The Koreas: North and South

A HUMAN PERSPECTIVE  Korea is surrounded by water on three sides and by mountains on its northern border. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Korea chose self-protected isolation and became known as “the hermit kingdom.” This isolation has continued in North Korea, which has little contact with other nations even today. However, that may be changing.

A Divided Peninsula

Korea is a peninsula. To the east lies the Sea of Japan. To the west lies the Yellow Sea. To the south lies the Korea Strait. To the north lie China and Russian Siberia. Korea’s location has shaped its history.

ANCIENT KOREA AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES The ancestors of today’s Koreans probably migrated into the peninsula from Manchuria and North China many thousands of years ago. Over the course of the centuries, different clans or groups controlled different parts of the country. About 2000 B.C., the first state, called Chosen, arose in Korea.

Around 100 B.C., China conquered the northern half of the peninsula. This began the history of invasions by China and Japan. Because of its location, Korea has been a buffer between the two countries.

After being partially conquered by China, the Koreans gradually won back their territory. By the late 300s, the Three Kingdoms had formed in the peninsula. These were Koguryo in the northeast, Paekche in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast. In the 660s, Silla conquered the other two kingdoms and controlled the peninsula for hundreds of years.
In 1392, a general named Yi Songgye became ruler of Korea. He founded a dynasty that lasted for hundreds of years. But the dynasty ended in 1910, when Japan took control of the entire peninsula. The Japanese ruled Korea until they were defeated in World War II in 1945.

**TWO KOREAS: NORTH AND SOUTH** After Japan’s defeat in the war, the northern part of Korea was controlled by the Soviet Union, and the southern half was supported by the United States. In 1950, Korean troops from the North invaded South Korea, starting the Korean War. The war ended in 1953 with a treaty that divided the peninsula between the Communist state of North Korea and the democratic country of South Korea. The two nations remained hostile toward each other, but in the year 2000, they began discussions on reuniting.

**Influences on Korean Culture**

The shadow cast by China has fallen across the Korean peninsula. Korean culture, including language, art, and religion, shows this influence. More recently, western economic influences have been very important.

**THE CHINESE INFLUENCE** In philosophy and religion, Korea has adapted many ideas from China. Confucianism (see Section 1) is a system of teachings based on the beliefs of the Chinese scholar Confucius. His ideas stressing social order have influenced many Koreans. Buddhism, which came to Korea by way of China, has also influenced many Koreans.
OTHER CULTURAL INFLUENCES  Since World War II, two major influences have had a profound effect on Korea. First, Communism has molded the culture of North Korea. Non-Communist South Korea, on the other hand, has been greatly influenced by Western culture.

In North Korea, the government only allows art that glorifies Communism or the folk tradition. In South Korea, artists have more freedom of expression. They work with themes drawn from their own history and culture, as well as themes drawn from Western art.

Moving Toward Unity

The most important recent development in North Korea and South Korea is the movement toward unification. However, the communist North and democratic South must overcome years of mutual hostility.

AN ARMED SOCIETY  After World War II, both North Korea and South Korea built up huge armies. The armed forces of South Korea number more than 600,000 soldiers and sailors. The armed forces of North Korea are even larger, numbering well over one million.

Both countries have existed with large armies and the threat of another war for many years. Only recently has there been an attempt to defuse the situation to prevent an outbreak of war. War has been a real possibility along the border between North Korea and South Korea, which is guarded by nearly 2 million troops on both sides.

A SINGLE FLAG  There are signs of hope, however. In June 2000, the leaders of both Koreas held a summit meeting at which they declared their intention to reunite the two countries. Shortly after, the defense
chiefs of the two Koreas met and agreed to reduce tensions along their border. They agreed to discuss clearing land mines so they could rebuild a rail link between the two countries. Perhaps most importantly, families in North Korea and South Korea were allowed to visit each other.

At the summer Olympics held in Sydney, Australia, in 2000, there was another sign of a thaw. The two Koreas marched into the Olympic Stadium under a new flag designed for a single, unified Korea.

**Economic and Human Resources**

Before the Korean War, the economies of North Korea and South Korea were agricultural. After the war, industry gained in importance in both countries. In many ways, the resources of each country balance one another.

**ECONOMIC PATTERNS** If North Korea and South Korea reunite, they will form an economic powerhouse. North Korea will be able to provide natural resources and raw materials for South Korea’s industries.

South Korea, like Taiwan, is one of the economic tigers of Asia. It is a highly successful and competitive economy. It has the world’s largest shipbuilding industry, as well as large automobile, steel, and chemical industries. South Korea is today one of the world’s top trading nations.

**POPULATION PATTERNS** Most of the people in Korea live on plains along the coast or in river valleys among the mountains of the peninsula. South Korea has 45 percent of the Korean peninsula’s land area but about 66 percent of its people. **Seoul** is by far the largest city in South Korea, with a population of more than 10 million. The largest city in North Korea is **Pyongyang**, with more than 2.5 million people.

In the next section, you will read about the history, culture, economics, and daily life in Japan.