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Unit I: Learning About World Cultures

Activity 6. Seoul Family

Introduction

The Republic of Korea has a long history of occupation by foreign powers. Despite this occupation, a distinctive Korean culture exists with roots more than 2,000 years old. Hosting the 1988 Summer Olympics helped introduce Korean vitality to people in other parts of the world. However, the complexity of such an ancient culture is impossible to capture in snapshots—either of the Olympics or in this brief presentation. Recently, political corruption and economic difficulties have left the Korean Republic more reliant on aid from the United States, many other nations, and the World Bank.

Objectives

1. To have students discover and record the major features and history of the culture of the Republic of Korea
2. To develop students' ability to identify in another culture examples of customs, traditions, values, and technology

Time to complete

A minimum of three class sessions, with more time required if supplemental activities are undertaken

Materials

- Exercise 16: Map of Korea
- Exercise 17: Seoul Family—Cultural Features
- Exercise 18: History of Korea
- Exercise 19: Letter to Grandparents in Kongju
- Exercise 20: School Report on Korean Traditions

Procedure

1. Use the class map of Korea to identify the following: Korea's neighbors; the 38th parallel, with the demilitarized zone dividing North and South Korea; Seoul; Kongju; and bodies of water surrounding Korea. Ask the students to add this information to their map in Exercise 16. Have them use what they already know to make predictions about Korea's history and economic situation. They should write down their predictions and save them for later use.
2. Read to the students Exercise 17: History of Korea. Compare their predictions with the actual history, focusing on the clues from the map that helped them make their predictions.
3. Distribute to the students Exercise 18: Seoul Family—Cultural Features. Then ask each group to read together Exercise 19: Letter to Grandparents in Kongju. When they have finished, have them write the appropriate information on the Seoul Family activity. Use the same procedure with Exercise 20: School Report.
4. Ask each student to write a one-paragraph statement explaining why he or she would choose to live in either Kongju or Seoul. Have them share these statements with their groups.
5. Assign to each group one of the cultural features not adequately covered in the material on the exercises. Each group should give a brief presentation to the whole class sharing the information they have found. Students should write this information on Exercise 18.
6. Divide the class in half. Have one group work on the activity suggested in (a) and the other half work on the activity suggested in (b) below. When the pairs from each half are through, form teams of four by putting together one pair from (a) and one pair from (b). Have them present their ideas to each other.
 - (a) Compose a list of reasons why the Republic of Korea might have wanted to host the 1988 Summer Olympic Games. Compose a list of reasons that might have been given for not hosting the Summer Olympics.
 - (b) Compose a list of reasons why South Korea might want to unite with North Korea. Compose a list of reasons that South Korea might give for not uniting with North Korea.

Suggestions for Further Study of the Republic of Korea

- Have students find in magazines and books pictures of statues of the Buddha. Ask them to draw a statue themselves and include on their drawing a paragraph explaining who the Buddha was and giving some details about his teaching.
- Read aloud to the class a Korean folktale. (Several books are listed in the bibliography of this section.) Have the students perform a dramatic recreation of one of the tales. *Blindman's Daughter* and *Two Brothers and Their Magic Gourd* would be appropriate. Both are edited by Edward B. Adams. They can be purchased from

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Gift Shop
1050 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20560

- Invite to your classroom people who have visited or lived in the Republic of Korea. Ask each student to write down one question for the visitor. Conduct a class interview with the visitor, and have each student record the visitor's answer to his or her question.
- Ask students to write a short story in which their home country is taken over by a foreign power. Tell them to use the experience of the people in the Republic of Korea as a model for writing their story. If there is time, have them read their stories aloud. If there is not time, display the stories for others to read.
- Many areas of the Korean Republic have Western food chains, like McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, and KFC, with many more chains planning to open soon. There are also many Western clothing stores, including DKNY, Benetton, Levis, and Reebok. Conduct a discussion of the following two questions:
 - (1) What might happen to Korean culture if half of the stores in large cities are not of Korean origin?
 - (2) If young people wear clothes and eat food that is generally recognized as Western, what makes them Korean?

