

TOP TEN THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT KOREA IN THE 21st CENTURY

BY EDWARD J. SHULTZ

One: KOREA IS NOT SMALL When looking at geographic size, one can argue that Korea is small. North and South Korea combined measure 84,747 square miles, an area slightly smaller than Great Britain, less than half the size of France, and about the size of Minnesota or Utah. But size is only one measure.

According to recent figures, the populations of North and South Korea combined number in excess of 68 million people, sixteenth in overall world population. There are more Koreans in Korea than French in France or British in Great Britain. From a historical perspective, it has always been one of the most populated lands, and Korean is the twelfth most commonly used language in the world.

South Korea is a highly urbanized society. Greater Seoul, with a population exceeding 20 million, is the third largest metropolitan center in the world. Five cities in South Korea have populations of more than one million people. Korea's limited geographic size makes it one of the world's most densely populated countries.

Two: KOREA IS NOT NEW Home to some of the world's oldest organized societies, Korea's prehistory goes back at least to the paleolithic age (circa 35,000 BP). Organized states first emerged around the fourth century B.C.E., and tribal kingdoms occupied the Korean peninsula by the sixth century. In 675, much of the southern two-thirds of the Korean peninsula came under the control of the Silla kingdom. In the tenth century, a new state, Koryŏ, controlled all of the peninsula except for the northern border area. Korea's modern borders were secured with the rise of its last dynasty, the Chosŏn kingdom, in 1392. In the West, empires have grown and collapsed while the Korean civilization has sustained its unity.

In the tenth century the Koryŏ kingdom organized an efficient, hierarchical governing structure. Like China, Koryŏ's state civil service examination recruited men to be government officials. Koryŏ had a rational division of power, and policy decisions made in the capital were executed in the countryside. Tax revenues flowed to the capital, paying salaries of government officials and the costs of equipping an army. The next kingdom, Chosŏn, further refined this governmental structure and closely managed its territory.

Living together as one people, the Koreans share a common culture and speak the same language; their homogeneity is a defining characteristic. Although there were contacts with the outside, Koreans lived together in relative isolation for over a thousand years, unifying attitudes across the peninsula.

Three: KOREA IS THE HOME OF MANY INVENTIONS To the early Koreans, scholarship was important. Monks, students, and scholars spent long hours reading and understanding texts. Inspired by religious devotion, the Silla people experimented with printing techniques. They produced the oldest extant example of wood-block printing, the Dharani sutra. Discovered in a pagoda being restored in 1966, the wood-block print dates from before 749. Five hundred years later, in 1239, when the Koreans were battling against the Mongol invasions, they used moveable metallic type to produce another Buddhist sutra.

If defense of their land pushed Koreans to refine printing, it also stimulated them to develop better weapons. Admiral Yi Sunsin in 1592, when confronted by the Hideyoshi invasion from Japan, built the first ironclad vessels used in a naval battle. Called "turtle ships" because of their shape and iron armor, Admiral Yi's vessels mauled the invading Japanese and ultimately forced them to retreat to Japan in 1598.

Koreans are among the most technologically-linked people in the world. More than 30 million people, 64 percent of the South Korean population, use cell phones, and South Korea has the eighth highest cell subscriber base in the world. More than 24 million South Koreans tap into the Internet, placing Korea in the world's top five internet-linked countries.

The Korean penchant for invention can also be seen in art. One of the earliest examples of what scientists believe to be an astronomical observatory, built in the 630s, is still standing in southeastern Korea. Architecturally, the Koreans perfected ventilation techniques and solved drainage problems as seen in a stone grotto temple constructed in the 750s. Its design kept the underground structure clean and dry. Koreans perfected celadon glaze application and went on to develop the art of inlay. Their achievements in ceramics remain the standard of perfection in world art circles.

Four: KOREANS HAVE A PASSION FOR NATURE In their art, in their literature, and in their leisure, Koreans express a deep passion for nature. In construction, whether it be a house, a palace, or a temple, the desire to be in harmony with nature is evident to this day. Koreans believe in *p'ungsu*, what Westerners call geomancy, the belief that topography dictates destiny. Attention to surroundings, to the presence of nature, is foremost in their minds when selecting building sites. This desire to work with and represent nature spilled over into the fine arts and is expressed in representations of animals in pottery or splendid landscapes done in watercolors. The Korean aesthetic sense is rooted in nature.

The earliest writings sang the glories of nature, whether a comet streaking through the night or a mystical mist enveloping the land. When the Koreans drafted history, they wrote with great pride about their natural environment. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, some of Korea's best poems praised the beauties of nature. Poetry is a literary form still emphasized today: schools empty their pupils into the hills to write about nature.

