

SOUTH KOREA by Anne Dean,
Editorial Director, Living
Abroad LLC and Yonjoo Oh,
Managing Director, RELOC8
Asia – Korea



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*"As you may know, sharing meals has special meaning in Korea. Family members are called sikku 'ku' means 'mouths' and 'sik' means 'to feed.' I am going to speak about my philosophy and the direction of my economic policy with you as if you were my sikku."
Address President Roh Moo-hyun at a Breakfast Meeting with the American and European Union Chambers of Commerce in Korea [January 17, 2003]*

South Korea has a population of over 45 million people, making it the 25th most populated country in the world. The main city centers include Incheon, Pusan, Seoul and Taegu.

Not to be confused with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), the Republic of Korea (South Korea) lies in the southern half of the Korean peninsula. Tensions between North and South Korea are infamous, however the recent summit talks between Korean leaders has considerably lessened this tension as of late.

South Korea has a democratic government that ensures all citizens equality, personal freedom and human rights. The country's nine provinces and five districts are governed by a series of elected officials since 1995.

Korea is a country filled with a friendly population of diligent, controlled people who continue to endure any of life's hardships presented to them. It is a country rich in tradition and struggle, but also a country growing and expanding with the times. As a foreign national, you will be treated with respect and will find this country culturally stimulating as well as beautiful.

Climate

South Korea has a climate that is divided into four distinct seasons. The Korean summer is generally hot and humid, with an average temperature of 26 degrees Celsius (79 degrees Fahrenheit). Fall is by far the most colorful time of year in South Korea, with leaves changing colors to red, orange and yellow. In late fall the transition to winter begins, with temperatures dropping and leaves falling. The average winter temperature is between zero and seven degrees Celsius (32 and 44 degrees Fahrenheit), but the coldest weather can be ten degrees below zero (14 degrees Fahrenheit) with a wind chill of 20 degrees below zero (four degrees below zero Fahrenheit). With spring comes a temperature of approximately 11 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit).

One distinct characteristic of the South Korean climate is a strong wind that is present year round, generally blowing from the northwest to the south in the winter and the

opposite in the summer. Summer sees the most rainfall, with winter seeing the least, and fall and spring falling somewhere in between.

The Culture

Korea's social culture is sculpted by Buddhist, Confucian and Christian traditions, with elements of all three religions expressed in daily life. The Buddhist concept of fatalism is what enables the Koreans to continue to endure all that is handed to them. With the hope that all hardships and difficulties will one day reap their reward, the Koreans continue to strive towards excellence.

The Confucian aspect of society is reflected in the discreet suppression of emotion. Most Koreans keep a quiet and reserved exterior without ever displaying any type of extreme emotion. This does not mean that there is no emotion. Koreans are very sensitive to their own feelings as well as to those of others.

Considered to be a uniform society of homogeneous nature, Koreans take great pride in their distinct attributes and physical characteristics that unite the entire country. In addition, great care is given to maintaining the common society through one language and culture that has been retained despite the many years of oppression from other nations.

Like many Asian cultures, there are a variety of ways in which Koreans greet each other, depending on status and age. The traditional greeting is a bow with a handshake. When doing the handshake always extend your left hand on the right hand of the person you are shaking as this is a sign of respect, especially for the elders.

Greetings are always done with a "Mr.," "Mrs." or "Ms." followed by the family name. First names are never used unless you are on very friendly terms. Korean names normally consist of three Korean words, first being the family name and the last two denotes the first name. One of the two letters of the first name sometimes denotes the clan and thus has some rules. (Unlike most Western countries, Koreans have many more first names than the last names.) When addressing a Korean use the family name or full name followed by the phrase "sonsaengnim," which means "respected person."

Koreans follow the Confucian edict which means that dignity, status and courtesy generally guide social behavior. People are brought up to be hard working and modest about their success. While they can be very direct, they will still be polite and treat you with respect. Koreans do not like to criticize or have public forms of disagreement as this is in contrast with the ideal of harmony and order.

Koreans may show little patience for waiting in line, after all, they are used to pushing and crowding to get a space on the bus, train or in a store.

Women

Compared to many societies, especially Western societies which boast female equality, gender roles in South Korea may seem quite different. It is most important that foreign nationals understand that different gender roles in South Korea may not be what they are accustomed to, and should always respect Korean culture and tradition. South Korea is considered by many to be a male-dominated society, and women are traditionally defined by their relationship to a male family member.

However, changes are taking place, especially in the major cities, where there is more industrialization and exposure to Western culture.

Language

Korean is the national language of Korea, although Japanese is widely understood by the older generations who had studied under Japanese rule (1910-1945). English is the language of business and is taught in schools. Most educated people may have studied English with a high concentration on reading and writing in school therefore making communication less difficult. However, not all of the Koreans speak English. It may be a good idea to learn some phrases in the language to get along outside of the office.

