

LEVELED Book • Y

South Korea



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Focus Question

What are some important characteristics of South Korea?

Words to Know

cease-fire
communist
culture
democratic
ethnicity
exported

extinct
generations
inlets
mystical
typhoons
urban

Front cover: A South Korean island at sunset

Title page: Tea harvesters in South Korea

Page 3: A crowded market in Seoul

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Where Is It?

South Korea, officially named the Republic of Korea, is a small country in East Asia. At 99,720 square kilometers (38,502 sq. mi.), it's slightly smaller than the country of Iceland. It is located on the southern part of the Korean peninsula.

Surrounded by water on three sides, South Korea shares only its northern border with another country—North Korea. The Sea of Japan, called the East Sea by the people in the region, is on the peninsula's eastern border. The East China Sea lies to the south, and the Yellow Sea lies to the west. A narrower strip of water called the Korea Strait separates South Korea from the Japanese island of Tsushima.

South Korea's closest neighbors are Japan to the east, North Korea to the north, and China to the north and west across the Yellow Sea.

With more than nine million people, South Korea's capital city of Seoul is the country's largest city. It's also one of the largest cities in the entire world. Seoul is located in the northwestern part of the country on the Han River. Although today's Seoul is a modern center of trade and business, it's also an important historic landmark. The downtown region is enclosed by walls originally built more than six hundred years ago. It contains centuries-old palaces, shrines, fortress gates, and royal gardens. There are also examples of a humbler type of building: the traditional South Korean house, called a *hanok*. Designed to stay comfortable in winter's bitterly cold temperatures, hanoks have a special heating system that carries hot air through channels beneath the stone floor. More than 60 percent of Seoul's people live in modern apartments that use an under-the-floor heating system inspired by the *hanok*.



One of the Five Grand Palaces in Seoul is located in the heart of the city.

A Respectful People

In traditional Korean life, people stand when an older person enters the room. If shaking hands, the younger person is supposed to wait for the elder to offer a hand.



People

More than forty-nine million people live in South Korea, most of them in **urban** environments. Aside from a small minority of Chinese and other non-Korean Asians, most South Koreans are the same **ethnicity** and speak the same language—Korean.

Until recently, North and South Korea were the only places to find large populations of Korean-speaking people. Since the fifteenth century, the language has had its own alphabet, called *Hangul* (HAHNG-gul). *Hangul* is similar to the alphabet used in English in that each letter stands for a specific sound—unlike Chinese characters, for example, where different symbols can stand for entire words.

South Koreans work in many different types of jobs. About half of the country's economy is based on **exported** goods. Many people work in manufacturing, making cars, ships, and other items that will be exported. South Korea also has jobs in computer-related technologies.

Family is important in Korean society.

Sometimes two or three **generations** live together in a single household, although this is becoming less common. Elders and family are honored in traditional South Korean practices. People keep records of their family history and have special food and ceremonies on holidays.

Many South Koreans see education as the key to success and power. Family life often centers around children's education. Children are often excused from chores so they can work at their studies. According to the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, Korean students rank among the best readers and problem solvers of its member nations.

South Koreans have a wide range of religious beliefs. Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism are the four major religions, and Islam is practiced as well.

After a regular school day, many students go to a school called a *hagwon* (HAH-gwon) to study languages, math, or music.





Land

Hills and mountains cover South Korea; only a small amount of the land is flat enough for farming. The Taebaek (TEbek) Mountains run along the eastern coast, with several mountain ranges branching off and running roughly east-west. Most of the mountains are less than 1,219 meters (4,000 ft.) in elevation. The highest peak is 1,950-meter (6,398 ft.) Mount Halla, also known as Hallasan. Mount Halla is an **extinct** volcano on Jeju, one of two volcanic islands off the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea's eastern coastline is fairly straight. However, the rest of the country's coast is broken up by numerous rivers and streams to form countless **inlets** and more than 3,500 small islands.

Lining the narrow lowlands are streams and rivers with some of the highest tides in the world. At Incheon, the port city beside Seoul, the water level varies about 9 meters (30 ft.). That's enough to cover a three-story house.

Most of South Korea's rural population lives in the coastal and inland plains region in the western and southern parts of the country. The plains provide fertile farmland for growing rice and vegetables.

Because of the country's location in a temperate zone, South Korea has four seasons. Temperatures range from an average of -6°C (21°F) in winter to highs of $27\text{--}32^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($80\text{--}90^{\circ}\text{F}$) in summer. Summer also brings the rainy season, when the country gets more than half its yearly rainfall. During this season, South Korea is sometimes hit by **typhoons**. Heavy flooding is common.



History

Korea—an area consisting of both North and South Korea—is a region with more than two thousand years of recorded history. People have been living there for at least ten thousand years. Its location kept it isolated from the world for hundreds of years.

Historians think that Koreans originally came from Mongolia and Siberia. Over many centuries, kingdoms rose to take control as Korea struggled between unity and division. Korea's internal struggles were further complicated by a series of invasions by China, the Mongolian Empire, and Japan.

In 1905, Japan forced Korea to sign a treaty that put Korea under Japanese control. Five years later, Japan made Korea a Japanese colony. Korea remained under Japanese control until Japan's surrender at the end of World War II. Koreans still celebrate their freedom yearly on August 15.



South Korean students wave their country's flag to celebrate independence.



South Korean soldiers patrol the border.

The United Nations planned to return Korea to self-government at the end of World War II. During this time, the United States was in charge of

the southern half of the Korean peninsula and the Soviet Union the northern half.

