

North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea)



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

► ASIA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. North Korea occupies slightly more than half of the Korean Peninsula and covers some 47,250 square miles (120,540 square kilometers). It is just smaller than Mississippi and about 20 percent larger than South Korea. Mountains and narrow valleys dominate the landscape. As a result, the majority of the population resides on only about one-fourth of the land. The mountainous interior is isolated and sparsely populated. The climate is continental, with relatively long, cold winters and hot, humid summers interrupted by a two-week monsoon season. Spring and autumn are more temperate and pleasant. Summer rainfall accounts for more than half the total annual rainfall, which averages about 31 inches (79 centimeters). Land continues to be cleared for agricultural production; the resulting deforestation has increased the severity of frequent floods.

History. North Korea was once part of Koguryō, one of the peninsula's three kingdoms, which were united in A.D. 668. A new kingdom called Koryō ruled most of what is now North Korea until 1392, when Yi Sŏng-gye took power and established the Choson (or Yi) Dynasty. The Choson kings controlled the entire peninsula for five hundred years, until Japan annexed Korea in 1910.

Korea was liberated from Japan at the end of World War II. The Soviet Union accepted the Japanese surrender in the northern part of Korea, and the United States accepted the surrender in the south. Former anti-Japanese guerrilla Kim Il Sung, with the full support of the Soviet command, took power in the north in 1948. He remained in firm control until his death in 1994. His son, Kim Jong Il, then assumed power.

On 25 June 1950, the North Korean army invaded South Korea, initiating a war that lasted three years and caused

untold suffering to all Korean people. The United States and a military force from the United Nations supported the south, while China and the Soviet Union supported the north. In July 1953, a truce was established along the 38th parallel, the original prewar boundary. Near the town of Panmunjom, a demilitarized zone (DMZ), created as part of the truce, separates the two Koreas today. The border is the world's most heavily armed, with some two million troops on either side of the DMZ. A peace treaty was never signed.

North Korea, though allied with the Soviet Union, became an isolated and almost xenophobic nation under Kim Il Sung. In addition to an extreme policy of self-sufficiency, Kim placed heavy emphasis on reunifying the Korean Peninsula, sometimes sending spies into South Korea or digging invasion tunnels near the border. Various talks on reunification were held in the 1990s, but little progress was made in an atmosphere of distrust. Neither side was willing to accept the other's vision for the peninsula's future. Talks in 1999 also faltered, although North Korea agreed to stop testing its ballistic missiles.

After Kim's death in 1994, two issues came to define North Korea: food and nuclear energy. North Korea had threatened to withdraw from the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1993, prompting the United States and others to negotiate a nuclear accord. The agreement called for North Korea to abandon any nuclear weapons program in exchange for two modern nuclear energy reactors that could not produce weapons. The agreement faltered more than once over delays, suspicions, an economic crisis, and military maneuvers.

Since 1994, food has been more on the minds of average North Koreans, as poor economic management, the collapse

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of communism throughout the world, outdated farming practices, floods, droughts, and typhoons all combined to decimate North Korea's harvests. While still suspicious of outside help, North Korea requested more aid as the severity of the food shortages increased.

In 1999, the North received a vital shipment of fertilizer from the South and, in an unprecedented move, signed an agreement with a major South Korean conglomerate (Hyundai) to allow tourism development in the Kumgang Mountains near the border. The first cruise, though tightly controlled, occurred in 1999.

In June 2000, South Korean president Kim Dae Jung visited Kim Jong Il in North Korea's capital of Pyongyang. Kim Jong Il surprised the world by greeting Kim Dae Jung at the airport to begin a friendly three-day summit. The two leaders immediately enjoyed warm relations and soon issued a joint declaration to solve the question of reunification. As part of the historic agreement, both nations agreed to end their bitter propaganda war, sponsor joint sporting teams and events, open communication and economic links, and set a timetable for separated families to be reunited (beginning in August 2000). Soon after, the United States lifted all nonstrategic sanctions against North Korea and many Western powers established diplomatic ties with Pyongyang.

Unfortunately, North Korea's improved relations with South Korea and the West were short-lived. In December 2002, North Korea expelled UN nuclear inspectors, later announcing it would withdraw from the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. North Korea's threat of nuclear weapons development alarmed its neighbors and the international community. Negotiations in 2003 involving North Korea, South Korea, the United States, Japan, China, and Russia failed to produce a resolution to the crisis. In 2004, North Korea proposed freezing its nuclear weapons program in exchange for economic concessions and security guarantees from the United States. The United States rejected the offer, demanding that North Korea not only freeze its program, but dismantle it altogether.