Resource Information About the Republic of Korea

- The Korean peninsula is about 600 miles long and 135 miles wide. The southern 45 percent of the peninsula is the Republic of Korea (South Korea). The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) occupies the rest of the peninsula. About 80 percent of the land is mountains and hills. The country has cold winters. Humid summers include a monsoon season that brings half of the rain that falls

during the year. There are occasional typhoons in late summer and cyclones in late spring. Numerous rivers, most of which flow into the Yellow Sea, provide water for irrigation of the important rice crop.

- The population is homogeneously Korean. The national language is Korean, and the writing system, *Han'gul*, contains ten vowels and fourteen consonants. Words from the Chinese language make up more than one half of the vocabulary. There are about 46 million people living in the Republic of Korea, with Seoul having about 10 million people. About one third of the population is younger than 15 years old. Small family farms employ one third of the population.
- The country is currently operating under the constitution of the Sixth Republic, which began in February 1988 when Roh Tae-Woo was elected president. It provides for a highly centralized presidential system of government. The president serves one five-year term. A prime minister is appointed by the president. There are 299 members of the National Assembly, and they serve four-year terms. At age 20 all citizens can vote. The Supreme Court chief justice is appointed by the president with the approval of the National Assembly. All other justices are appointed by the president.
- Religious beliefs include shamanism (spirits reside in inanimate objects), Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity.
- Six years of primary education is compulsory and free. Almost all children attend primary schools. Three fourths attend three-year middle schools and three-year general or vocational high schools. Getting into the right university is very important, and students work extremely hard all during high school to prepare for the entrance exam. How they do on the exam will determine whether they will be able to go on to a university, and which ones will accept them. There is a national literacy rate of 95 percent.

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World Wide Web Sites

<http://www.koreaherald.co.kr/>

<http://www.korea.com>

Exercise 16

Map of South Korea



Exercise 17

History of Korea

Korea is a 600-mile-long peninsula the size of Utah. Well before 300 B.C., powerful leaders called feudal lords gathered around them people who would farm their land and, when necessary, fight against other feudal lords. For many centuries fighting was a way of life for the settlers of Korea.

Over a period of seven centuries, starting around 57 B.C., small groups of people began to unite into more powerful groups. Three kingdoms emerged, and toward the end of the seventh century A.D., the Silla kingdom cooperated with the Chinese to defeat both the Paekche and the Koguryo kingdoms. Shortly afterward, Silla pushed the Chinese out and unified the Korean peninsula under its rule. What followed was a blending of Korean and Chinese customs. Buddhism became the dominant religion, but Confucianism also was very strong. Many temples were built, art was encouraged, and education became very important. During the next century the city of Kyongju became the fourth largest city in the world. The rule of the Silla continued for the next several centuries; by A.D. 935 the leader Wang Kon grew strong enough to unite the peninsula under a new state, Koryo, and to begin a dynasty that was to last for 450 years.

Continuous conflict with the Chinese weakened the power of the dynasty and led to the Mongol invasion from the north in the middle of the thirteenth century. The Mongols took large annual tributes of gold, silver, horses, and women. Nevertheless, during their occupation, the Koreans gained knowledge of astrology, medicine, cotton cultivation, and artistic skills.

After the Mongols had been driven out, there emerged a major new leader, Yi Song-gye, who resumed relations with China and established Confucianism as the dominant religion. All during its rule, the Yi dynasty had to deal with attempted invasions by Japan and strong pressure from the Manchus in China. In the 1800's, despite some financial progress, Korea experienced major social unrest. Contact with people and ideas from the West was discouraged. Japan and China continued their struggle for Korea. In 1876 Japan and Korea signed a peace treaty.

From 1910 to the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Japanese had possession of Korea. During that time, Korean ideas and language were discouraged. During the Second World War, Korean workers took jobs vacated by Japanese workers, who were required to fight.

(continued)



Exercise 17

History of Korea *(continued)*

When Japan lost the war, North and South Korea were temporarily divided, and plans for a provisional government were agreed to. The United States maintained a strong presence in the south, while the Soviet Union assumed responsibility for guiding the recovery of the north. Few Koreans supported this plan; in addition, the working relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union broke down. The United Nations became involved in trying to reunify the two Koreas. Elections were held in the south, and on August 15, 1948, 73-year-old Syngman Rhee became the first president of the Republic of Korea. The north became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and was governed by Kim Il-song.