However, leaders couldn't agree on how to establish Korea's new government. The United Nations ordered **democratic** elections, which South Korea held. North Korea established a **communist** form of government.

In 1948, the United Nations recognized South Korea's government as the only legal government in North and South Korea. Two years later, North Korea invaded South Korea in an attempt to bring the divided nation together by force. The Korean War had begun. It would cost 2.5 million lives and devastate both countries. The war ended in 1953 with a **cease-fire** agreement that left North and South Korea separated by a strip of land 4 kilometers (2.5 mi.) wide. Although the two countries agreed to a cease-fire, they have never signed an official peace treaty.

Celebrations

Until the mid-twentieth century, South Korea was an agricultural society. Many of its holidays are linked with the moon calendar. New Year's Day, called Seollal (SAHL-lahl), is the most important of these festivals. It's celebrated with *tteokguk* (DAWK-gook), or rice cake soup. On this holiday, South Koreans celebrate everyone becoming one year older with gifts, games, and fortune-telling.

A harvest celebration called Chuseok is another important holiday. It's a time when people gather for family reunions. Families visit their family tombs and leave food offerings in honor of the dead.

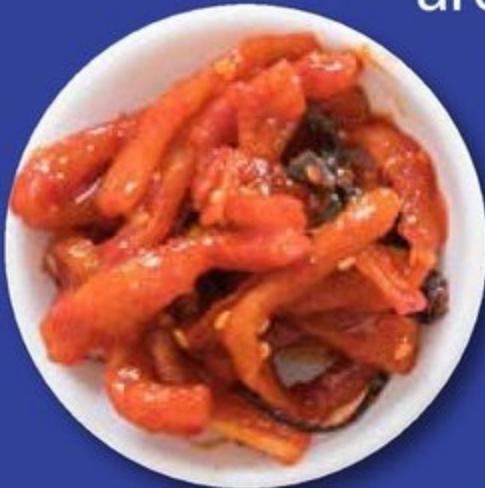
South Koreans also have a big celebration on a baby's first birthday. The parents place objects in front of the baby and let the baby choose his or her favorite. If the baby picks up a book, he or she will be smart; picking up money means wealth.

Parents hold their baby at her first birthday party. Plentiful food represents prosperity for the child.



Kimchi

There are probably hundreds of different kinds of kimchi, a pickled vegetable dish that is usually very spicy. The most popular types are cabbage kimchi, radish kimchi, cucumber kimchi, and water kimchi. Some type of kimchi is served with nearly every traditional meal.



cabbage kimchi



radish kimchi



squid
kimchi

Food

South Korean food is often spicy. Kimchi, a food similar to spicy sauerkraut, and rice are served at nearly every traditional meal. Fish and other seafood are also an important part of South Korea's cuisine, as are pounded rice cakes called *tteok* (DAWK).

There is a saying in South Korea: "Food is the best medicine." It means that both health and sickness come from the food people eat. Traditionally, South Koreans eat seaweed—which many believe improves health—on their birthday. Some women expecting babies eat seaweed to help ensure a healthy birth.

Another traditional belief is that some foods have **mystical** powers. For example, a dish consisting of sweet red beans and rice porridge is supposed to chase off evil spirits and help ensure long life.



The bustling capital city of Seoul glistens at night.

Conclusion

From their country's bustling cities to its rugged mountains and fertile plains, South Koreans have been united for centuries by a **culture** that values hard work and respect for family and elders. This culture and the strength of the South Korean people have enabled the country to triumph over war and poverty. Today, the country's trillion-dollar industrial economy is one of the strongest in the world. South Korea has become a modern world power—a country and people with a bright future.

South Korea



Population: 49,115,196

Land: 99,720 sq km (38,502 sq. mi.)

Capital City: Seoul

Primary Language: Korean

Primary Religions: Christianity, Buddhism

Name of Currency: Won



Source: CIA World Factbook (May 2016)

Glossary

cease-fire (<i>n.</i>)	an agreement to temporarily stop fighting during a war (p. 11)
communist (<i>adj.</i>)	of, relating to, or supporting a political system in which the government controls the economy (p. 11)
culture (<i>n.</i>)	the ideas and customs of a certain group of people (p. 14)
democratic (<i>adj.</i>)	relating to or based on a form of government that is run by the people through free and frequent elections (p. 11)
ethnicity (<i>n.</i>)	the state of belonging to a group of people with a common cultural heritage or nationality distinguished by customs, characteristics, language, and common history (p. 6)
exported (<i>adj.</i>)	sold in another country or area (p. 6)
extinct (<i>adj.</i>)	not having erupted in thousands of years and showing no sign of erupting in the future (p. 8)
generations (<i>n.</i>)	spans of time, approximately twenty to thirty years, between when parents and their children are born (p. 7)
inlets (<i>n.</i>)	narrow strips of water that lead from a body of water into land (p. 8)
mystical (<i>adj.</i>)	having a spiritual or symbolic meaning that is not easy to understand (p. 13)
typhoons (<i>n.</i>)	strong, spinning storms with heavy rain and high winds that occur near the Indian or Western Pacific Ocean (p. 9)
urban (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to cities or towns and the people living in them (p. 6)

South Korea

A Reading A-Z Level Y Leveled Book

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Connections

Writing

Choose at least two topics from the book.

Write an essay explaining how another country compares to South Korea in these areas.

Social Studies

Research South Korea's economy. Write an essay explaining how the country's geographic location positively and negatively impacts its economy.

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