

SOUTH KOREAN

Characteristics

It is not easy to define national characteristics. But the following are some generalisations that may help in understanding Koreans. It needs to be remembered though that each individual Korean is different.

Confucianism and Buddhism

These ideologies and religions have been in Korea over several thousand years and have influenced life in all its aspects. Even Christians (whether they realise it or not) are influenced by these beliefs. The first missionary came to Korea just over a hundred years ago (in 1884). Christianity therefore is relatively new compared to Confucianism and Buddhism.

From Poverty to Affluence

Twenty years ago Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world. This resulted from the Japanese rule of thirty-six years and the Korean Civil War, which lasted three years (1950 to 1953). Cars and radios at that time were rare commodities but after thirty years, almost every family owned a car, TV set, computer(s), et cetera. Change therefore has been rapid. Koreans have had extreme experiences from poverty to affluence. Now materialism has spread widely and has become the strongest ruling power on people's lives.

Language

Everyone speaks Korean. English is taught with intensity from Junior High School (grade 7) and is taught from grade 3. English is the most important subject at school and very necessary for securing a good job. Most companies evaluate one's English ability every year and use various criteria to promote progress. Some workers attend English school early in the morning before they go to work. Many, however, have head knowledge rather than practical knowledge of English. Koreans find difficulty of mastering English because its characters and grammatical structure are entirely different from Korean. The reserved and shy Korean culture can also prove to be an obstacle to learning English and other languages as well.

Race and culture

Koreans are a mono-cultural race. Whilst this is good for the unity and harmony of the nation, it can be a hindrance when relating to those of other cultures and races.

Christians

Christians were a small minority until the 1970s. Now they have become 25% of Korean population. 7 out of 10 of the biggest denominational churches in the world are in Korea. This country, which was stronger in its worship of Buddha than Japan, now sends many Christian missionaries overseas - a miraculous change! More than 10,000 students graduate from Bible Colleges and seminaries every year. There are more than 60,000 churches planted in Korea. Korean pastors and missionaries are hardworking people.

Education

Education in South Korea is viewed as being crucial for success, and competition is consequently very heated and fierce. English and Mathematics are generally considered to be the most important subjects. Normally physical education is not considered important and therefore many schools lack high-quality gymnasiums and varsity athletics. South Korea was the first country in the world to provide high-speed internet access to all primary, junior, and high schools.

Although South Korean students often rank highly on international comparative assessments when compared to students of most Western education systems, the South Korean education system is criticized for emphasizing too much upon passive learning and memorization. Especially private institutes such as academies or cram-schools (Hagwon) emphasize too much on passive memorization.

Most Koreans spend their entire high school life preparing for college entrance examinations. After classes, most children attend foreign language classes or other private classes to try to get an edge over their classmates. Some parents even get private tutors for their children as early as primary school.

Generation Gap

A generation gap between the old and the young exists. This is because older people have experienced the rigors of two wars but the younger generation has received everything easily.

The older generation (sixty years old and over) experienced Japanese rule and knew first-hand about poverty and hunger. They also spent their prime years during World War 2 (1939-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953).

The younger generation (thirty to fifty years old) is the group which has been actively involved in the modernisation of the country. They had better education and worked very hard day and night in the office or the factory. They regard effectiveness, achievement and success as their prime virtue.

Now the third generation (under thirty years of age) is emerging. They have little experience of poverty or war. They enjoy material affluence and are open to the world at large. They are influenced even by post-modernism. They are very free to express their feelings and hate to be controlled by any old values. Older people may misunderstand them and Western influences crowd in upon them. They like travelling to other countries and are becoming more 'international' in their outlook.

In Conclusion

Koreans cannot easily say 'No' when they are asked to do something by others, because they are sensitive to how the other person may respond. They worry that their counterparts may be offended if they say 'No'. For Koreans, 'saving face' is of utmost importance. This stems from a culture rooted in Confucianism.

Koreans regard the formal outward attitude of more importance than the inward (the content). When relating to a colleague, even though he is not in agreement, he seldom reveals his real thoughts. Instead, he may respond with a smile. Because of Confucianism, people emphasise their formal attitude rather than their real/honest attitude. Formal outward appearance is important.

Age-order and status are also important for Koreans. At mealtimes, for example, younger ones will rarely be served first. Koreans are loyal to anyone in authority, particularly those older and more senior. People are expected to obey authority whether it is in the work-place or at church. A more modern approach of equality is tried by some but it has not proved too successful because of tradition.

Koreans do not easily outwardly express their emotions even to wives or children. Though they have deep love for family members, they will not readily express their feelings to them.

Family ties are extremely important. Financial and emotional support is given to both immediate and extended family members.

Koreans have been brought up to be competitive. They are hard workers and good achievers. Time is money but there is some flexibility. Work must be done; it is a contribution to society and a means of exercising one's ability.

The home is open for family and friends to share meals and stay overnight if necessary. Guests will happily sleep on the floor. Privacy is important but not as important as people in need.

When greeting, Koreans do not hug! Men shake hands with men but would generally wait until the older or senior person gives their hand first. Women generally do not shake hands with each other. Bowing is another way to greet one another.

People are called by their status rather than their name, especially if they are older or senior. For example, you would not say 'Soon Tea', but 'Kim-Sun-Kyo-Sanim', which means 'dear missionary Kim'. Not 'Oh Ae' but 'Sa-Mo-Nim' which means 'dear missionary's wife'. So, young or junior people are not used to having to remember their seniors'/elders' first names (they just need to know their surnames and status). As a result, Koreans are poor at remembering people's first names and may get hurt by the way others freely use first names.

Koreans will sacrifice for the sake of others. Nation first, society second, groups third, and myself last. They will readily give higher priority to the time of others in preference to their own. However, possessions show social status and are a means of generosity.

Food, fashion, and lifestyle are now constantly influenced by Western society. Arranged marriages were the most popular way of getting a lifetime partner in the past but young people nowadays like to find a partner themselves.

Korea is quite different from many other countries in that it is a country of one ethnic group, Korean. Its people share one language and one history. Koreans may not be aware of their ethnic identity whilst living in their own country but when overseas, it comes to the forefront. When Koreans meet in a foreign country, there is an immediate rapport and friendships develop quickly. Most Korean immigrants to other countries feel they belong to Korea, even though they may hold different citizenships.

Now Koreans are divided into two different political identities, but if you ask any Korean whether they want the unification of Korea, they answer, 'Yes, we do!'. Even though the North and the South are strongly opposed to each other, Koreans still feel one people. Some people may wonder why many of the first generation Koreans in America, or in Brazil are hesitant to take out citizenship of their host countries. It is because they want to keep their Korean identity. Intermingling with people of the host country has not taken away this desire. They tend to gather together and form their own small Korean town and have a Korean church. Korean people seem to feel at home with their own people whether in China, Russia, Latin America, or the USA.

Though it takes time many Koreans, especially Christians, want to be part of an international fellowship and involve themselves in global friendships.