In leisure, Koreans rejoice with their natural surroundings. On weekends, the mountains of Korea are filled with hikers appreciating the beauty of the natural world. Leisure destinations, whether beaches or mountain temples, attract millions each year. The Diamond Mountains, famous for their craggy peaks and coastal beauty, draw North and South Koreans together for family reunions. Koreans find regeneration through communing with nature and rejoicing in the scenic beauty that has blessed their land.

Five: YOU CAN STILL SEE CONFUCIANISM IN ACTION ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA From the time Confucianism entered Korea, as early as the fourth century, it has remained an important philosophy in guiding the lives of the Korean people. Stressing the importance of human relations and reciprocal ties among people, Confucianism helped bring social stability and authority to Korea's rulers. By stressing the importance of loyalty, it fostered respect and service to leaders and the state. By emphasizing filial piety, it caused families to accept paternal leadership and thereby regulated social interaction. Confucianism is hierarchical and mandates subordinates to respect the wishes of superiors, but it also dictates that those in authority be responsible and look after their subordinates.

Many South Koreans at the start of the twenty-first century adhere to many of these traditional principles, ones most clearly seen in family dynamics. Generally, the father is treated with respect and is deferred to in decision-making. Newspapers sing praises of those noted for filial action, and to many South Koreans, the obligation to serve one's elderly parents on a daily basis is central to their existence. The importance of the family emerges clearly when a youth talks about marriage. To marry a spouse not approved by one's family can lead to severe hardship and even ostracism. Major holidays center on venerating deceased parents and grandparents.

In interacting with friends, many Koreans place a strong emphasis on loyalty; once friendships are firm, rarely do they fall apart. Schools play an especially important role in binding people together, and classmates, whether primary school, high school, or college, continue to support each other for the duration of their lives. These links extend to tight bonds between upperclassmen (*sŏnbae*) and lower classmen (*hubae*) as well.

Six: KOREA IS NOT A COPY OF CHINA Situated to the east of China, Korea cannot ignore China's presence in its historical evolution, but Korea is not China. Chinese institutions in governance were a model for early Koreans. Chinese characters were used to express the first written words in Korea, and religious expression from China helped Koreans shape their own spirituality. Even while receiving these immense contributions to their development, Koreans evolved a culture distinct from that of China.

A Korean king in 943, noting the Korean attachment to the “ways of China,” said, “Our people’s character is different from that of the Chinese. Hence, there is no reason to strain ourselves unreasonably to copy the Chinese way.”¹ When Chinese visited traditional Korea, they were struck by the differences between the two countries, and begrudgingly admired the spontaneity and frank nature of the Korean people.

For centuries Koreans relied on the Chinese character to express their thoughts. In the middle of the fifteenth century, a Korean monarch assembled scholars who, after timely deliberations, presented a new written script called *hangul*. This uniquely Korean phonetic alphabet script enables Koreans to write words as they sound, freeing them from the straitjacket imposed by exclusive use of Chinese characters. Today *hangul* is used everywhere and the Chinese character is disappearing.

Both Buddhism, which came to Korea by way of China, and Confucianism have been immensely important in the spiritual and political maturation of Koreans. Both belief systems, however, have had to work in an environment framed by shamanism. Although its interaction with Confucianism was less direct, this native belief system heavily impacted the practice of Buddhism. Shamans from earliest times have remained an integral part of folk expression and are just one example of how Korea is distinct from China.

The role of Christianity in Korea is unique in East Asia. Early Christian influences came into Korea from China in the eighteenth century, but it was not until the late nineteenth century with the opening of Korea to the West that Christianity, through the efforts of Protestant missionaries, gained a significant foothold. Since the 1960s, Christianity’s alignment with modernization efforts and the democratic movement has bolstered church attendance, leading some to claim that up to 50 percent of Koreans today are Christian.

Seven: THE KOREAS ARE NOT HERMIT NATIONS Nineteenth century Western traders referred to Korea as the “Hermit Kingdom,” an epithet referring to its attempts to keep Western powers out by sealing its borders. This policy did not last long when the United States in 1882 and then many other Western states established formal diplomatic relations with Korea. While some people today contend that North Korea pursues a similar policy of shutting its borders, this too is not a completely accurate assessment.

Historically Korea had close contacts with the outside world. By the sixth century, when organized states were fully in control of the peninsula, Korea was the center of East Asian exchange, sharing goods and people with China and Japan. In the eighth century, Koreans were the maritime leaders of East Asia, transferring commodities, priests, and officials among China, Japan, and Korea. Over the next thousand years, although contacts with Japan and China changed depending upon the international environment, trade missions and formal governmental exchanges were the norm, especially between China and Korea. Prior to the twentieth century, educated Koreans, by mastering the written Chinese language, were able to keep abreast of important events and ideas emanating from China. At the start of the twentieth century, educated Koreans mastered Japanese, and at the start of the current century, English became the accepted second language of all Koreans. Through their bilingualism, Koreans throughout the centuries have been able to remain current with the outside world.

