

INTRODUCTION

The Korean peninsula is located at the eastern end of Asia, between China, Siberia (now part of the Russian Federation), and the islands of Japan. Because of the complex, shifting, and historic relations between these areas, as well as relations with other places such as the United States in more recent times, the history of Korea has been told in many ways and is still the subject of hot debate both inside and outside the Koreas.

The overall pattern of development in the history of the Korean peninsula is a process that begins with an unknown number of early tribal groups that populate the peninsula in prehistoric times, wandering out of Siberia and areas to the west. Over time, some of these groups form more complex societies that eventually result in early kingdoms that grow up on the peninsula; in some cases extending westwards into what is now Chinese territory. As time and events unfolded, these kingdoms were unified, though the borders and degree of unity have continued to change over time—down to today. Besides the obvious split between North and South Korea, cultural differences (including dialect, food, and local identity) exist between the various regions of the peninsula. Nevertheless, Korean culture is highly homogenous in comparison with China, and even Japan.

Over the last 2,000 years the Korean peninsula has been wracked by eight major invasions and countless smaller wars and incursions. Strategically situated on a partial land bridge in the Yellow Sea interaction sphere, the peninsula has been a natural access route for invasions to and from the Asian mainland. In times of war armies tend to push each other up and down the peninsula, guaranteeing that many areas will be subject to repeated devastation—a dynamic very prominent in the Korean War (1950-53).

Among the many invaders have been ancient Chinese kingdoms, Khitans, Mongols, Japanese, and Manchus. In the 20th century, Korea was colonized by Japan and in the Post-WWII era was caught in the middle of conflicts between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China over the expansion of Communism in the Cold War Era – an era which still lingers in the as yet unresolved division between North and South Korea. In some cases invaders have left their mark, and even ushered in periods of positive cultural exchange, in other cases, only devastation was left in their wake. Despite these challenging circumstances, Koreans have managed to maintain a unique cultural identity that marks them as hardy survivors.

Activity 1: Complete the blank map of East Asia. Map the countries, surrounding seas, and oceans. (Handout A)

Activity 2: Complete the blank map of the Korean Peninsula using an online atlas or the atlases on your textbook. Map the major rivers, mountain ranges, surrounding seas and countries. (HANDOUT B)

Note: You will find the following different spellings throughout the reading and following activities: Choson/Chosun/Joseon; Shilla/Silla

PART 1: PREHISTORY AND EARLY KINGDOMS

Prehistory and Myths

Traditional myths of ancient Korea tell that over 4,000 years ago Hwanung, the King of Heaven, descended near a Tan tree on Mt. Taebak in North Korea. Accompanying Hwanung were 3,000 followers, and he ruled over all of their needs. In a nearby cave lived a tiger and a bear who wished to become human. As part of the test he gave them mugwort and garlic to eat, requiring them to live in darkness for 100 days. After only a few days, the tiger could no longer stand it and ran out into the mountain forests. The bear, however, stayed in the den, finally emerging as a beautiful woman. She repeatedly prayed beneath the Tan tree for a child, and Hwanung momentarily transformed himself to marry her. They produced a wonderful child they called Tangun. Tangun invented the basics of civilization and created a dynasty that lasted for 1,500 years. This was followed by a period called Kija Choson that lasted 99 years. Tangun is still regarded as a great culture-hero and his memory is marked each October 3rd on Foundation Day. Depictions of Tangun often show him with a tiger, which is regarded as a mountain god.

Archeological evidence indicates that the presence of modern humans in northeast Asia dates to 39,000 years ago. By 6,000 years BC Neolithic cultures appeared on the Korean peninsula. Early inhabitants were hunters and gatherers who migrated onto the peninsula from the Manchurian Plateau and Siberia. By 1200 BC agriculture was widespread and bronze tools were in use. Towns were protected by earthen fortifications and society became increasingly stratified. By 400 BC Chinese records tell of formidable cultures on the peninsula. Among these early peoples were the Yemak and Puyo. By 108 BC, the Han Empire had set up several posts on the peninsula after battles with the Wiman Chosun kingdom. Over the next four hundred years many aspects of Chinese culture were assimilated into the various peninsula cultures. As time went on, small kingdoms grew and sometimes confederated on the peninsula. Some had closer relations to China than others, which served to their advantage if conflicts broke out with other kingdoms.

The Three Kingdoms

With the decline and fall of the Han dynasty in China, the Chinese command posts were gradually abandoned and three major kingdoms emerged on the peninsula. These three rival kingdoms were:

- Koguryo (37 BC-668 AD), located on the northern half of the peninsula, and part of what is now northeast China.
- Paekche (18 BC- 660 AD), located in the southwest of the peninsula.
- Shilla (Silla) (57 BC-935 AD), located on the southeast of the peninsula near present-day Kyongju.

