

# Korean History

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## 1. Prehistoric Era

Artifacts from the early and late Paleolithic era have been found in every region on the Korea peninsula. Stone tools made in the Acheulian style, such as hand-sized axes made from quartz, wide-bladed axes, and scrapers, have been found in Jeongok-ri in the northern part of Seoul, drawing attention from around the world, and in the Pyeongyang region of North Korea the fossilized bones of Neanderthal humans have been discovered. However, it appears that the residents of Korea during the Paleolithic era moved north after the diluvial epoch, and there is a period of three to four thousand years that is devoid of human culture.

Around 6000 B.C.E. a group of ancient Asian peoples came down from the north and moved south along the eastern coast. Their relics discovered in Gulpo-ri, Osan-ri and Dongsam-dong include earthenware--such as earthenware with line patterns and no patterns in Dongsam-dong and earthenware with decorated mouths in Osan-ri--that is characteristic of early Neolithic cultures.

On the western coast, comb-pattern earthenware (a development over earthenware with decorated mouths that occurred around 5000 B.C.E.) has been discovered at such famous Neolithic era sites as Gungsan-ri and Amsa-dong. This new earthenware gradually replaced other forms and became the representative earthenware of Neolithic Korea.

People of the Neolithic era originally hunted meat and gathered wild grains, but in the late Neolithic era they began to cultivate grains. Early in the first millennium B.C.E., Tungus peoples moved to the Korean peninsula from Manchuria and assimilated the native residents of the area. These people are the direct ancestors of modern Koreans. These Tungus peoples arrived from the Yonyeong area and settled in the northern and western areas of the Korean peninsula. Historical records call these people the Yemaek (Weime in Chinese).

The Yemaek's migration to the southern part of the Korean peninsula coincides with the Bronze Age in Korea (c. 3000 B.C.E. - 1000 B.C.E.). Characteristic relics of the Korean Bronze Age are numerous dolmens, the so-called Yonyeong-style bronze swords, and bronze mirrors with coarse lines and two handles (*semungyeong*). An earthenware style that might be described as coarse and patternless was also produced during this period. Like the residents of the Korean peninsula during the Neolithic era, the residents of the Bronze Age adhered to shamanism. Accordingly, the tradition of bear totemism that had been handed down from the

Neolithic era was continued in the Bronze Age, in particular in the northern part of the Korean peninsula, and was transmitted to the early historical period. It would appear that the Koreans of the Bronze Age created the foundation myth of Dangun, the result of the union of the son of God (originally: *sangje*, or "Heavenly Emperor") and a bear that had been transformed into a woman, who went on to found Old Joseon around 3,000 B.C.E.

Around 300 B.C.E. iron weapons were introduced and the early Iron Age (c. 300 B.C.E. - 1 C.E.) began. Bronze weapons were no longer practical, but became symbols of authority for the leader of a society, and bronze ceremonial items decorated with intricate geometric patterns were also widely used. As agriculture--in particular rice agriculture--developed and iron began to be used, ruling groups grew and developed. In the second century B.C.E., Wiman II's Old Joseon, located by the lower reaches of the Daedong River in the northwest Korean peninsula, became a great threat to northern China. So in 108 B.C.E., Emperor Muje of Han China dispatched troops by land and sea and destroyed what they referred to as "the Hun's left arm," and then established a colony in Old Joseon territory that they called Nangnang.

## **2. Establishment of Ancient States**

The period from 1-300 C.E. is called the Early Three Kingdoms Period. During this time Goguryeo (108 B.C.E. - 668 C.E.) was established along the Yalu River and small tribal societies began to appear in southern Korea. Silla (57 B.C.E. - 935 C.E.) in the southeast and Baekje (18 B.C.E. - 660 C.E.) in the southwest began to gradually occupy adjacent areas, and by the year 300 C.E. they had developed into kingdoms in the practical sense. In 313 Goguryeo conquered Nangnang, and Korea entered the historical age, that is, the Three Kingdoms Period.

Gaya, a confederation of a number of tribes, was located between Silla and Baekje near the lower reaches of the Nakdong River, and it remained as a separate political and cultural entity until 562, when it was incorporated by Silla.

In 372, Buddhism entered Goguryeo from China and was introduced to Baekje a decade or so later. Silla was the last state to receive Buddhism, but it appears that Buddhism flourished more in Silla than in the other two states. With the patronage of the royal family, Buddhism grew rapidly and stimulated artistic activity, and also served as a bridge for the introduction of Chinese culture.

