

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY - SOUTH KOREA

Submitted by Sylvia Mazuera. Source: Culture Grams.

- ⇒ South Korea is slightly larger than Indiana. Korea is traditionally known as *Chosŏn* ("The Land of the Morning Calm"). It has a population of 48.3 million and around half of it lives in the greater Seoul area alone.
- ⇒ The Korean language plays an important role in national identity. It is written in Hangul, a phonetic alphabet created in 1446 because classical Chinese (the only written language available) was difficult to master (but Korean is not related to Chinese). It has 24 letters, 10 of which are vowels. The Seoul dialect is the standard taught in school. English is taught in school also.
- ⇒ Korean society is vertically ordered according to Confucian philosophy. Nearly all interaction is determined by one's place in various social groups or one's status in a relationship. Within the Confucian social structure, how one is greeted depends on one's age and social standing relative to the greeter. A bow is the traditional greeting, but it is usually accompanied by a handshake between men. As a sign of respect, the left hand may support or rest under the right forearm during the handshake. A common greeting between peers or subordinates is *Annyong haseyo?* (Are you at peace?). Children often greet each other with a simple *Annyong?*
- ⇒ Koreans often use extreme modesty when speaking about themselves. They are reluctant to accept high honors and graciously deny compliments. Koreans are quick to make friends and they rely on each other for just about anything.
- ⇒ Proper courtesy is shown with gestures. Items are passed with both hands or the right hand grasped by the left at the wrist or forearm. Koreans beckon by waving the fingers together with the palm down. Beckoning with the index finger is rude.
- ⇒ Guests invited to a home remove their shoes upon entering. While western furniture is common, in traditional Korean homes guests are seated on floor cushions that are heated from below. Men sit cross-legged and women tuck their legs to one side behind them.
- ⇒ Koreans eat three meals a day. Chopsticks and spoons are the most commonly used utensils. At a dinner party, the meal usually is served before socializing begins. Korean food is generally spicy. Rice and *kimch'i* (a spicy pickled cabbage) are staples at almost every meal. Various soups are common. Rice is often combined with other ingredients such as red beans or vegetables. Fruit is often served as a dessert.
- ⇒ The family is the foundation of society and is bound by a strong sense of obligation among its members. The father is the head of the family; he and the oldest son receive the greatest respect.
- ⇒ A Korean name consists of a one-syllable family name followed by a one-or two-syllable given name. Kim, Lee (*Yi*), and Park (*PaK*) are the most common family names.
- ⇒ The most popular sports are baseball, basketball, soccer and volleyball. Unique to Korea is a form of wrestling called *ssrŏm*, where contestants hold on to pieces of cloth tied around their opponents legs during their match.