

ANCESTRAL RITES and HOLIDAYS IN KOREA

GRADE LEVEL: Middle School

SUBJECT: Social Studies

TIME REQUIRED: One to two class periods

OBJECTIVES:

- 1.) Identify ancestral rites and holidays observed in Korea.
- 2.) Describe the rituals involved in each of the rites.
- 3.) Compare and contrast the Korean ancestral rites and holidays with rituals in the United States.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

Handouts:

- Ancestral Rites
- Photos of Sollal
- Sollal—New Year's Day
- "Harvest Moon Festival" by Ku Sang
- Ch'usok—Thanksgiving in Korea
- *Korea Times* article: "Ch'usok Holiday Festivities in Full Bloom" (September 7, 2000)
- *Korea Times* article: "Chinese Food to Flood Ancestral Rites" (February 2, 1999)

BACKGROUND:

Koreans have a rich tradition of ancestral memorial rites. These rituals honor the spirits of ancestors and provide a link between the dead and the living, a continuity that persists in Korean culture. From ancient times, Koreans emphasized obedience to parents and respect for ancestors. The effect of Confucianism on Korean life augmented these beliefs further. Traditional rituals associated with birth, the first birthday, coming of age, marriage, and death are vital parts of everyday life in modern Korean society.

Honoring one's ancestors and giving them continuity through offspring is the duty of filial children. Memorial services are held for ancestors up to four generations back: parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents. More distant ancestors are given memorial services once a year at their graves.

Sons are responsible for caring for aging parents and performing ancestral memorial rites. The family name and traditions are passed down through male heirs. Traditionally, when a couple could not produce a male heir, they adopted the son of a relative or the husband had a son with another woman to guarantee that the family name was

continued. Today, the husband of a daughter can fulfill these duties.

PROCEDURE:

These activities concentrate on ancestral rites practiced during the two most significant Korean holidays: Ch'usok and Sollal. Both are lunar holidays. Ancient Koreans used the position of the moon to mark the change of seasons and dates important for agriculture. The practice continues in the observance of these special holidays.

1. Discuss in class: How do Americans honor their dead, observe Thanksgiving and observe the New Year? Make a list on the board as students discuss these three holidays.
2. Show students the pictures in Handout Two and ask them to extrapolate the ways in which Sollal, Lunar New Year's Day, is observed.
3. Review the information in Handouts One and Three, and compare to what students were able to glean from the pictures. Note all comments on the board. Discuss the reasons for this holiday, the ancestral practices conducted during Sollal, and the special preparations (including food.)
4. Have students compare the observance of New Year's in the U.S. with that in Korea. Have students compare attitudes toward our ancestors and the dead. Note all these comparisons on a chart. For a special treat, prepare *ttokkuk* for the students prior to their arrival.
5. Have the students read the poem, "Harvest Moon Festival," by Ku Sang in Handout Four. Ask the students: What is causing the son so much grief? What is the purpose of the Harvest Moon Festival? Why can the son not join in this festival?
6. Distribute copies of Handout Five, Ch'usok—Thanksgiving in Korea. What is the purpose of this holiday? What practices are followed to commemorate the ancestors? If you wish, prepare *songp'yon* for students to try.
7. Read in Handout Six the *Korea Times* article, "Ch'usok Holiday Festivities in Full Bloom." List the activities typical of Ch'usok in the capital city of Seoul. What additional information is learned about Ch'usok from this article?
8. Compare and contrast the Korean Thanksgiving festival with the American one. Add to the chart begun above which compared the New Year's celebrations.
9. Have students speculate on why ancestral rites are part of Thanksgiving and New Year's in Korea but not in the U.S.

EVALUATION:

Have the students respond to this question: If you could combine ancestral practices of Korea and the United States, what special activities/ceremonies would you incorporate and why?

ENRICHMENT:

Read the additional *Korea Times* articles in Handout Seven. Discuss the international influence on the local holidays of South Korea.

RESOURCES:

www.koreatimes.co.kr

Handout One

ANCESTRAL RITES

Families honor ancestors for four generations back by visiting hometowns and grave sites.

Families who have moved from their hometowns return for New Year's and Thanksgiving to honor their ancestors.

Special foods are prepared to celebrate these holidays.

Young people dress in their best outfits, sometimes traditional *hanbok*, for these occasions.

The government of South Korea permits three-day vacations for the celebration of these events.

Family members attend to the graves of the ancestors, cleaning and performing ceremonies.

Handout Two—PHOTOS OF SOLLAL



Handout Three

SOLLAL—NEW YEAR'S DAY

The first day of the lunar calendar year usually falls in late January or early February. Because the entire family should gather at the home of the eldest male, a three-day holiday is given to allow time for a visit to one's hometown.

On New Year's Eve, there are several customs associated with the coming New Year. People may prepare special sieves made with straw (*pokchori*) and hang them outdoors to protect their family from evil and bad luck. Koreans also customarily hang ladles on the wall to pray for good luck in the New Year. Another custom is telling a playful joke warning against sleep for fear your eyebrows might turn white during the night. Children may try to stay awake all night for fear this might happen!

