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988. In 1992, South Korea celebrated a return to civilian democracy when it conducted free elections. Kim Young Sam became the first civilian president in 32 years. Today, the ROK has diplomatic relations with about 150 countries, including Russia and China. With a 90 percent literacy rate, South Koreans enjoy the highest level of education in the world. About 20 percent of South Koreans hold college degrees.

South Korea supports the arts and intellectual pursuits. Its strong commitment to preserving traditional arts and crafts has resulted in renewed interest in *maedup* (knot-making), traditional music and paper crafts. It has worked to preserve historic landmarks, including royal burial mounds, palaces, fortresses, Buddhist temples, academies and traditional villages with artisans and their crafts.

Modern art is also thriving. Corporations support artists with gallery spaces and exhibitions. Women writers have experienced commercial and critical success and they are a significant presence in the modern art scene. Pak Kyong-ri's The Land is considered one of the most important Korean novels in this century. The Land is a historical chronicle about a traditional land-owning family before, during and after the Japanese occupation. It deals with cultural conflict between the values of old Korea and those of the modern world.

South Korea's economy experienced a severe setback in 1997. The spreading Asian financial crisis caused many South Korean banks and businesses to collapse. These economic setbacks are seen as temporary. The government undertook major reforms. Amid the economic turmoil, a new president with an impressive pro-democracy record, Kim Dae-jung, was elected. Appealing for national unity, President Kim brought together representatives of labor, business and government to discuss the economic situation and to plan for the future. His goals are to reestablish South Korea's economic stability and continue dialogue with North Korea.

The reunification of South Korea and North Korea has remained the ultimate goal of all the Korean people since 1945, when the country was divided against its will by foreign powers. To some, the reunification of Germany and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe are encouraging signs for Korean reunification. Talks between the two Koreas, however, have yet to make any big breakthroughs toward reunification.