Civil war broke out in 1950 when troops from the north invaded the south and pushed the Republic of Korea troops almost to Pusan in the south. United Nations troops, supplied mostly by the United States, came to the aid of the Republic of Korea. Three years later, a truce was signed, and a permanent division was made at the 38th parallel. Both sides were devastated by the war. They have since had separate governments with no contact allowed between peoples.

Kim Il-song remained the leader in the north. Syngman Rhee continued in the south until he resigned in 1960. After an interim, General Park Chung-hee became president of the Republic of Korea in 1961. He served until his assassination in 1979. With a new constitution in 1980, the Fifth Republic began. In August 1980, the National Assembly elected General Chun to a seven-year term as president. World recognition of the economic health of the Republic of Korea came with its selection as host of the 1988 Summer Olympic Games. Just prior to that event a general election was held, and Roh Tae-Woo was elected president, marking the start of the Sixth Republic. He served as president until 1992, when Kim Young-Sam was elected as the first civilian to be president in 30 years. Talks about uniting North and South Korea continued to be held during his presidency. Bribery and bankruptcies also happened during his term in office. New elections were held in December 1997, and Kim Dae Jung was elected. He took charge in February 1998, with massive foreign debt problems.



Buddhist temple in Seoul

Exercise 18

Seoul Family—Cultural Features

Food	Rules and Penalties
Clothing	Type of Government
Housing	Transportation
Language	Education
Religion	Other Special Features

Exercise 19

Letter to Grandparents in Kongju

Seoul, Korea

July

Dear Grandfather and Grandmother,

I am helping Mother get ready for Yeo's first birthday party. I am so excited that you will be able to come. We have already made lots of rice cakes and candies. Next week I will go with Mother to the market to buy the apples, muskmelon, pears, and tangerines. I hope there are some strawberries too, because these are my favorite fruit. Yeo gets excited every time we mention her birthday *Tol*.

Mother was telling me about my first birthday *Tol*. She said you both were here. When it came time to play the game of prophecy, she told me that I touched the book and the thread but finally picked the pencil to keep for my own. Father was so excited because he thought that meant I would be a writer. I wonder what Yeo will pick. It would be good if she chooses the money. I would like to have a sister who is wealthy, so I could have things I like.

You will like the special jacket and skirt Mother has made for her. I hope you will wear your beautiful old *hanbok*, Grandmother. I like the bright colors in the skirt and the long ribbon tie on the jacket. Mother says that she doesn't see very many women wearing *hanbok* in downtown Seoul. Most of the women and men wear the kinds of suits and dresses that you see in large Western cities. I like my clothes to be mostly in the Western style. I particularly like the blue jeans I got last week.

Father took us downtown on the subway the other day. We got to play at the playground halfway up Mt. Namsan. We put Yeo in a swing and pushed her. She laughed and laughed. Then we took a bus to the top of the Seoul Tower. Father pointed out many of the gates from the old city of Seoul. I saw some of the Olympic buildings as well. Father said that he had taken me up here a long time ago, but I don't remember it. I liked looking out and seeing how huge our city is.



Street scene in Seoul

(continued)

Exercise 19

**Letter to Grandparents
in Kongju** *(continued)*

Will the Paekche Cultural Festival in Kongju be held in early October this year? I asked Mother if we can come visit you while that is going on, but she said Whan and I will be in school and can't afford to miss the classes. I remember the last time we were with you for the festival; I thought the street procession honoring the ancient kings would never end. The costumes worn by the court maidens and loyal subjects were decorated with such pretty silk designs. The traditional music and dancing were also interesting. The dancers moved to the music so smoothly they seemed to float.

Have more people been coming to the festival since the tomb of King Muryong and his queen was discovered? It is hard for me to imagine what life was like in A.D. 510. When you took us to the museum to see some of the relics, I remember that Whan was fascinated by all the weapons. He kept making strange noises as he pretended to charge at me with a sword. He surprised me when he said he liked the porcelain lamps, too. My favorite relic was a gold ornament in the shape of a flower.