## **3. The Unified Silla Period**

There was continuous fighting between the three kingdoms, but eventually Silla allied with Tang China and conquered Baekje in 660 and Goguryeo in 668, unifying the Korean peninsula. The term "Old Silla" is used to refer to the kingdom before unification, while "Unified Silla" refers to the kingdom after unification. Gyeongju was the capital of Silla for approximately 1,000 years, from the Old Silla period until the fall of Unified Silla in 935. The glory of Gyeongju's past can be seen in Silla burial mounds and the Buddhist ruins primarily from the

Unified Silla period.

During the Unified Silla period (668-935), Silla formed close political and economic relationships with Tang China, and Silla culture became much more international. As can be seen in the amazing sculpture of Gyeongju's Seokguram Grotto, created in the mid 8th century, Buddhism and Buddhist culture flourished. Silla monks traveled to China and India to increase their knowledge and broaden their religious experience. Among them, a monk named Hyecho wrote an account of his journey to the center of Buddhism in India. According to Paul Pelliot, a copy of this book was discovered in Donhwang and is now kept in the National Library in Paris. It is an important resource on Buddhism in Asia.

However, Silla's power began to wane in the 9th century. The tradition of consanguineous marriage in the royal family, which was practiced in order to preserve the purity of the bloodline, served instead to ultimately weaken Silla. In the 9th century, this tradition, along with frequent crop failures and reduced government revenue, brought about economic chaos, and as the central government weakened rebels sprang up in revolt in frontier regions.

#### **4. The Goryeo Period**

Goryeo (918-1392) was founded in central Korea by Wang Geon, a general leading one of the rebel armies that rose up against Silla. He established his capital at Gaeseong in central Korea and received the official surrender of Silla's last monarch, King Gyeongseon. Goryeo, which is where the English "Korea" derives from, sought to reclaim all the territory once held in Manchuria by Goguryeo. However, Goryeo suffered from invasions by northern nomadic tribes such as the Geok, Yeojin and Mongols, and many cultural properties were burned or destroyed during this time. A few of the later Goryeo kings were even forced to take Mongol princesses as their brides. In spite of these difficulties, Goryeo culture and arts developed through cultural exchange with Song China across the Yellow Sea.

Goryeo became famous around the world for its outstanding celadon porcelain and the invention of movable metal type. When the Mongols invaded Goryeo in the 13th century the royal family retreated to Ganghwa-do Island on the western coast and there they printed a complete collection of the Buddhist scriptures using 80,000 movable wooden type dies, as a plea to Buddha to watch over the nation. The kings of Goryeo relied excessively on Buddhism throughout the Goryeo period. This excessive patronage by the royal family brought about the corruption of Buddhism. Monks became politically powerful individuals and landowners who did not need to pay taxes, and a few monks had clandestine meetings with Goryeo queens.

#### **5. The Joseon Period**

In 1388, General Yi Seong-gye received orders to lead a military expedition to aid Won, which was being attacked by Ming. Yi Seong-gye traveled all the way to the Yalu River and then ignored the king's order and returned to Gaeseong. In his eyes, both Won and Goryeo

had grown weak, and he realized that there was a need for a new dynasty. There was a need for a revolution to get rid of the social ills that had come from corrupted Buddhism and the powerless government of that age.

In 1392, Yi Seong-gye founded a new dynasty, which was called Joseon (1392-1910). Joseon suppressed Buddhism and founded its political and cultural philosophy on Neo-Confucianism. Yi Seong-gye formed a close relationship with Ming China, and Joseon became a "little China" in cultural terms for the nomadic tribes of the north and Japan to the south.

In the 15th century *hangeul* (the Korean writing system) was invented and gave new life to Joseon's cultural development. In 1403 Jujaso (a type foundry) was founded to publish books printed with government-made movable copper type. Joseon was also famous for its arts, in particular its *buncheong* ("white powder") pottery, white porcelain and blue porcelain. However, many cultural artifacts were lost during the Japanese invasion of the 16th century and the Manchu invasion of the 17th century.

In the 18th century hopeful new movements in the arts and literature drew attention, but as discussed above, the social foundation was insufficient to support them and they did not last long. By the time Western powers attempted to open the doors of East Asia in the 19th century, Joseon was little more than a small recluse nation.

## **6. Japanese Colonial Rule and the Establishment of the Republic of Korea**

In 1910 the Japanese Empire annexed Joseon, putting an end to the Joseon Dynasty and beginning a period of Japanese rule that last 36 years. Korea was liberated at the end of the Second World War in 1945, and the independent Republic of Korea was established. Korea's long cultural tradition became the foundation for efforts over the past half century to establish the new republic as a modern nation.

