

## **NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA – INFORMATION SHEET**



### **BACKGROUND**

Korea has a rich 5000 year cultural history. The establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea's official name) resulted in changes to traditional society with the Confucian philosophy of family loyalty and piety being supplanted by intense nationalism. South Koreans are proud of their country's accomplishments, including the contributions of traditional Korean culture and the nation's modern economic success.

### **LANGUAGE**

The Korean language plays an important role in the identity of the Korean people. Korean is spoken in both North and South Korea and is written in a phonetic alphabet created and promulgated in the mid-15th century. While the alphabet is called Hangeul in South Korea, it is known as Chosongul in North Korea. Although the Korean language is replete with words adapted from Chinese, the North Koreans, unlike the South Koreans, do not use Chinese characters with Chosongul in their newspapers and publications. There are also some differences in vocabulary between the North and the South, influenced somewhat by politics and also by the contact each country has had with other nations. Russian, Chinese, and English are taught as second languages in the schools.

### **RELIGION**

The government of North Korea has constitutionally confirmed freedom of religion. In reality, however, the effectual state religion is the veneration of Kim Il Sung, the "Great Leader" and the founder of the modern republic. Yet the way of life and philosophy in North Korea echoes traditional patterns and is based fundamentally on Confucian thought. The government also permits Christians to meet in small groups under the direction of state appointed ministers. Shamanism, a native belief in household and natural spirits, gods, and demons, may still have limited influence in rural areas, but it is mostly promoted by the government as an art form. Confucianism has taught Koreans to behave with decorum and to show respect for propriety. Buddhism is also a significant social and cultural presence.

### **FESTIVALS**

#### **North Korea**

- Kim 1 Sung's Birthday 15 April
- Labour Day 1 May
- Anniversary of Liberation 15 August
- Independence Day 9 September
- Anniversary of Korean Workers' Party 10 October
- Anniversary of the Constitution 27 December

### **South Korea**

Independence Movement Day 1 March  
Children's Day 5 May  
Memorial Day 6 June  
Constitution Day 17 July  
Liberation Day 15 August  
Armed Forces Day 1 October  
National Foundation Day 3 October  
Anniversary of Proclamation of Korean Alphabet 9 October

### **ETHNIC MAKEUP**

North Korea 22,326,557 (US IDB Census 2002)  
South Korea 47,962,703 (US IDB Census 2002)

### **SOCIAL CUSTOMS**

**MARRIAGE:** Western-style dating is now more common in the South, while parental consent for marriage is essential in both South and North Korea. The government has established minimum marriage ages (27 for men, 25 for women) to allow for the completion of military service and other obligations. Due to a shortage in the labour force, the government provides incentives for married couples to have large families.

**SOCIAL ETIQUETTE:** North and South Koreans often use extreme modesty when speaking about themselves. Reluctance to accept high honours is the mark of a true Korean gentleman. Compliments are graciously denied. Success depends greatly on social contacts. Koreans are quick to make friends and friendships are highly valued. Giving gifts as a means of obtaining favours is common, especially in the workplace, and accepting a gift carries the responsibility of reciprocity. Open criticism and public disagreement are considered very serious because it is not proper to damage another person's reputation. Because of respect for the feelings of others, Koreans may withhold bad news or adverse opinions or express them in an indirect way.

Koreans do not commonly visit one another unannounced, and arranged social visits are infrequent. Generally, people visit relatives for the Lunar New Year or Parents' Day. Unless special business calls for it, a superior never visits a subordinate. It is considered polite and a sign of respect for guests to take a gift to the hosts. In most cases, a gift will be fruit, a beverage, or something from one's home region. Shoes and hats are removed indoors.

Observing etiquette involves paying particular attention to the host and making sure their feelings are respected. Koreans are very generous hosts and give their guests the best of everything. Greetings and introductions, therefore, tend to be rather formal. Handshakes are common among men, but a bow is still most common. A younger or lower-status person always bows until the other offers a handshake or returns the bow. Children always bow to adults and wave or bow among themselves. When greeting a superior, it is common to ask about health and parents. When greeting a subordinate, the questions are about the spouse and children.

**CLOTHING:** Most Koreans, except for the elderly and some in rural areas, wear Western-style clothing. The youth wear modern fashions, and Korea has an active fashion industry. For special occasions or holidays, however, traditional clothing is often worn. Bare feet are inappropriate.

**CHILD REARING PRACTICES:** Parents place a great deal of emphasis on literacy and numeracy and child care programs in Korea are much more structured than in Australia. Parents are also much more likely to be involved in their child's education and will want to monitor their child's progress through frequent written reports from the child care provider. They will want to know as much as possible about the child care programs and what their children will 'learn.' It is not uncommon for children to attend childcare and also take classes in art, music and English.

Centres in Korea are generally attractive and offer a range of up-to-date equipment, toys and arts and craft supplies. Parents expect their children to be well behaved and respectful and adopt a loving yet firm approach. The family is an important part of Korean life and 'love your family love your state' is still very much a part of government philosophy. However both parents usually work and children are placed in day care centres. A number of these may be located in the work place. Children may appear shy, but generally do not lack personal confidence.

Starting on 1 November 1958, all education up to middle school became compulsory and free of charge. By 1975 North Korea had extended this to eleven years of free compulsory education, including one year in a collective pre-school. In addition, factories and collective farms have nursery schools, where children are introduced to socialisation and taken care of collectively away from home, since mothers are usually full-time workers.

**HIGHER EDUCATION** is regarded as an honour and a privilege, as such, it is not open to everyone. Entry is often through military distinction or intellectual recommendation.

## **CUISINE**

Rice, barley and beans are staple foods of Korea. The consumption of soy beans and corn is high, as is that of millet and wheat. Korean food is generally spicy. *Kimchi* (a spicy pickled cabbage) and rice are the mainstays of the diet around which most other dishes are produced. Meals usually consist of a number of spicy vegetables, soup, fish and *kimchi*.

Because of the lower economic level of North Korea, traditional Korean delicacies such as *pulkogi* (marinated beef) and *kalbi* (marinated short ribs) are not as common as in South Korea. A favourite food in North Korea is *naengmyon*, a cold noodle dish.

Families rarely have time to eat daily meals together. Fathers often have to leave early in the morning and return late at night. They commonly eat their meals at the workplace cafeterias. Koreans consider eating while walking on the street ill-mannered and offensive, something only a child is allowed to indulge in. Except during lengthy dinner parties, conversation during meals is quite limited. Eating with fingers is considered impolite, but slurping soup and noodles is accepted; in fact, it is a practical way to



eat hot food at the rapid pace Koreans are used to. Spoons for soup and chopsticks for everything else are the most common utensils.

**REFERENCES AND SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION**

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