Korean is based on the hangul alphabet and is somewhat easy to learn. You may be presented with some slight confusions when confronted with a Romanization of a Korean word. For example, when traveling Chamsil, Chamshil and Jamshil all are the same place. The Roman letters ch and j, b and p, d and t, and s and sh are interchangeable. To further the confusion, official Romanization has changed over the years.

As in most foreign countries, when speaking with an individual who may not speak fluent English, it may be beneficial to speak slowly and repeat important words or phrases whenever necessary. Most Koreans who are high school graduates may understand several written words, so writing English on a piece of paper can suffice as a last resort to communicate. Keep in mind that non-verbal communication is almost important as the spoken words. You will find non-verbal communication is a large part of Korean life. Pay strict attention to it and do not accept it as rude.

Religion

Korean religion is a combination of beliefs and ideals that have been adopted from traditional religions. The most predominate religion in South Korea is Buddhism with Christianity coming second. Both religions have a large impact on the daily lives of the Koreans. In addition to the main organized religions, Koreans are adamant followers of Confucianism.

Confucianism is based on a strict set of rules pertaining to social conduct. The underlying understanding of Confucianism is harmony. Harmony in all aspects of life, be it family, business or emotion, is to be obtained in order prevent social disruption. Everyone in society has a purpose and a place, and this should always be remembered and respected. Trust, piety, loyalty, respect and positional distinction are components that are instilled into every aspect of daily life.

Shamanism

The invocation and worship of spiritual deities are the basis of shamanism. Despite several strong attempts to eliminate such beliefs from society, shamanism has become entrenched in modern Korean Buddhist, Christian and Confucian rituals. Shamanism stresses the importance of spiritual existence and relation to every part of nature. Everything has a spirit attached to it, either good or bad, which must be appeased in order to maintain harmony.

Korean mudangs, commonly women with the ability to communicate with the spirits, serve as the go-betweeners for the spiritual world. When confronted with a problem in life, a mudang will conduct a kut--a ceremony to help appease the spirit -- in order to rejuvenate personal harmony.

Doing Business

Doing business in Seoul may take some getting used to. In addition to a new country, you will be expected to adapt to the local customs and modes of business. Although there are not many differences between Korean and Western business, there are some things that you should be aware of.

Business Customs & Etiquette

The traditional greeting consists of a bow, which is typically followed up with a handshake. Although women do not always shake hands, it is customary for men to shake hands. When introduced to a female colleague or associate, do not offer to shake her hand unless she extends hers first. Always address the woman by her full name and keep in mind that it is considered rather improper to call a woman by her given name. Business cards should be exchanged with both hands, and should be printed in English on one side with Korean on the other. When someone presents a business card, be sure to examine it thoroughly before putting it away.

One of the most important aspects of doing business in Seoul is that of respect of authority figures. Although business decisions are based on a consensus, it is the authority figure that makes the final decisions. Never cause an associate to lose face in public. Face is the concept of self-pride and would cause a great deal of embarrassment if one was publicly humiliated by another person.

In general, Koreans prefer to stress personal and social relationships between individuals rather than strong business efficiency.

Drinking alcohol may not be something that is usually done at most business meetings, but drinking among business people in Korea is considered to be a sign of trust between colleagues. When in a social situation, be sure to offer or pour the host a drink first. Since the majority of business is done outside the office setting, large amounts of money are spent to promote festive events. Always be flexible and amiable when such an occasion arises.

Koreans prefer to conduct business on a face-to-face basis, and is considered rather improper to discuss such matters on the telephone. The telephone is to be used only to confirm meetings. When in the company of a stranger, always address the individual by their full name. Never call someone by their given name unless they ask you to do so first.

When in a business meeting, remember that Koreans tend to be quiet and reserved. Be discrete--do not speak loudly at meetings and always expect everyone attending to voice their opinion.

Business Dress

Business dress is typically conservative, and men should wear dark suits and conservative ties. Women should wear conservative business attire and should always avoid risqué clothing.

Entertaining

Most business will be conducted over lunch or during a cocktail party. It is most common for office associates to invite an expat out for drinks or even to their home for dinner.

Business entertaining is often conducted in restaurants as opposed to private homes. If invited to a Korean home, though, it is customary to bring a small gift such as crafts from one's home region, fruit, cake, chocolates, flowers, imported coffee, etc.

Gift Giving

Giving gifts to build relationships is a common practice in the workplace, and reciprocity is expected.

Should one plan to give a gift to several people within an organization, a gift of greater value should go to the senior person. The gifts that are presented to that person's subordinates may be similar, as long as they are of lesser value than the one given their superior.

Reluctance in accepting a gift is considered good manners, so expect it, but be persistent.

Whenever a person receives a gift, it is customary for the recipient to give another gift of similar value in return at a later time. So, if a gift is given, make sure it is compatible with the recipient's economic means because his or her inability to reciprocate will result in a loss of face. Similarly, if one receives a gift that is far too extravagant and a potential bribe, it should be sent back, citing company policy not to accept a gift with a certain dollar amount. This should be done with graciousness, gratitude and regret for not being able to accept such generosity.

Business Hours

Business hours are from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and most Koreans work a 44-hour week.

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