Although the kingdoms differed in many ways and even may have spoken different languages, there were some similarities. All were agricultural economies based on rice cultivation (though other grains such as wheat and millet were also raised). Trade was mostly through barter, with a limited use of shell money or Chinese coins. Transport was by horse, oxcart, and ship.

Each of the kingdoms developed rigid social hierarchies in which a small, powerful ruling class was drawn from a small number of families. Rule was passed from father to the first born son in a system of primogeniture. The elite were ordered in the so-called “bone-rank” system (something like the idea of “blue blood” in feudal Europe). According to one’s “bones” (i.e. lineage), a person could rule as king (an option limited to very few), serve on governing councils, or hold government positions at varying levels in the provinces, counties, and smaller units of government throughout the realms. There were also numbered grades (called “head ranks”) of lower aristocracy (6, 5, 4), and free citizens (3, 2, 1), as well as lower classes that included slaves and criminals. Movement between classes was strictly controlled. A hierarchical system was also used in the military organizations, led by the king.

Each kingdom developed effective military forces of cavalry and foot soldiers employing weapons that included iron swords and spears, as well as bows and arrows. All grew up under the influence of Chinese culture. Archaeological evidence in the form of glass objects and animal designs on jewelry suggest contact with other cultural forces from farther west on the Asian landmass.

Activity 1: On the blank map of the Korean Peninsula shade in and label the Three Kingdoms (HANDOUT C)

Activity 2: Complete the social hierarchy handout with a description for each. (HANDOUT D)

Buddhism was adopted by the northern state of Koguryo in 372 AD and in Paekche in 384 AD. Shilla, on the more remote eastern end of the peninsula did not adopt Buddhism as a state religion until 528 AD. One reason that Buddhism was so quickly accepted in some areas may have to do with its reinforcement of social roles (decided

by actions in past lives), and thus its use in maintaining the status quo. If people accepted their lot in life, they were easier to control. Confucianism and Daoism were other aspects of worldview that gradually penetrated all three kingdoms.

Buddhism heavily influenced the art of the kingdoms, especially in terms of temple architecture (that used native stone and wood), sculpture, and tomb paintings. In Shilla, a type of gray, ash-glazed ceramic was developed. Shilla rulers also wore intricate crowns made of thin sheets of gold that incorporated symbols of celestial trees and deer antlers. Education of the upper-classes included foreign language studies in Sanskrit and Chinese in order to better read the Buddhist sutras and Confucian classics.

In general, China was regarded as a cultural model and tributary relations existed with all three states. There were also relations between some of the kingdoms and Kaya, a small league of states at the tip of the peninsula that had close relations with the Yamato culture in southern Japan. In the course of the Three Kingdoms era, there was almost constant fighting between the rival kingdoms and the borders shifted many times.

Activity 3: Using online sources or your textbook, complete the handout, Spread of Buddhism. (HANDOUT E)

PART 2: SILLA PERIOD

Unified Shilla Period (668 - 935 AD)

Although Koguryo was the earliest, largest, and most powerful of the Three Kingdoms, by the seventh century it was suffering from a decline in leadership and was weakened by wars with Sui dynasty China. For sixteen years, a tremendous amount of resources had been used in constructing a long wall between Koguryo and China. Shilla, on the other hand, was modernizing its government and eventually strengthened its relations with the newly established Tang dynasty, though the process involved a complex series of alliances and broken alliances among the various states of the region. Eventually, Shilla was able to defeat both Paekche and Koguryo in a series of wars and take control of much of the peninsula – setting up a unified state comprised of large portions of the former Three Kingdoms. By this time the Shilla state closely followed the structure of the Chinese government, with a powerful ruler who oversaw six bureaus filled with officials who over saw the affairs of the state, that included war, finance, and public works. The Unified Shilla era became a time of relative peace, prosperity, and cultural growth. Today, a great number of archaeological sites and artifacts from the period can be found in the former Shilla capital of Kyongju in the east of the peninsula.

Activity 1: On the blank map of the Korean Peninsula shade in the Three Kingdoms. (HANDOUT C)

These include the Shilla tombs, burial mounds of the ancient Shilla royalty. A number have been excavated in Tumuli Park and have revealed a wealth of information on Shilla culture. Although the custom of burying living servants with the rulers was abolished in 502 AD, numerous and lavish grave goods –jewelry, everyday use items, and weapons accompanied the dead.

