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Cover photo: Downtown Seoul.

Photo on pages 132-133 shows a panoramic view of modern Seoul built around the core of historic buildings. The photo was supplied by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Washington, D.C.



Life in South Korea Today

SEOK-CHOON LEW

During the last four decades South Korea has transformed itself from a traditional agrarian society to a modern industrial complex. In 1945, the overwhelming majority of the population lived in rural villages and hamlets and were farmers. Forty years later, in 1985, more than 65 percent of the population lived in urban areas, and more than two-thirds of the working population were engaged in nonagricultural labor. Rapid urbanization and industrialization have accelerated because of a marked success in economic growth.

Coupled with the structural change in economy and population was the dramatic improvement in the standard of living, which resulted in new modes of social life. The traditional belief-value system based on communal ties and kinship attachment has given way to a modern one in which impersonal prescribed rules of social relations are predominant. This change was caused, in part, by greater opportunities for mobility. Traditional heritage is seen as an essential counterweight to the individualism of modern society and as an assertion of basic Korean values in the face of foreign influence. South Koreans do not seem to be attempting to create a

carbon copy of Western society. Rather, they are trying to synthesize indigenous Korean values and Western values, still an ongoing process.

Religion and Social Values

The social values of contemporary South Korea reflect the synthesis and development of diverse influences, both indigenous and foreign. Shamanism, the oldest indigenous religion, goes back to prehistoric times and is based on belief in a world inhabited by spirits. The Shaman is the sorceress or priest who attempts to mediate with the spirits or to appease them, thus preventing natural disasters and curing illness. Shamanists believe that these spirits have the power to influence or change the fortunes of people.

Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism were introduced to Korea from China long before the Christian era. Taoism and Buddhism are highly disciplined philosophic religions that stress personal salvation through the renunciation of worldly desire. On the other hand, Confucianism is a social ethic that provides a this-worldly-oriented moral code of conduct whose chief virtues are filial

piety and a combination of loyalty and reverence. The worship of ancestral spirits as prescribed by Confucian ritual forms a dominant mode of religious expression.

The introduction of Christianity in Korea is a relatively recent phenomenon, compared with other foreign value systems. This introduction took place during the nineteenth century. Despite its short history in Korea, Christianity played a significant role in the modernization of the country and in the struggle for national independence against Japan. Encouraged by these contributions to national development, about a tenth of South Korean population is now Christian.

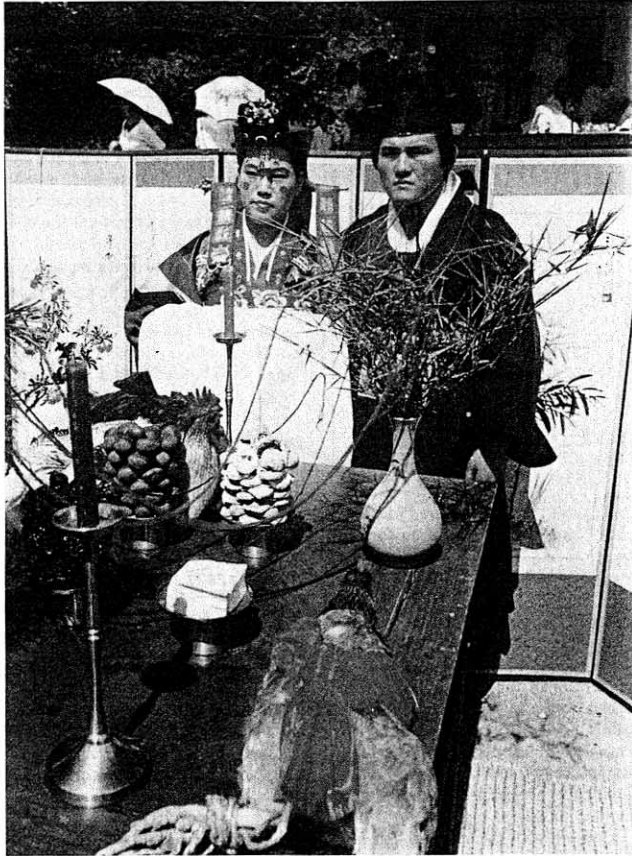
Given the great diversity of religious expression, the role of religion in South Korea's social development has been a complex one. A concern with moral principles is deeply rooted in the Korean tradition. The Confucian ideal of the superior individual who chooses to act on the basis of an abstract ethical code is a fundamental part of a Korean world view. Therefore, most Koreans seem to take for granted the conventional sociological notion that normal behavior is motivated by shared values rather than by a deterministic factor of an economic

nature or by an individual's rational assessment of alternative courses of action. Similarly, the failure to act properly is almost invariably attributed to an inadequate education in morality.