The first president, Syngman Rhee, cooperated with the United States, enabling him to preserve at least the southern half of the Korean peninsula, which had been in danger of becoming communist, as a capitalist land. After the experiences of the April 19th Student Revolution and the May 16th military coup d'etat, President Park Chung Hee exercised his dogmatic leadership abilities to achieve the goal of economic development, building the foundation that made the present economic situation possible. In spite of the Gwangju citizen's movement, the era of military government continued during the administrations of President Chun Doo-hwan and President Roh Tae-woo, but fortunately economic stability was preserved.

Democratic government was achieved with the administration of President Kim Young-sam, but Korean society grew uneasy with the foreign currency crisis of 1997. Since President Kim Dae-jung, the administration has focused its efforts on the Sunshine Policy, striving to ease tensions between North and South Korea but failing to achieve any noticeable results; recently, during the administration of President Roh Moo-hyun, North Korea has responded to these efforts by pursuing the development of nuclear capability. While political corruption has decreased somewhat, the Roh

administration is working against the trend of basing the economy on a capitalist market economy system even though there are still no signs of a solution to the problem of distribution of wealth among the rich and the poor.

# **Korean Nature, Economy and Society**

## **1. Natural Environment**

The Korean peninsula, which juts out from Manchuria toward Japan in the south, is approximately the size of New Zealand, at around 220,000 square kilometers in area. The climate is a typical temperate climate. Korea has four seasons, but spring and fall are relatively long, and summer and winter are neither too hot nor too cold. The average annual rainfall is fairly abundant, ranging from 600-1400 millimeters. Most of the rain falls during the summer monsoon season, offering relief from the heat. During the winter the weather is said to alternate between three days of cold weather and four days of warmer weather, making the cold bearable. Only one-fifth of the nation's territory is under cultivation. There are many mountains, but geologically speaking the peninsula is very old.

The mountains are generally rounded and gentle, and steep and rough mountains are hard to find. There are no active volcanoes--the last volcanic eruption occurred approximately 200 years ago on Cheju-do Island. The Taebaek Mountain Range stretches south from the Gaema Plateau forming the backbone of the Korean peninsula and dividing the country east and west. Water is abundant in the western part of the nation due to a number of rivers that flow into the Yellow Sea, and the land is characterized by a very gentle slope. There are a wide variety of pines (including Korean (white) pines), oaks, zelkovas and maples in the mountains. The land is adorned with various colors throughout the seasons, such as the yellow and purple of forsythias and azaleas in the spring, and the deep red of peppers drying on house roofs in the fall.

In a word, Korea has a very pleasant natural environment, and the scenery instills feelings of peacefulness. The gentle, rounded shapes of house roofs form a harmony with the mountains, different from the sharply sloping roofs of Chinese houses and the straight roofs of Japanese houses.

The natural environment influences those who grow up within it, just like one's residential environment. The joy, satisfaction, and closeness with nature that Koreans feel played a decisive role in the formation of the naturalism found in Korean art. However, we must not forget that national character is not formed by one factor alone. It is a combination of all of the various factors. A beautiful natural environment does not produce the same national character everywhere. National character is not decided by the various factors, but by the system in which those factors interact.

## **2. The Economy**

Korean society has traditionally had an agricultural economy, and Koreans were originally farmers. The history of the Far East is in actuality the history of the struggle for survival

between the nomadic peoples of the north and the agricultural peoples of the south. The life of a farmer is one of relative abundance, with a stable food supply. Accordingly, farmers are sedentary and peaceful, and have conservative personalities. In contrast, nomadic peoples are not sedentary but mobile. Thus, nomadic peoples have no choice but to plunder agricultural regions in order to meet their needs for food and other necessary items. Also, nomadic peoples are faced with cold weather and a bleak natural environment, and so they are naturally militant and adventurous. As can be seen in the art of the Vikings and the Scythians, the art of northern peoples is powerful, dynamic and abstract in both spirit and form. Similar artistic tendencies can be seen in the art of the northern Korean kingdom of Goguryeo.

It is a law of nature that the land will return what is put into it. There may be periodic natural disasters, but at harvest time the land will generally repay the sweat and labor poured into it throughout the year. For this reason, farmers guard the land as they would their lives. Farmers think of the land as a great and trustworthy savior, and it is in the land that they trust. This is what is behind the frankness, simplicity and religious faith that appears in the art of agricultural peoples. This also explains the purity, peacefulness and lack of artifice in the art of agricultural peoples.

