

Introduction to Korea, Seoul & Suwon

1) Korea

Korea is a beautiful country with a history of over 5,000 years. It is hard as an American to comprehend a culture that has lasted that long when our history as a country only goes back a few hundred years. All of the historical sites have been preserved for future generations. These buildings, stone pagodas and lanterns, and other pieces of sculpture are known as National Treasures and are numbered. Seven sites have been selected as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The Korean treasures included in the World Heritage List are Bulguksa Temple and nearby Seokguram Grotto; Haeinsa Temple's Changgyongp'ango (depositories for the Tripitaka Koreana Woodblocks); Jongmyo Shrine; Changdeokkung Palace Complex; Hwaseong Fortress; Kochang, Hwasun and Kanghwa Dolmen Sites; and Gyeongju Historic Areas. More information about the World Heritage Sites can be found up each of the site's information and in the Teacher Activities.

Even with this rich history from the past, Korea can be seen as a progressive and modern country. The modern buildings of the big cities rival those of any other modern country, yet scenes from the past coexist with the new.

The people of Korea are very friendly and loving and are excited to try their English. All of the younger children are learning English. They know that their future depend upon being able to speak English. At this time only the bigger hotels have someone who can speak English but this will change. The Korean people want foreign investors to come to Korea to help their economy. Korea will become a major tourist destination as Americans begin to learn about the beauty of Korea.



Korea has a cultural history of over 5,000 years. Over five centuries of culture, customs, and society have uniquely defined who the Korean people are. Koreans are very proud of their culture and deeply appreciate it when visitors try to learn about it.

Every country has a different culture, and understanding other cultures helps improve the way we interact with different people. By learning about Korean culture, you can better understand who the Korean people are, their values, and why they act the way they do in certain circumstances. Knowing these will allow you to enjoy yourself better when you visit Korea.

[Traditional Patterns and Symbols]

Korean people traditionally adapted to and found meaning in the order of nature. Wanting to teach the hidden meanings of nature to their children and believing them as law and order in their daily lives, they created beautiful and diverse patterns. These patterns can be found almost everywhere you look in Korea, from the Taegeuk in the national flag to the animal designs on chopsticks in restaurants. Many symbols are similar to the Chinese characters for luck, fortune, longevity, and fertility.



[Traditional Korean Clothing]

Traditional Korean clothing has its roots extending back at least as far as the Three Kingdoms Period (57 B.C. - 668 A.D.), as evidenced by wall paintings in tombs dating from this period. The Korean *hanbok* represents one of the most visible aspects of Korean culture.



The top part called a *jeogori* is blouse-like with long sleeves with the men's version being longer, stretching down to the waist. Women wear skirts (*chima*) while men wear baggy pants (*paji*).

[Korean Drinks]

Many countries have their own traditional alcoholic beverages, of which only a fraction are widespread. Korea, with rice as its staple food has created unique alcoholic beverages using rice malt. Its alcohol-making history stretches hundreds of years and each of Korea's major periods has had unique characteristics. Learn about Korean traditional alcoholic beverages and Korea's drinking culture!



[Korean Food]

As in all countries, food plays a very important part of Korean life. Besides its critical role in everyday life, food also has a major role in many events and festivals. Certain types of foods or meals are symbolic with a child's first birthday (*dol*), part of a marriage ceremony (*pyebaek*), or ancestral rites (*jesa*). Certain regions also have foods strongly associated with them, such as Busan and raw fish (*hoe*), Suwon and beef ribs (*galbi*), Jeonju and mixed vegetables with rice (*bibimbap*).



[Terrain & Climate Terrain & Climate]

Korea is surrounded by water on three sides and has a magnificent landscape with many mountains and rivers.

As for the climate, Korea is a temperate region with four distinct seasons. Spring comes in March with clear skies and warm weather and lasts until May. In June, July, and August, the temperature goes up, and during the monsoon season from late June to early July, the weather can get quite hot and humid. In September, October, and November the temperature cools down, but the diurnal temperature ranges become larger. Winters in Korea which begin in December and last until February, are usually cold and dry.

[Culture & Holidays]

Despite rapid industrialization, Korea still embodies much agricultural tradition and culture, because it was originally a farming community. Also, the influences of Confucianism and Buddhism enrich Korea's culture even today.