Thus, in Korea, the ethical emphasis is on social obligation and propriety rather than on the struggles of an individual conscience to achieve personal salvation by means of direct transactions with the supernatural. Moreover, religious beliefs practiced in contemporary Korea tend to be syncretistic. There is no exact or exclusive criterion by which each believer can be identified because there is nothing contradictory in one person visiting and praying at Buddhist temples, participating in Confucian ancestor rites, and even consulting a Shaman. The contrasting perspective of Western Christianity adds to the complexity of the contemporary situation. This is probably one reason why Christianity, when proclaiming exclusive possession of the truth, appeared to lack harmony with the traditions of existing faith, especially Confucianism.

Family, Kinship, and Social Life

The Korean family is patrilineal. The most important concern for the family group is the production of a male heir who will carry on the family line and perform ancestor rituals in the household and at the gravesite. The first son customarily assumes leadership of the family after his father's death and inherits a greater portion of property than his younger brothers in order to be in a position to carry out the ritually prescribed obligations to the family ancestors. Thus, in Korea, kinship loyalties and obligations have generally taken precedence over other claims and commitments, both ideally and in terms of actual behavior. Not surprisingly, the basic structural principle of family system is closely associated with the Confucian concept of filial piety.



A bride and groom at a traditional Korean wedding.

As part of the modernization process, profound changes have been taking place in the family system, and there has been considerable erosion of the dominance of family concerns. Contemporary urban family and social life exhibit significant trends away from traditional structures. Since people in the cities no longer work among their relatives and neighbors in the farm fields but among unrelated people in factories, shops, and offices, mobility in human relations is

becoming more apparent as people change their residence more frequently, often in line with employment requirements. These changes in location tend to weaken complex kinship and family structures, and the nuclear family is becoming predominant in contemporary South Korea. Accordingly, the conjugal relationship, rather than the relationship between the son and his parents, is achieving greater importance, leading to greater equality between husband

and wife. Furthermore, the nuclear family unit is becoming increasingly independent, both economically and psychologically, from members of the larger kin group.

Although it is evident that there is a movement away from lineage and neighborhood-based social relations toward achievement-oriented social relations, ideals of family cohesion and solidarity retain their influence, and the individual's dependence on close kin is still very great. It is still true that the urban individual, whether he is the leader of a well-established organization or a newly arrived migrant from the countryside, is apt to deal with the world of strangers outside his doorstep by relying on a well-organized network of kinfolk for assistance. Moreover, filial piety and the continuation of the male line are still considered to be very important, and surveys show that male children are strongly preferred over female children, even by modern parents.

Education

Few doubt that the rapid economic growth in Korea has stemmed from a widespread educational foundation, which has provided a highly educated and trained labor force. The traditional esteem for the educated person has been extended beyond the stereotype of the Confucian scholar to other concepts of scientist, technician, or manager working with highly specialized knowledge. Education in Korea represents a very productive synthesis of traditional Confucianism and characteristically modern attitudes toward the successful development of human capital, in quality as well as in quantity.

At present, as shown in Figure 1, the education system is divided into six years of compulsory primary school, followed by three years each of middle and high school, and four years of college or university. A competitive graduate program for master's and doctoral degrees is also available in higher education. The

figure indicates that Korea has successfully expanded enrollments on both primary and secondary levels to percentages comparable with those of leading Western countries. Consequently, the Korean population now enjoys almost total literacy.

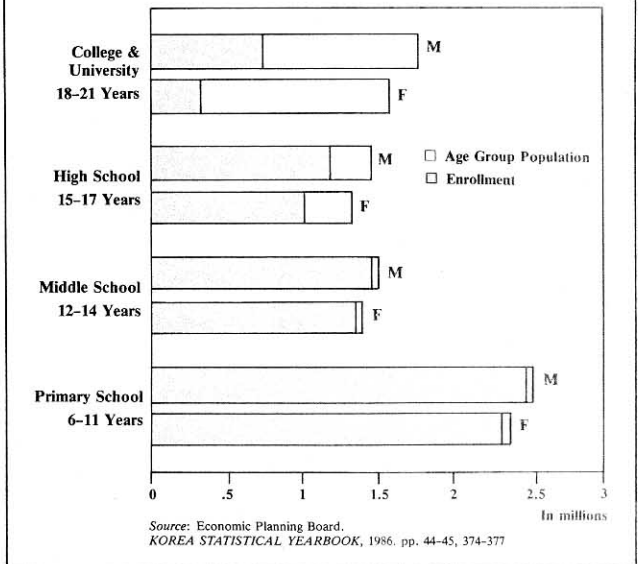
Families invest a great deal in their children's schooling in terms of financial and emotional support. The government provides almost 100 percent of the expenses for primary school. At the middle and high school level, the parental contributions increase dramatically; parents provide roughly three-quarters of the cost at each level. The willingness of parents to sacrifice for secondary school expenses is closely associated with the perception that entrance to top universities would offer opportunities for their children to become part of the country's social and economic elite. This possibility of upward social mobility through educational achieve-