In the nearby mountains is a great granite and wood temple known as Pulguksa, meaning “Temple of the Buddha Land.” Dating to the early 6th century, it has been re-constructed several times after periods of warfare. The temple is the finest example of Shilla-style temple architecture in existence. In the main courtyard are two small pagodas known as Sokkat’ap Pagoda and Tabot’ap Pagoda. According to the story, a newly-wed stoneworker was commissioned to carve the two pagodas. His work took him far from home for several years. One night he had a dream that his wife was standing by a pond near Pulguksa, awaiting his return. Little did he know that his dear, young wife had actually made the long journey to the temple site, and was indeed waiting for him outside. After several days, however, she had not caught even a glimpse of her busy husband. Several locals told her to look at the reflection of the pagodas in

the pond. She did so, but still did not see her husband. Believing she would never see him again, she jumped in and drowned. Later, when her husband heard of her death, he ran about the pond and forests, searching for her in vain. He finally found a human-shaped rock and carved a Buddha upon it in remembrance of his wife.

One of the most outstanding architectural and artistic feats of the Unified Shilla period is the Sokkuram Grotto Shrine, located in a mountain cave not from Pulguksa Temple. Dating to 751 AD, the grotto was eventually lost, and for centuries lay undisturbed. In 1909, the grotto was re-discovered when a mail courier took refuge from the rain. The central sculpture is a sublime carving of Sakyamuni Buddha executed in white granite. The massive carving, crafted from a single piece of stone, commands the interior of an arched vault and measures seven meters in diameter. The vault is constructed of intricately shaped, interlocking slabs of granite. The domed walls are lined with carvings of Buddhist deities, including the Four Heavenly Kings and an array of bodhisattvas and disciples. The site is a testament to the high level of mathematics, astronomy, architectural principles, and artistry of the Unified Shilla period in East Asia during a time when powerful cultural influences were traversing the Silk Road.

Although Shilla unified and controlled most of the peninsula, another state eventually formed in parts of the former Koguryo kingdom to the north. This kingdom, also ruled on the Chinese model, was known as Parhae and was situated between northeast China (what came to be known as Manchuria) and Shilla. The Parhae kingdom was established in 716 AD and lasted until 926 AD. As the Tang dynasty declined in China, leadership in Unified Shilla was also weakening. In the course of uprisings and fighting the Unified Shilla state fell into pieces, somewhat along the lines of the old Three Kingdoms. Eventually a rebel leader named Wang Kon became strong enough to challenge Shilla. In the end, he and the last Shilla king ended it amicably by each marrying one of the other's daughters, with Wong taking control and allotting the former king a large holding of land. The new state would be known as the Koryo dynasty.

Activity 2: Using <http://www.silkroadproject.org/tabid/177/default.aspx> as a resource, complete the map of Asia (HANDOUT A) to show the northern trade route of the Silk Road. Include the connecting trade route to Korea.

PART 3: KORYO DYNASTY

Koryo Dynasty (918 - 1392 AD)

The Koryo dynasty, founded by Wong Kon, extended the borders of the defeated Unified Shilla northwards into parts of old Koguryo – Koryo is a shortened form of that name. The name “Korea” is derived from Koryo. In his bid to maintain control over the new kingdom, Wong Kon followed an old Chinese strategy (also used in Tokugawa Japan) of forcing local rulers to send male members their families (often sons) to live in the capital as virtual hostages. He also took 29 consorts from families of position all over the realm. Although this initially helped him gain control, in the long run succession problems arose because of the many powerful families involved.

In the Koryo period, the government became even more complex and centralized than in Unified Shilla. The Chinese model was followed even more closely— civil service examinations were established, and open to all except the lowliest classes. Special considerations were made, however, for sons from the higher ranks of society, who could be given positions by appointment. Examinations were based on composition, knowledge of the Confucian Classics, and occupational knowledge such as astronomy, mathematics, and law. A national academy was established as well as private institutions of learning. Although in theory there was no private ownership of land, land tracts were often given to high office holders and military personnel. Taxes were levied on landholdings and households and the government could demand yearly service for labor projects. Individual regions, which specialized in certain products, might also be asked to supply quotas of these goods. The government also ran production industries (manufactories) staffed by artists and craftsmen in the capital and provinces – some in the provinces staffed by persons in the lowest social classes. Products ranged from consumer goods, such as precious metals (gold and silver), salt, silk, charcoal, paper, ink, and roof tiles to agricultural items such as fruits, grain, sesame, and ginger.