Sometimes Yeo comes out in the garden with me when I go to gather some vegetables. I have to watch her very carefully because she doesn't know the difference between the weeds and the sesame leaves or spinach leaves or radishes. She has learned not to pull up the mung beans and the soybeans because these now have pods that are easy to see. She will put these in her mouth and eat them raw, though! I much prefer them in the soups that Mother makes with the fermented soybeans. I hope you will bring some of your special cabbage *kimchi* when you come for Yeo's birthday *Töl*. Yours is so much better than what we buy in the store here. It is delicious with rice.



Vegetables in Chongju

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Love,

Sook Min

Exercise 20

School Report on Korean Traditions

by Yoo Whan Ho

This report describes some of the ways in which my grandparents' and their parents' lives were the same. My grandparents' home in Kongju belonged to my grandfather's parents. Very little about the house has been changed. It is located near the edge of the city on land that has a small garden plot. The house is one story, with small windows and two outside doors. An outside wooden porch is used for eating and visiting in the hot summer.

Inside the house are two rooms. The kitchen has a large cooking area where a wood fire supplies the heat for cooking. Many herbs are hung around the kitchen. My grandmother goes into the countryside to collect wild herbs for cooking. She also grows herbs in her garden. The heat from the kitchen fire—and in the winter, from another fire built near the foundation in the kitchen—is used to heat the *ondol* room in the house. The hot smoke flows through ducts under the floor of the *ondol* room and then leaves from a chimney on the other side of the room. The floor of the room stays warm as long as the fires are burning.

The *ondol* room is the main room of the house. It is used for eating and, when the dining table is put away, for sleeping as well. The floor is laid with flagstones that are covered by clay and by a heavy waxed paper that helps conduct heat into the room. Since people sit on the floor to eat and lie on thin mats to sleep, their bodies keep in contact with a warm floor. This kind of heating has been used in Korea for about two thousand years. Many of my grandparents' friends now use coal and hot water to heat the floors, but my grandfather says he would rather do things the traditional way. My grandparents have also kept the old custom of having the toilet in the backyard.

Before we enter their house, we put our shoes on a stepstone outside the door. The inside walls are lined with a specially prepared paper that serves as insulation against cold and heat. It is white, but the screens that stand in several rooms have colorful designs. The house seems as if it is hundreds of years old.



On the way home in Chongju

(continued)



Exercise 20

School Report on Korean Traditions *(continued)*

In the fall my grandparents make *kimchi*. Grandmother cuts, washes, and salts about 60 heads of cabbage, along with many white radishes. These vegetables are mixed with red peppers, garlic, and ginger; pickled; and put in thick pottery jars. The jars are then buried up to their necks in the ground. All the ingredients ferment to make a tasty food that is available all winter. During the summer they make more fancy *kimchi* by adding things like eggplant, turnip, pine nuts, salted shrimp, and oysters.

Grandfather tells me that all during the fall, while people are making their *kimchi*, they ask each other about the progress they are making on their *kimchi*. He says that the time for making *kimchi* in the fall is called *kimjang*.

Another tradition is one my family takes part in. Every lunar New Year's Day we dress in our best clothes, leave our home in Seoul, and go to Kongju to be with my grandparents. My cousins and their parents also come. The most important part of our celebration is when we children honor our grandparents. My grandparents are seated on the floor of the *ondol* room dressed in their best clothes. All of us bow low in front of them, almost touching our heads to the floor. It is a time to show them how much we respect our elders. As a way of showing appreciation for the honor, my grandparents give us some small coins, which we may use to buy toys or candy.

The younger children play games, and then we have our special meal. Grandmother has fixed many different dishes for us: fish, barbecued beef, soups, and, of course, rice.

Sometimes we are able to stay at their home for several days, since New Year's is a national holiday. It is the only time our whole family is together, because my cousins live in the south in Taegu. When Grandfather was young, it was the tradition to live in the same place as your father. This is one tradition that our family has not kept: Father is in Seoul, and his brother is in Taegu.