ment for even the lower class defuses the destabilizing influence of many social contradictions in contemporary Korea.

Housing, Food, and Clothing

The traditional Korean residence is a single-story, detached building with several rooms forming an L or U shape. Much of the charm of a Korean house results from the heavily tiled roof making an upward tilt at the corners. A floor-warming system, called *ondol*, provides heat for the house. The floor warming system nicely fits into the Korean life style and has proved to be a rational and scientific heating system in terms of fluid mechanics and thermodynamics. To keep their floor from getting dirty, Korean people do not wear shoes in their homes. Many domestic activities take place on the floor of the home where, during the day, a movable din-

FIGURE 1—Male and Female School Enrollment Compared to Age-Group Population, 1985.





In the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, the courtyards of Buddhist temples are strung with wire. People buy paper lanterns and candles to hang from the wires. If a lantern catches fire, that signals a year of bad luck.

ing table is placed for eating. At night, the members of a household sleep on portable quilted mats placed directly on the floor. Because of the comfort it provides, the floor warming system from the traditional home has been subsequently employed in modern architectural schemes.

Of course, with the adoption of Western ideas, these traditional residential customs are changing. The major trend is toward construction of apartment complexes and appropriate growth of satellite cities to satisfy aspirations of an expanding population with a nuclear family life style. Although the increase in modern-style housing is predominantly in contemporary urban Korea, many historical architectural forms are still being incorporated into modern construction, as illustrated in the case of the heating system.

Korea's national costume, called *hanbok*, is made of coarse hemp, cotton or lavish colorful silk. Though now most people prefer Western clothing for daily work, people still

wear the *hanbok* for special occasions, festivals, and ceremonies. Korean clothing is seen more often in the rural countryside than in the cities.

The main dish for Koreans is generally boiled rice, and other dishes and recipes vary greatly according to the region and season. Next to rice, *kimchi*—a pungent, fermented dish made from cabbage, turnips, or cucumbers that are seasoned with salt, garlic, onions, ginger, red pepper, and shellfish—is the second most important component of a Korean meal. Other dishes include seafood, meat or poultry, vegetables, herbs, and roots. Each person is served his own bowl of soup and rice, but all the other dishes are placed in the center of the table for everyone to share. A spoon and chopsticks are used for eating.

Leisure and Sports

Because of the advances in their standard of living, contemporary Koreans are demanding that govern-

ment and private industries offer increased recreational opportunities. The results are apparent in various aspects of society. Cultural facilities for modern as well as traditional types of arts have been expanded, reaffirming the aesthetic mind Koreans have cultivated throughout history. Land for public parks and playgrounds has been reserved when land development plans are presented. The construction of diverse sports facilities is under way to enhance leisure opportunities.

In particular, hosting the 1988 Summer Olympic Games marks a milestone in shifting government policy to meet the growing demand for improved sports facilities. Planning for the extensive facilities necessary to accommodate sports events and huge influxes of foreigners should include upgrading tourist facilities, such as hotels and transportation systems, and ensuring easy access to all of Korea's cultural treasures. The preparation for the games will result in an overall improvement of the living environment in Korea.

Maintaining a National Identity

Change is probably the single most persistent theme underlying social life in Korea during the past forty years. Modernization from a traditional value system, industrialization from an agrarian economy, urbanization from rural villages, and internationalization from a hermit kingdom are the rubrics that characterize contemporary Korea. Moreover, when confronting these rapid changes in a socioeconomic environment, whether generated internally or imposed externally, Koreans have preserved a strong sense of the national identity they had developed throughout their history. Koreans believe that this cultural identity provides them with some leverage in a world that is sometimes friendly and other times hostile. With the national identity, Koreans hope to realize their own ideals and to contribute to the progress of the world community.