Today both North and South Korea are members of the United Nations, and both have diplomatic contacts with nations around the world. South Korea has embassies and missions in more than 190 countries; North Korea has diplomatic ties with more than 150. There are over one million Korean-Americans living in the United States today. Korea never was a “Hermit Nation.”

Eight: KOREA IS TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED Technology is behind Korea’s economic growth (it ranks thirteenth in the world in overall Gross Domestic Product). Koreans are among the most technologically-linked people in the world. More than 30 million people, 64 percent of the South Korean population, use cell phones, and South Korea has the eighth highest cell subscriber base in the world. More than 24 million South Koreans tap into the Internet, placing Korea in the world’s top five internet-linked countries. Buying off the Web is a common practice in Korea. Its excellent computer technology allowed it to rank fourth in 2001 in sales in the global chip-making industry, and Korea holds the top spot in the dynamic random access memory (DRAM) sector.²

Koreans have reached a position of leadership in technology through historical factors. During the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945, rapid economic and social change helped lay a foundation for future growth. But Korean diligence and hard work is the key to this success story. Since the end of the Korean War, Koreans have stressed the importance of education, leading to an education mania that has resulted in a 98 percent literacy rate. Korea is one of the most literate societies in the world, allowing ease with new technology. South Koreans sent many of their talented youth abroad to learn about the latest systems in technology and then lured them back to Korea with plush economic packages. By fostering an environment of inquiry and support, South Korea has taken advantage of native talent to push itself into the ranks of the technologically advanced.

Nine: THE KOREAN PENINSULA CANNOT BE IGNORED Distracted by the two major powers in East Asia—China and Japan—scholars, students, diplomats, and politicians often forget Korea. It has been referred to as a “shrimp between two whales”, a shrimp having to accede to the dictates of the whales. And in fact, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Great Powers used Korea as a pawn when alternately Chinese, Japanese, and Russians sent troops onto the Korean peninsula. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Great Powers again struggled over Korea as United Nations (under U.S. command) and Chinese troops clashed during the Korean War.

Korea’s interests have often been overlooked, and concern for Korea has often been secondary to China and Japan. This has caused many to look at Korea as a problem rather than a possible solution, and has led many to ignore Korea’s unique contributions. At the beginning of this century, Korean film is generating great interest around the world. Korean soap operas have captured a significant following in the United States. Korean pop culture is the rage across Southeast Asia. Korean athletes are setting new records, especially in U.S. sports. Korea became the first Asian nation to make it into the final four of the World Cup, and Korean virtuosos have enriched the world of classical music. These are just a few areas in which Koreans are declaring through their own bold successes that Korea cannot be ignored.

South Korea has struggled to build democratic institutions. An active democratic movement spearheaded by students forced Syngman Rhee to relinquish the presidency in 1960. When Korean military leaders took power in 1961, advocates for democracy continued to work for greater freedom. Not until 1993, with the full restoration of authority to civilian leaders, did democratic institutions seem secure. Koreans, passionate and methodical in their quest for democracy, have pursued still wider political goals by seeking greater rights for labor and women.

Ten: KOREANS WANT TO BE REUNIFIED When Koreans look to the future, foremost on their minds is the reunification of their country. In 1945, at the close of World War II, Americans, faced with the collapse of Japan and anxious to secure a U.S. foothold in Korea, drew an arbitrary boundary across Korea at the 38th parallel. The U.S. declared that north of that line the Soviet Union would disarm the Japanese occupiers of Korea, and south of it the U.S. would handle the surrender. Although this Great Power decision angered Koreans, north and south, they were powerless to resist, and in 1948 the Republic of Korea was formed in the south and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea appeared in the north. In 1950 peace on the peninsula was shattered when war between the north and the south broke out. The Great Powers signed an armistice in 1953, but the country has remained divided.

With the continued division of the country, hostilities have remained high, occasionally erupting into minor battles. The memory of the war and its staggering losses are bitter for both north and south, and each side has put forth unending suggestions on how to overcome this division. Since the 1970s there have been both public and secret meetings between government officials in search of a compromise. In June 2000 a major breakthrough appeared imminent when South Korea’s president Kim Daejung and North Korea’s president Kim Jong Il met for several days in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. Agreements have been signed and some have been met, but many issues remain to be resolved. One of the most urgent actions is to reconcile families separated from each other because of the division and war. Brothers, sisters, parents, and children who have not seen each other for more than five decades desperately want to be reunited.

Koreans realize that a sore that has festered in Korean life ever since the country was first occupied by Japan in 1910 will start to heal with unification. And with the healing of this wound, Korea will once again be able to assert its role of leadership and achieve new marks in the world economy and culture. ■

NOTES

1. Peter H. Lee, ed., *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 264.
2. *Korea Now*. April 6, 2002, p. 23.

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