Activity 1: Complete the Influence of China handout. Some categories may overlap. (HANDOUT F)

Although the bone-rank system of Shilla had been broken by the rising of powerful new families and leaders in the rebellion drawn from lower classes—hierarchy was still a powerful social concept. The new classes that emerged in Koryo fell into six ranks in the following order of importance: 1) the royal caste group, comprised of relations to the royal clan; 2) a class of civil and military officials known as the *yangban* ("two classes"); 3) palace functionaries of lower official rank; 4) regional clerks and other lower government officials; 5) tax-paying free citizens, mostly peasant farmers, fishermen,

artisans, etc.; 6) inferior, stigmatized people such as butchers and market hunters (who were defiled under Buddhism by taking life), itinerant peddlers, the female entertainers known as *kisaeng*, and slaves. Landholdings were held mostly by the upper and middle ranks.

**Activity 2: Complete the social hierarchy handout with a description for each.
(HANDOUT D)**

During the Koryo period Buddhism flourished and was closely linked to the ruling caste. The period was also a time of change on the northern borders, as Parhae was overrun by the newly emerging Liao (Qidan) state in what is now northeast China (and many refugees fled to Koryo). Koryo was eventually invaded twice by the Liao, as well as briefly by the Song dynasty in China, which soon came under the control of successors to the Liao – the Jin, who conquered northern China, and were eventually conquered in turn by the Mongols. By 1231, the Mongols had begun serious incursions into Koryo that lasted thirty years with devastating effect. In some cases the Koryo forces put up stiff resistance, including the month-long siege of Kuju, in which the Mongols employed a whole array of “weapons of mass destruction” - fire carts, fire-bombs of human fat...

Activity 3: Complete the blank map of East Asia by showing the path of outside invaders into Korea (HANDOUT G)

Though resistance continued, relations eventually improved between the Mongol and the Koryo court. This was due in part to the personal relationship between the Koryo King Wonjung and Khubilai Khan. According to the story (an example of contemporary diplomacy), when the Khan developed gout in his feet, King Wonjung sent him a pair of orthopedic shoes made of fish skin. In turn, when the King was ill, the Khan sent a special medicinal soup. Both Mongol and Korean brides were traded in alliances that deepened over the years, with a Korean lady actually serving as the final empress in the Yuan dynasty in China. During the latter Koryo period Mongol cultural influences left a lasting impression on Korean culture (some say that the red circles on a traditional Korean bride’s face today are related to the Mongol legacy).

Among the artistic and technical accomplishments of Koryo was the creation of a sublime style of ceramic known as Koryo celadon. The greenish-blue hue of the glaze was especially coveted by Song dynasty Chinese emperors (who also enjoyed Chinese celadon). Unfortunately, the formula for the hue was lost in the Mongol invasions and never recovered, despite attempts that continue today.

Printing technology also advanced during the era. During the Mongol invasion the wooden printing blocks used to print the Buddhist scriptures were burned. As a result,

the monks on Kanghwa Island re-carved them—all 80,000—and carried them on their heads into the southern mountains.

Another result of the burning of the Buddhist printing blocks was the invention of moveable metal type. Although both the Chinese and Koreans had been experimenting with printing for centuries, and moveable ceramic type was in limited use, the Koreans developed moveable cast bronze type as another way to try and preserve the scriptures . Thereafter, both metal type and woodblock printing techniques were used down to modern times, when largely displaced by Western moveable type in the early 20th century. Despite advances in printing, brush writing was still the most common form of written communication at the individual level. One of the most popular literary forms was a style of lyric poetry, sometimes used for social comment, known as *sijo* poetry. Popular folk songs were known as *changga* and were often of a humorous, earthy flavor.

Such poetry would become even more popular in the dynasty that succeeded Koryo – the Yi or Chosun dynasty that arose during the waning of Mongol power and the rise of the Ming dynasty in China. Powerful families that had supported the Mongols were eventually swept from power and Buddhist hold on the government was ended as a new generation of leadership under General Yi Songye established the longest—and last—dynasty in Korean history.

PART 4: CHOSON (YI) DYNASTY, 1392-1910

Activity: As you read, complete handout on key individuals. For impact, give clear evidence from the reading. (Handout H)

The Choson, or Yi, dynasty lasted from 1392 until 1910. In the course of the dynasty, relations were established with Ming China; the peninsula was invaded by the Japanese in the late 16th century; their neighbors, the mighty Manchus, invaded a few decades later; Western powers threatened Korea by the mid-19th century, while Japan positioned to take control of Korea by the end of that century, which finally prompted the fall of Choson in 1910. Thus, the longest dynasty in Korea's history spans some of the most transitional periods in the recent history of East Asia.