### 3. Society

Traditional Korean society, that is Joseon society, had five social classes. The uppermost class is the royal family, followed by the officials or landowning *yangban* class, the *jungin* class, which was comprised of people with specialized knowledge, such as secretaries, interpreters, doctors, and astronomers. The two lower classes were the *sangmin* class, primarily comprised of farmers, but also including artisans (who were considered to be lower than other *sangmin*), and the *cheonmin* class, which included lower-class occupations such as butchers and clowns. The upper class lived reasonably well, but because most of them had no estate or authority they could not become effective cultural catalysts within society. Farmers always struggled with poverty due to inefficient farming techniques and improper administration, and this general poverty explains the low sale of commodities within the nation. As a result of all of this, citizens bartered only for useful articles or items needed for everyday life--the production of luxury items or high-class products was curbed. Due to a lack of economic activity, the appearance of a prosperous merchant class that might have stimulated the national economy was delayed. In other words, in traditional Korean society there was no middle class in the strict sense of the word, and this was a great impediment to cultural development, especially in the arts. In ancient Korea Buddhism, as producer, protector and consumer of art objects, contributed significantly to cultural development. With the suppression of Buddhism in the Joseon period, though, there was no class left to act as patrons of the arts, and the production of art objects was limited to only those that were useful in everyday life.

After the Tang and Song Dynasties, a modern citizens' class emerged in China and contributed greatly to the growth of mass culture. In Japan, places such as public baths,

theaters and geisha houses served as places of social interaction and recreation, and at the same time stimulated the development of literature, drama and the arts. The development of mass culture during the Edo period in Japan is related to many factors. These factors included the peace unique to that period, the appearance of an affluent class that accrued property through maritime trade and trade among domestic feudal lords, and of course the Japanese consciousness of beauty and cleanliness in their residential environment.

In Korea, though, there was no such foundation for the development of mass culture. In the 17th and 18th centuries the so-called "Korean painting" style of painting emerged and developed slightly, but since the society could offer no support it did not last long. At the same time, handicraftsmanship became a sort of family trade by which folk art objects were made. However, one positive result of all this is that these conditions kept Joseon artisans from the negative aspects of modernization. Untarnished by such external factors as commercialism or secularization, Joseon artisans left behind many simple and beautiful works of art that were not overly ornate.

#### **4. Religious Freedom**

Shamanism was the traditional belief of ancient Korea. In the fourth century, though, Buddhism was introduced and captivated the land and its people. One reason that Buddhism prospered is that the kings of the warring three kingdoms made it the state religion in order to justify their rule. Therefore, Buddhism gained in influence through the Three Kingdoms period, when it had a close relationship with government and governmental authority--a relationship that continued until the fall of Goryeo. Another reason that Buddhism prospered was that, unlike the native shamanism, which sought to prevent or rectify the misfortunes of this life, Buddhism not only prevented misfortune in this life but promised everlasting happiness after death as well.

In order to become more acceptable to the general populace, Buddhism adapted elements of shamanism, and Buddhist thinking deeply influenced Koreans' thinking and philosophy about life. By contrast, Confucianism dealt with the formal aspects of life, such as religious and other ceremonies, and standards of action. Confucian ethics, in particular loyalty, respect for one's parents and elders, and fidelity in marriage was thought of as a fundamental element by which society was preserved. However, as far as personal issues went, Buddhism was more deeply rooted in the general populace's lives and thinking.

Buddhism denied the life of this world for life in the next world. Buddhism satisfied the poor through a number of methods, such as encouraging them to accept reality and offering them a philosophy that supported escape from reality. This acceptance of reality produced an amazing patience among Koreans who accepted their fate despite wars and poor rule, and this eventually developed into a Buddhist view of life.

Depending on how one looks at it, pessimism and acceptance of reality may be seen as sceptical views of life, but in another sense they can be seen as transcendentalism and

optimism. Acceptance of reality is actually one side of optimism. Korean optimism was firstly cultivated by the natural environment. Next, this optimism was preserved and expanded in the process of withstanding crises. This optimism brought about an intuitive transcendental philosophy that allowed an escape from reality for artisans who were limited in social status and had no economic hope.

By examining these aspects of Korean life--the natural environment, the economy, the social structure, and people's economic thinking--we can perceive a fundamental factor in understanding the nature of Korean art. However, we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg here--we haven't even begun to approach the heart of the matter. At any rate, rather than thinking of each of these factors separately, we must think of them within the context of Korea's characteristic natural environment, as an inclusive yet organic whole that has formed against the background of Korean history. This has influenced the Korean character, and ultimately the formation of the characteristics of Korean art.

1. Discuss the prehistoric culture of Korea.
2. What are the names of the dynasties in Korean history?
3. What is the cultural characteristic of the Unified Silla?
4. What was the political and cultural difference between Goryeo and Joseon?
5. Describe the Korean weather.
6. What was based on the economy of the traditional Korean society?
7. Discuss the natural and economical influence on the Korean art?
8. How was the social structure of the Joseon period?