THE PEOPLE

Population. North Korea's population is estimated to be about 22.5 million, growing at an annual rate of 1.07 percent. Ethnic Koreans comprise almost the entire population. About 60 percent of all people live in urban areas, where food is more readily available. Hunger is most acute in the spring when food runs out before the new harvest. During this time, rural people forage for food or eat a mixture of grains and grasses, roots, or even tree bark to fill their stomachs. The government has encouraged people to plant potatoes and to raise rabbits and goats for food. International food donations have provided some relief.

Language. The Korean language plays an important role in the identity of the Korean people. Korean is written in a phonetic alphabet created in 1446. The alphabet is called *Hangul* in South Korea but is known as *Chosongul* in North Korea. Although the Korean language is replete with words adapted from Chinese, North Koreans, unlike South Koreans, do not use Chinese characters with Chosongul in their newspapers and publications. They prefer to use only Chosongul, which is sufficient for most needs. There are also significant differences in vocabulary between the North and the South, influenced somewhat by politics and by the contact each country has had with other nations. For instance, North Korea has a policy against adopting Western words. Russian, Chinese, and

English are offered as second languages in the schools.

Religion. The government of North Korea has constitutionally confirmed freedom of religion. In reality, however, the effectual state religion since the 1950s has been the veneration of Kim Il Sung, the first Great Leader, and his son, President Kim Jong Il (Dear Leader). Kim Jong Il did not officially assume his father's position until after a mandatory three-year mourning period. In 1998, Kim Jong Il named his father the "eternal" president, and in 1999, his government affirmed Kim Il Sung's place as the nation's "sun" and source of its great policies.

Despite the personality cult that surrounds Kim Il Sung, the way of life and philosophy in North Korea echo traditional patterns and are based fundamentally on Confucian thought. Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs were introduced in the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively. *Ch'ondogyo* (also known as *Tonghak*) is an indigenous religion founded in 1860 as an eclectic combination of Buddhist, Confucian, and Christian beliefs. The present government points to this religion, which has organized a political party, as proof that religious freedom exists in North Korea. The government also permits Christians to meet in small groups under the direction of state-appointed ministers. Shamanism, a native belief in household and natural spirits, gods, and demons, may still have limited influence in rural areas, but the government promotes it mostly as an art form.

General Attitudes. The establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea brought about radical changes in the nature of traditional Korean society. The Confucian concept of filial piety and loyalty to one's lineage has largely been supplanted by an intense nationalism that is described as both fiercely proud and excessively paranoid. The interests of the state have taken priority over the interests of the family. Kim Il Sung, through extensive indoctrination, effectively united the North Korean people in the belief that their political system and way of life were superior. Although contemporary North Korean society is structurally and theoretically socialist, the most important and influential concept is Kim's idea of *chuch'e* (self-reliance). *Chuch'e* colors every aspect of life, from popular music to political speeches and everyday conversation. *Chuch'e* gives people a reason to sacrifice and accept difficult times. It also defines North Korea's isolationism and resistance to outside influence. North Koreans know very little about anything that occurs outside of their country, except as it is reported by the government. However, nearly all North Koreans desire reunification with the South. A beloved song popular on both sides of the border expresses a hope for reunification as one people.

Personal Appearance. North Koreans wear simple attire when working, often consisting of one-color jumpsuits. Office workers may wear uniforms, and urban professionals wear suits or dresses. On special occasions, Koreans often wear a traditional *hanbok*. For women, this is a long two-piece dress that is often very colorful. For men, a *hanbok* includes trousers and a loose-fitting jacket or robe.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Confucianism has taught Koreans to behave with decorum and respect. Therefore, greetings and introductions tend to be rather formal. Handshakes are common among men, but a bow is still the most common greeting. A younger or lower-status person always bows until the other offers a handshake or returns the bow. When Korean men do shake hands, they extend the right hand, often supported at the wrist by the

left hand to show deference, and slightly bow the head. When women meet, they usually extend both hands and grasp each other's hands. Children always bow to adults and wave or bow among themselves.

Several phrases are used in greeting, but the most common is *Anyonghaseyo?* (literally, "Are you in peace?"). The Korean language has different levels of formality, so this and any other greeting will differ depending on the people involved. For example, *Anyonghashimnikka?* is used for superiors, while *Anyong?* is used with children. The variations have the same meaning, but the different endings indicate differing levels of respect. When greeting a superior, one commonly asks about health and parents. When greeting a subordinate, the questions are about the spouse and children.