On the morning of Sollal, all family members dress in their best clothes called *solbim*. This clothing traditionally contains five colors. The *hanbok* is commonly worn as well.

The family performs *ch'arye*, ancestral memorial rites with *ttokkuk*, a bowl of sliced thin white rice cake soup boiled in a thick beef broth topped with bright garnishes and green onion. People believe that if they have a bowl of *ttokkuk*, they will become a year older. For this reason, Koreans traditionally add a year to their ages after Sollal, not their birthdays.

After breakfast, the younger people bow to their elders in a ceremony called *chol* or *sebae*. Children bow to their parents, grandparents, and relatives, and adults bow to their elders. Comments such as, "I wish you a happy New Year" or "I wish you to be healthy" are given as the New Year's first greetings. The elders give the good wishes back with such comments as, "Take care of yourself," "Study hard," or "Get a job and take a wife within this year!" The young children receive *sebaet ton* from their elders, money rewarded for the bowing. Some children may have prepared small beautifully decorated purses called *pokchumoni* for the receipt of this special money.

The *chol* or bowing is performed in a ritualistic fashion. The man brings his hands together in front of his eyes and sits on his knees touching the floor, and then bows his head on his hands, which touch the floor. The ritual bow for a woman is more difficult and may require assistance. She has to sit with her hands brought together, keeping them in front of her eyes, and without touching her knees on the floor, she must sit down with her hip to the floor.

After bowing, the young people go outside to fly kites, and boys spin tops, and girls seesaw the Korean way. Inside, they might play *yutnori*, a stick game using four wooden sticks and checkers. The family will eat, talk and play all day, enjoying their large family reunion.

Handout Four—"HARVEST MOON FESTIVAL"

By Ku Sang

Mother,
your unworthy son is older now
than you were when I took my leave of you
for the last time,
and it seems my hair and beard are whiter
than my father's when he died.

Mother,
I have heard that after my elder brother, the priest,
was taken away by the communists, you found refuge
in the house of your god-daughter Johanna
Until you died,
but were you laid in a coffin?
Were you provided with a grave?
I do not know,
and I cannot picture your burial-place,
to my greater grief.

Mother,
today is the festival of the Harvest Moon,
they say a million people have left Seoul
to go and venerate their ancestors' tombs,
while groups have come from Japan and China
for the same purpose,
but I just attended a Requiem Mass this morning
and now, sitting here absently
at the window of my study,
I am gazing up at the clouds as they drift northward

Oh mother.
Mother.

Ku Sang

Ku Sang was born in Seoul in 1919, but when he was a small child his family moved to the northeastern city of Wonsan, where he grew up. His parents were Catholics, and his elder brother became a priest, but Ku Sang underwent a crisis of faith during his student

years in Japan, where he studied the philosophy of religion. He only slowly found his own understanding of Catholicism. He returned to the northern part of Korea and began work as a writer and journalist, but after the Liberation in 1945 he was soon forced to flee to the South because of his refusal to conform to the demands of the Communists.

Handout Five CH'USOK—THANKSGIVING IN KOREA

Ch'usok, the Korean Thanksgiving Day, is the most famous traditional event in Korea. The 15th day of the eighth lunar month is called Ch'usok (the harvest moon). Families gather at the oldest member's house for a great feast to offer thanks and to show respect to nature and to their ancestors.

In modern Korean society, many families have moved from their traditional family towns to larger cities like Seoul. For *Ch'usok*, these families normally return to their hometown. This big movement of people results in major traffic delays during the holiday season. In compliance with this annual cultural traditional heritage, the Korean government has declared as public holidays no less than three consecutive days to enable families to visit their rural ancestral homes.

On the first day, Koreans prepare lots of food in order to perform the ancestral rites or *chesa*. *Songp'yon* is one of the more important of the foods prepared. It is a crescent-shaped rice cake. The rice cakes are made of dough made from flour milled from newly harvested rice, and steamed on a layer of freshly picked pine needles. The pine needles give the rice cakes a nice fragrance and help preserve them. Fillings for the rice cakes vary from region to region, but the most common are sesame seeds, chestnuts, beans, and jujubes. Other foods include rice, soup, kimchi, fish, meat, fruits and wild greens.

On the second day of Ch'usok, Koreans put on their best outfits. Often the traditional *hanbok* is worn as a symbolic link to the past. Homage is paid to the ancestors by placing the previously prepared food on a large table. It is offered to the ancestors in solemn rites that include bowing to the ancestors. Then it is customary to visit the graves of the ancestors and perform rites, which again include bowing and the offering of food. The graves are cleaned in preparation for winter.

Various folk games can be played during the remainder of the day. As a culminating event, family members view the full moon.

The third day of Ch'usok is for travel or additional time spent with family.

Handout Six

The Korea Times, "Ch'usok Holiday Festivities in Full Bloom," September 9, 2000

With the Ch'usok holiday season just around the corner, people are very busy shopping for food and gifts for their families, relatives and friends.

In the midst of a euphoric mood across the nation, many museums and cultural institutions have also geared up efforts to use the coming three-day holiday, which falls on Sept. 11-13, as an occasion to awaken the general public to the values of traditional culture.