General Yi Songgye founded the dynasty which took his name. Yi had made a name for himself fighting Jurchen forces in Manchuria and Japanese pirates (*wako*) on the seas around the peninsula. As Koryo fell apart under a series of child rulers and shifting alliances among the forces in northeast Asia, Yi took control of the situation on the peninsula and set up the Yi or Choson dynasty. To secure power he stripped former powerful families of landholdings and withdrew government support of Buddhist monasteries. Some sources say it took days to burn the land registers in the streets of the new capital at Seoul. The last Koryo king was exiled and faithful officials purged from the government or even executed.

A strong central bureaucracy was established, building on the Chinese/Koryo model, but extending government control over the realm even farther. New officials were appointed from among Yi's followers and land re-divided. Large numbers of civil officials and military, appointed through a rigorous series of civil service or military examinations, came to fill the ranks of the *yangban*. As time went on, the civil service *yangban* (a class of civil and military officials) became a leisured class with elite tastes whose members excelled in the arts of painting, calligraphy, and writing classical Chinese and the more vernacular *sijo* poetry. As the power of the Buddhist organizations was weakened, Confucianism was promoted and elaborated under the tenets of Neo-Confucianism. In the early decades of Choson, reforms in agricultural and economic reforms were carried out, printing with metal type increased (including texts exported to Japan), paper money was issued, and schools and academies prospered. Books were published on Neo-Confucianism, literature, agriculture, technology, and medicine. In terms of social control, one ruler even instituted the use of identity tags

(made of ivory, antler, or wood, depending on class) to keep track of all males for tax and other purposes.

The vibrant new dynasty produced outstanding rulers and scholars. Among them was the almost incomparable King Sejong, the fourth Choson monarch who reigned from 1418-1450. Known as a model king, Sejong surrounded himself with the finest scholars of the day and commissioned important research projects, including astronomy, geography, firearms and metals technology, and irrigation. Probably the most enduring project was the creation of the Hangul syllabary. Often regarded as the most scientific syllabary ever invented, the shapes of the symbols are based on abstract representations of the mouth and tongue when pronouncing the various basic sounds. Although Korean scholars continued to use written Chinese characters down into the early twentieth century, Hangul became popular among merchants, women, and authors of popular fiction, as it was easy for people to learn. Many translations of Chinese Confucian and Buddhist classics were made into the new system of writing.

By the end of the 16th century, various internal and external situations precipitated in a series of devastating invasions from which the Yi dynasty never really recovered. As royal leadership declined, struggles for power on the islands of Japan spilled over onto the Korean peninsula in a series of invasions launched by the warlord Hideyoshi. Despite fierce resistance from government troops and peasant militias—and aid from the Ming dynasty, many parts of the peninsula were sacked by Japanese troops that arrived by sea with firearms and cannon. Although the Koreans had used gunpowder since the Mongol era, a particularly galling experience was having captured Korean cannons used as cannonballs and shot back into Korean fortifications by larger bored Japanese guns. One bright point in the invasions was the armada of turtle boats commanded by Admiral Yi Soon-sin. Yi had invented a sort of armored ship holding many cannon that for a time deferred the Japanese forces. In the long run the Koreans held on as the Japanese became embroiled in the internal clashes leading to the founding of the Tokugawa shogunate.

The Chosun dynasty barely had time to recover from Hideyoshi's incursions, when scarcely thirty years later new invaders appeared on the northern borders in the form of the Manchus, who were establishing their empire under the leadership of Nurhaci and Abadi. As the Ming fell and the Manchu Qing dynasty arose, Korea found itself allied as a tribute state to the Manchus, after a series of devastating invasions—that were fiercely resisted, or aided, depending on what side of the internal struggles forces were on. A certain number of Korean rebels actually joined the Manchus, forming a Korean banner. Korean leadership never returned to its earlier days of glory. By the time Western forces

(French, English, American, and Russian) began sending missions up Korean rivers to force the so-called "hermit kingdom" to open its doors in the latter 19th century, the most powerful ruler was Queen Min, regent to a weak young king. Queen Min played a role similar to that of the Empress Dowager Ci Xi, whose rule overlapped with hers for a few years. The Queen was killed by Japanese-backed assassins in 1895 as Japan maneuvered into place to take Korea as a colony. The Manchus vainly attempted to hold the situation together (future president of the Republic of China, Yuan Shikai was the field marshal in Korea for sometime).

Inner turmoil and rebellion ignited with the rise of an anti-foreign group called the Tonghaks, who attempted to resist the challenge of the West. Although its leader, Ch'oe Cheu, was executed, social instability continued as did the decline in leadership. By 1910 Japan had taken Korea as a colony, with quiet acquiescence from the British and the United States who formed a secret pact with Japan to protect their own holdings in Asia.