Gestures. It is not unusual for men to hold hands in public or walk down the street with an arm over each other's shoulder. This is an expression of friendship. Touching between strangers or casual acquaintances, especially between opposite sexes, is considered inappropriate. In most situations, people maintain good posture to show respect for a host or speaker. Sitting in a relaxed manner is considered an insult. One takes care not to expose the bottom of one's feet to another person while sitting. People give and receive gifts with both hands. Hands generally are not used much in conversation. Men remove hats in buildings, as well as in the presence of an elder or superior. One never looks a superior directly in the eye.

Visiting. North Koreans do not commonly visit one another unannounced, and arranged social visits are infrequent. Generally, people visit relatives for the Lunar New Year or Parents' Day but not often otherwise. Unless special business calls for it, a superior never visits a subordinate.

Traditionally, invited guests are offered light refreshments that might include a drink, fruit, crackers, cookies, or coffee. It is considered polite and a sign of respect for guests to take a gift to the hosts. The value of the gift is far less important than the gesture of giving it. In most cases, a gift will be fruit, a beverage, or something from one's home region. Food and economic crises have curtailed such practices.

People remove shoes and hats when going indoors. In some cases, they put on slippers, but otherwise they wear only socks in the home. Etiquette requires paying particular attention to the hosts and making sure their feelings are respected. Showing respect for the family and state are of utmost importance for most visits. Koreans view the care of a guest as basic good manners, so visitors are given the best the household has to offer. If there are many guests, then age or status determines who gets the best seat, the best cut of meat, the largest drink, and so forth.

Eating. Families rarely have time to eat daily meals together. Fathers often leave early in the morning and return late at night. Urban workers commonly eat their meals at workplace cafeterias. Koreans consider eating while walking on the street offensive, something only a child is allowed to indulge in. Conversation during meals is limited. Eating with the fingers is considered impolite, but slurping soup and noodles is accepted; in fact, it is a practical way to eat hot food at the rapid pace Koreans are used to. Spoons for soup and chopsticks for all other foods are the most common utensils. Restaurants in North Korea are few and very expensive. The average worker would almost never eat in a restaurant. Tipping is not allowed.

life. The population has been exhorted constantly by the government to "love your family, love your state," but obligations have been continually extended outward to embrace the larger society. Beginning in 1948, the government worked to break down the traditional extended family and clan system. Devotion was redirected toward the country's ruler, whom children were taught to refer to as "Father Kim Il Sung." Through his "moral leadership and benevolent instruction" in all aspects of life, Kim was portrayed by the government-controlled media as a highly paternal figure and a near-god. His picture was (and is) everywhere and his will was obeyed before any other. His popularity weakened near the end of his life, but the government continues to promote his image and now that of his son's.

For most families, the average monthly wage sometimes is not enough to purchase daily necessities, and most cannot pay for the luxury of nonessential goods. Personal austerity was encouraged even before the famine. Due to the economic conditions, both parents usually work and their children go to day-care centers, often located at the workplace.

Dating and Marriage. Western-style dating is not allowed. Parents either arrange marriages or give their consent for a couple to wed. The government has established minimum marriage ages (27 for men, 25 for women) to allow for the completion of military service and other obligations. Due to a shortage in the labor force, the government provides incentives for married couples to have large families. Still, the birth-rate has fallen dramatically since the mid-1990s.

Diet. Korean food generally is spicy. *Kimch'i* (a spicy pickled cabbage) and rice are the traditional mainstays of the diet around which most other dishes revolve. Meals usually consist of a number of spicy vegetables, soup, fish, and *kimch'i*. Because of the lower economic level of North Korea, traditional Korean delicacies such as *pulkogi* (marinated beef) and *kalbi* (marinated short ribs) are not as common as in South Korea. A favorite food in North Korea is *naengmyon*, a cold noodle dish. People also consume soybeans, corn, millet, and wheat when available.

In food crises, only the governing elite has regular access to rice. One or two meals per day are standard during shortages. In some regions, rations are set well below minimum levels and include foods normally not eaten by humans, such as grass.

Recreation. Sports are popular and encouraged by the government; sports facilities are plentiful. Soccer is the national sport. Many people also play table tennis. Family outings and picnics to North Korea's many parks and cultural and historical sites are traditional Sunday activities. Sunday is the worker's day of rest. Television is popular and widely available.

The Arts. Music and theater play important roles in North Korea's cultural identity. Oral histories and national values are transmitted through song, usually accompanied by an ensemble of bamboo flutes, percussion, and stringed instruments. Performances are highly polished, and form is valued over spontaneity or individuality. Movies, plays, and operas, usually with strong political messages, are well attended. Often, literature has strong political undertones as well. Poetry is the principal form; however, North Koreans enjoy literature of many genres. Visual arts and architecture show the influences of traditional as well as Western styles.