In addition, Korea has many traditional holidays such as Chuseok (harvest festival), Seol (Lunar New Year), Jeongwol (First full moon of the year), and Dano (start of summer, May 5 by lunar calendar). Koreans spend their traditional holidays with family and share authentic dishes.

Koreans use a unique alphabet called "Hangul," which was created by King Sejong the Great in 1443.

[People & Customs]

Koreans are basically diligent and polite. Having good manners is very important to Koreans, and because of a rich tradition in Confucianism, it is quite common to see young people offer their seats to elders in the subway or bus.

Koreans speak in an honorific tone when addressing an older person and the younger person is obliged to bow to the older person first unless he wants to be regarded as impolite.

Traditionally, Koreans are a people that enjoy songs, dances, and drinking. They are accustomed to sharing in celebration, so they offer each other drinks, and fill one another's empty glass. An empty glass should always be filled to the brim and it is against tradition to refill a glass that is not empty.

2) Seoul

Seoul is one of the Asia's largest and most culturally rich cities and it has been the capital city of Korea for more than 600 years. The city was founded in 1394, when it became the capital of the Chosun Dynasty (1392~1910).



The vestiges of the Chosun Dynasty, honored for its cultural achievements and various other accomplishments, are still prominent features of the city's landscape and add to the color and charm of the thriving cosmopolitan city that Seoul is today. It is the political, commercial, recreational, educational, and cultural center of Korea. This world's famous city is home to major domestic and international corporations, banks, government offices, leading schools and universities, theaters and entertainment facilities.

To take you virtually anywhere in the city and the nation, Seoul has an extensive public transportation network consisting of subways, taxis, buses, trains and commercial airlines. This network allows one to visit other premiere cultural attractions in Korea such as Mt. Sorak, Kyongju, and Jeju Island. (www.seoul.go.kr)

3) Suwon

[Introduction to Suwon]

Suwon is an important Korean district of culture, history, industry and recreation. Physically, Suwon is located mid-south of Kyonggi Province, occupying the central part of the Korean Peninsula. Suwon, with population of one million, is located about half-hour drive away from Seoul, the capital city of Korea and the fourth largest city in the world.



Suwon is not a city naturally formed, but a well-planned city formed scientifically in the 18th century by King Jeongjo the Great. Its foundation was based on the ideals of filial piety and renovation. Suwon is well known in Korea as a city for maintaining its rich history and culture.

One of the most famous cultural heritage sites in Suwon is its Hwaseong Fortress, which was

also designated as world heritage site by UNESCO in 1997. Over 200 years ago, King Jeongjo, the 22nd king of the Joseon Dynasty, drew up the master plan for Suwon. The king moved his father's tomb(now called Yung-neung) to Mt. Hwasan and constructed Hwaseong Fortress around the base of Mt. Paldalsan. Founded on filial piety, this beautifully planned city has prospered around Hwaseong Fortress and esteemed for its cultural heritage. Today, Suwon plays a leading role in the country, developing agronomy, science and technology, commerce and transportation.

As the southern gateway to the capital, Seoul, Suwon hopes to rise as a truly international city in the future. Suwon will host the 2002 World Cup Soccer Games, and is hopeful that the successful hosting of these international games will lead to its becoming a world-renowned city in the years to come. (www.suwon.ne.kr)

[History of Suwon]

During the era of the Three Kingdoms, under the occupancy of Goguryeo (from the end of the 5th century until the United Silla era), Suwon was called 'Maehol'. In the following United Silla period under the rule of King Gyeongdeok(A.D. 757), the city was renamed Suseong-gun, and again Suju during the Goryeo Dynasty.



Here, 'seong,' 'gun' or 'hol' are merely geographical suffixes representing the division of administrative districts. The real meaning of the name lies in the key words 'su' and 'mae'.

It seems definite that the word 'mae' is phonographically related to the Korean term for 'water'.

In the absence of Korean characters, proper nouns were marked using the sound and meaning of Chinese characters in a writing method using borrowed terms.

The 'hol' in "Maehol" is also worth mentioning. The Chinese character (忽) is read 'hol', but it is presumed that the character was read 'gol' at the time the city was named.

Therefore, while the name 'Maehol' means 'a valley of water', it was probably read 'Maegol' or 'Migol' at the time the city was named.