As usual, four major palaces, 14 parks with royal tombs and 23 cultural sites in Seoul are open free of charge on the full moon of Ch'usok, Sept. 12, one of the nation's most festive days. During the remaining holiday period, entrance will be free of charge, at national museums as well for those wearing traditional Korean costumes, or *hanbok*.

At most of these places, visitors will partake in a variety of traditional games and entertainment typically enjoyed during the Ch'usok season, from *yutnori* (four-stick game) and shuttlecock to tug-of-war. They will also enjoy performances of *samul nori* (ensemble of four traditional percussion instruments) folk songs, mask dances and rituals.

Besides these typical Ch'usok activities, some state-run museums and institutions will offer special cultural programs and activities designed to educate as well as entertain the public on the meaning of the holiday season.

The National Museum of Korea will present a display of Choson-period brush works depicting the full moon from Sept. 9-20, and another exhibit of old roof tiles engraved with moon-dwelling rabbits on Sept. 10-13.

The roof tiles date back to the late seventh century of the Silla Kingdom. Visitors are allowed to make imprints of them and keep them as mementos.

The fairy tale of rabbits pounding rice with wooden bats in the full moon is one of the most endearing stories told to children even today.

On Ch'usok, the museum will offer a puzzle game of relics such as the Silla period observatory "Ch'omsongdae" located in Kyongju, North Kyongsang Province, and celadon from the Koryo period.

For those interested in ceramics-making, it will also open a special class on the making of moon-shaped pots on Sept. 13. Call 02-398-5077 for details about all activities at the museum.

Meanwhile, rituals, food and entertainment pertaining to Ch'usok are on view at the National Folk Museum in Kyongbok Palace. Foreigners are encouraged to take part in a session of *songp'yon* (half-moon shaped rice cakes enjoyed during the Ch'usok season) making from 13:00 to 14:30 on Sept. 7.

The ability to make shapely *songp'yon* is particularly appreciated among locals, who used to say that makers of smooth, well-shaped *songp'yon* will have a pretty daughter.

Following the session, setting a traditional Ch'usok table and ceremonial procedures will be demonstrated along with a lecture on the meaning of such rites and customs of the Ch'usok traditional. The set table will be exhibited until Oct.9.

Performances of various rituals will also take place, helping viewers get in touch with old folk beliefs and shamanistic ideas. Among them is a show titled "Kobuk nori" (turtle play), presented by some 20 primary school children in the courtyard of the museum on Sept. 8. Call 02-734-1341, or 02-725-5964, for details about the events.

At the annex of the National Theater of Korea, a *changguk* (traditional musical drama) titled "The Tale of Pae Pijang" will be presented on Sept. 11-17, directed by veteran pansori singer An Suk-son and featuring some 60 performers, including An. A well-known satire against the hypocritical *yangban*, the upper class of Korea's Choson period, the story centers on the eccentricity of Pae Pijang, who tries to keep his dignity as a yangban in pursuit of his sexual desires toward Aerang, a *kisaeng* (Korean geisha). The tickets are 10,000 to 30,000 won. Call 02-2274-1173 for more information.

Handout Seven

The Korea Times, "Chinese Food to Flood Ancestral Rites," February 2, 1999

In preparation for ancestral rites held during the Lunar New Year's Day on Feb. 16, many consumers are flocking to department stores and supermarkets to stock up on ancestral rites goods. However, many of those products this year will most likely have originated from China.

According to the retailers, the majority of the vegetables sold for use during ancestral rites, such as bracken and balloon flower roots, will be from China. During the Ch'usok holiday during Oct 4-6 last year, about 20 percent of the vegetables were locally grown.

Most consumers are seeking out the Chinese vegetables as the local products are 2-3 times more expensive due to strange weather patterns last year that slashed domestic production.

In one department store, 100 grams of locally produced bracken sells for 1,490 won while its Chinese counterpart retails for just 390 won. Likewise, domestic royal fern sells for 1,900 won compared to 390 won for the Chinese royal ferns, and local balloon flower roots are priced at 990 won while the Chinese balloon flower roots are only 390 won.

Due to low consumer demand, some department stores are not even stocking their shelves with the expensive local products and only sell them to customers who specifically ask for the locally grown vegetables.

The percentage of tofu, bean sprouts, and mung bean sprouts from China are also increasing. During the Lunar New Year and Ch'usok holidays last year, about 50 percent of the tofu and bean sprouts sold were from China. This year, retailers expect the ratio to go up to 70-percent.

However, the percentage of croakers from China naturally goes up during the Lunar New Year compared to Ch'usok as Koreans catch the majority of this fish in autumn.

During Ch'usok last year, 70 percent of the dried croakers sold were from China. The price per fish ranged from 17,000-23,000 for the domestic croakers and 8,000-12,000 won for the Chinese ones. During this coming Lunar New Year holiday, 90 percent of the croakers will be from China and prices will be 8,000-16,000 won for the Chinese fish and 18,000-25,000 won for the local fish.

"The Chinese supply of fish is steadily increasing," said a Hanhwa Store official. "As prices of Chinese products are much cheaper than local goods, the Chinese fishing quota directly affects local prices," he added.