Holidays. In addition to national holidays, many commemoration days can be declared holidays if local authorities are satisfied production will not be disrupted. The government has discontinued traditional Korean seasonal festivals. Official

LIFESTYLE

Family. The family remains an important part of North Korean

North Korea

holidays include New Year's Day, the birthdays of Kim Il Sung (15 Apr.) and Kim Jong Il (16 Feb.), May Day (1 May), Liberation Day (15 Aug.), Independence Day (9 Sept.), Workers' Party Day (10 Oct.), and Constitution Day (27 Dec.). Kim Il Sung's birthday was declared in 1999 to be the nation's grandest holiday.

Commerce. As with other key aspects of North Korean society, the government is closely involved in the mobilization of labor. Adults are expected to work at least 40 hours per week and attend various political and production meetings. Technically, workers can earn a variety of supplies, benefits, and gifts from either their employers or the government. However, workers' benefits are constrained by lack of resources. Tightly controlled work teams laboring on farms and in factories are the norm. By 1958, all farms in North Korea were incorporated into more than three thousand cooperatives, each comprising about three hundred families on about 1,000 acres. Since the mid-1990s, agricultural output has fallen by more than two-thirds. Industry has been idle due to lack of resources.

SOCIETY

Government. North Korea is a communist state. Although Kim Jong Il has held power since 1994, he was officially elected in 1998 as the general secretary of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea. Not wanting to assume the title of "president," Kim widened his duties as head of the military (officially, the chairperson of the National Defense Commission) to include being head of state. An appointed premier (currently Pak Pong-ju) is technically head of government. The 687-seat Supreme People's Assembly forms the legislature, but it has very little real power. When elections are held, only a single candidate runs for each office. The candidates are either from the Workers' Party or a few minor, associated parties. Voters can only vote "yes" or "no" for each person, and they generally vote "yes." The voting age is 17 and turnout usually is reported as 100 percent.

Economy. Since the end of World War II, North Korea has changed from an agricultural to a semi-industrialized nation. The means of production are almost completely socialized. Planning for economic development is centralized and set forth by the government in a series of seven-year plans. Major industries include mining, steel, textiles, chemicals, cement, glass, and ceramics. There is a shortage of light manufactured items (mostly consumer goods).

North Korea has about 80 to 90 percent of all known mineral resources on the Korean Peninsula, and the extraction of coal, iron ore, and other minerals fueled North Korea's past industrial growth. South Korea's "sunshine policy" of openness to the North includes joint economic development. If continued, that policy and investment or loans from other nations will likely lead to improvements in the North's standard of living and economic growth. The currency is the North Korean *won* (KPW).

Transportation and Communications. The rail system is the principal means of transportation in North Korea. The subway in Pyongyang is efficient and cheap. Few motor vehicles are available to the general population. The streets, roads, and avenues, at least in the major cities, are broad, tree lined, and well

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rankNA
Adjusted for womenNA
Real GDP per capita\$1,000
Adult literacy rate99 percent (male); 99 (female)
Infant mortality rate26 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy68 (male); 74 (female)

kept. Most North Koreans usually walk or ride a bus to their destinations. Bicycles, once rare, are now a principal mode of transport. Oxcarts are common in rural areas. Communications systems and the media are tightly controlled.

Education. North Korea has more than two hundred universities and colleges, more than four thousand high schools and specialized institutions, and nearly five thousand elementary schools and kindergartens. An 11-year education program is compulsory and free, and illiteracy has been all but eliminated. However, food shortages prevent children from attending, which will impact skills in the future.

Competition is fierce for entry into the prestigious Kim Il Sung University and other institutions of higher learning. The socialist and nationalist focus of the North Korean educational system, while supplying the state with skilled and compliant workers, aims to produce uniformity in thought and action, with little room for individuality and diversity.

Health. Although the healthcare system is extensive and care is free, quality is relatively poor and medicines and supplies are often unavailable. Hospitals lack sufficient electricity and food for patients. Due to malnutrition, the mortality rate for children younger than age five has doubled since the mid-1990s. The average birth weight is low, and children are growing at about half the normal rate. Prolonged malnutrition in children is beginning to affect long-term mental and physical development. Minor illnesses can turn deadly because of the lack of antibiotics or because people are too weak to combat infections. Tuberculosis and other diseases are spreading.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- Invited by the North Korean government, an unofficial U.S. delegation of experts visited a nuclear reactor in Yongbyon in January 2004. It was the first time outsiders were allowed in the facility since UN inspectors were expelled in 2002. The experts stated that the facility may have been developing weapons-grade plutonium, but they were uncertain if North Korea had the capability to develop a nuclear weapon.
- Since 2002, the North Korean government has encouraged citizens to establish small businesses and other private enterprises, marking the first policy shift toward market-oriented activities.

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