

EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

GRADE: 10

AUTHOR: Noah Lawrence

SUBJECT: Asian Studies

TIME REQUIRED: One to two class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. To understand how Korea's experiences in history, particularly during the Japanese occupation and the Korea war, have shaped and continue to affect how the Korean people view themselves their relationships to others in the global community.
2. To understand how national identity "should be understood as an evolving phenomenon which has been influenced by the changing times." (Han Geon-soo)
3. To recognize contemporary forces that are causing Koreans to reevaluate what it means to be "Korean."
4. To understand that nations establish different criteria for determining who is qualified to be an official citizen, and to recognize that nations have different social norms for determining who is accepted fully into the society.
5. To understand the ways in which Korea is becoming a more multicultural society, and to evaluate the methods that have been proposed to help foster the integration of non-ethnic Koreans into society.
6. To compare the criteria for what it means to be "Korean" to what it means to be "American" and to understand the historical forces that may explain the differences.
7. To understand the concept of Ethnocentrism, and to recognize the potential dangers of an ethnocentric worldview.
8. To help students recognize that when examining contemporary global problems, it is helpful to understand and research the historical context out of which the problems grew.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Handout 1: What does it means to be an American?
- Handout 2: Undated Timeline of Korean History
- Han Geon-Soo. "Korea Transforms itself into a Multicultural Society." *Koreana* (Summer 2008): 8-13. Available online at <http://koreanamagazine.com/>
- Choe Hyun. "The Challenges of Korea to Become a Truly Multicultural Society." *Koreana* (Summer 2008): 24-29. <http://koreanamagazine.com/>

BACKGROUND

As more non-ethnic Koreans have decided to establish residency in the ROK, ethnic Koreans have been challenged to rethink what it means to be "Korean." Throughout its long history, the people living on the Korean peninsula have come to believe that they share a community based on a common geography and history. However, the official attitude towards immigrants has shifted across time. As a result of Korea's geographic location as a gateway among China,

Russia and Japan, many Koreans would have interacted frequently with people and ideas from other nations. Korea's participation in trade along the Silk Road is testament to this fact.

During the early Chosŏn Kingdom, foreigners were generally welcomed so long as they shared the Confucian values of the royal court. However, as world powers came to challenge Korean commercial interests in the early 1900s, the nation's rulers chose to cut off ties with foreign cultures in an attempt to preserve its Confucian world view. As a result, Korea fell behind in the areas of technology and commerce, and fell victim to Japanese aggression.

The period of Japanese colonial rule led to a surge of Korean nationalism. Japan's attempts to eradicate Korean culture and language had the opposite effect, as Koreans bonded together to preserve their heritage. In the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War, the Republic of Korea (i.e., South Korea) was born, and the people of this new nation, having survived the trauma of the previous half century, emerged with a heavily nationalistic spirit. South Korea was thought to be a homogeneous society where all citizens shared a common language, culture, and ethnicity. In this context, diversity (in the areas of ethnic background, language, appearance, or behavior) was not highly valued. To be Korean generally meant one's ancestors were Korean.

While this sense of national identity based on birth and shared history had served the people of Korea well in resisting Japanese imperialism and enduring the hardship of occupation and the war, subsequent historical events are causing many Koreans to rethink what standards should apply to foreigners wishing to live in or interact with Koreans. While understandably weary of foreign influence given the first half of the twentieth century, South Korea has become more open to cultural exchange in the second half. By establishing trade relationships with the United States and many other nations, the ROK has become an industrialized modern nation. As the trend toward globalization increases, many more foreigners have come to visit and to live in Korea. As a result, Korea is becoming a more multicultural society, and the standards of Koreanness are changing.

One observation I made while traveling in Korea is that the study of other cultures and languages has become an important element in the education of Korean students. There are several schools in Seoul, including Daeil, which are devoted specifically to the study of foreign languages. That Korea has become a more diverse place is evident in the variety of cuisines available at local restaurants, in the styles of clothing citizens wear, and in number of people born in other countries who now reside in Korea. What steps the Korean government should take to encourage the development of a multicultural society is a question currently being debated, and the focus of this lesson.

PROCEDURE:

1. Administer the survey on Handout 1: What It Means to be an American. Students are to rank eight different criteria for how to determine whether an individual should be a considered an American. If possible, have students take this survey online, so that results can be tabulated more quickly.
2. Tabulate then discuss the results in small groups. Ask each group to consider the following questions:
 - What conclusions can you draw from this data?
 - Do the standards determining who is an American derive more from bloodline and ethnicity or from political and legal factors? Why do you suppose this is so?

- How do immigrants become Americans? Is there a difference between being legally declared American versus being socially accepted as an American? How might the experience differ depending on the circumstances of the immigrant?
 - Do you think the criteria for what it means to be an American has stayed the same throughout American history, or has it changed? If it has changed, how? And why?
3. Have group leaders share a synopsis of their groups' discussion. Have students consider the case of the Olympic athletes representing America in Beijing. For example, in the men's 1500 meter run, a track and field event, none of America's three representatives were born in America. Bernard Lagat was born and raised in Kenya, came to college in America, and became a citizen two years ago. Lionel Manzano came to the United States from Mexico with his parents when he was four years old. And Lopez Lamong was born in the Sudan, fled to a refugee camp in Kenya at the age of six, and came to America as one of the "lost boys of Sudan" at the age of sixteen. Facilitate a discussion on whether or not they think these individuals should be considered Americans.
 4. At this point, it is time to introduce the case of Korea to students. Begin by pointing out that Korean citizens have been having a similar discussion about the Korean American golfers Michelle Wie and Christian Kim, both of whom live in the United States but are followed closely in Korea. Many Korean citizens are unsure whether or not to embrace Wie and Kim as their own. Suggest that this conundrum is a good way to begin examining a larger issue: why has Korea faced greater struggles in becoming a multicultural society that the United States has? And what methods are Koreans considering for addressing this issue?
 5. For homework, have students read one of the two *Koreana* articles on the topic of multiculturalism in Korea ("Korea Transforms Itself into a Multicultural Society" by Han Geon-soo or "The Challenges of Korea to Become a Truly Multicultural Society" by Choe Hyun, both in the Summer 2008 volume available online). Have half the class read one article, and the other half read the other article. Students should take notes, and should prepare responses to the following questions:
 - What historical circumstances have impacted how Koreans view themselves a people? How?
 - What do the authors suggest as methods by which Korea might become a more multicultural society?
 6. At the beginning of class on day two, pair students up or put them in groups, and have them summarize their article for their partner.
 7. In these groups, have students reconstruct a timeline of Korean History. Include key events including the unification of Korea under the Silla Dynasty (668-935), the rise of the Koryo Dynasty (918-1392), the Mongol Invasions (1270-1370), the establishment of the Choson Dynasty along with the construction of Neo-Confucian schools in 1392, the development of Hangul by King Sejong in 1443, the successful defense of the nation against Japanese invaders by Admiral Yi and his turtle ships (1592-1598), the Sino-

Japanese and Russo Japanese Wars, the seizure of Korea by Japan and ensuing period of living under Japanese control (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), The Kwangju uprising (1980), and the Seoul Olympics (1988). Give them the events without dates by passing out Handout 2: Undated Timeline of Korean History, and have a competition to see which group can put them in the correct order first.

8. After one group has successfully placed the events in order, review the timeline as a class.
9. Next, give each group 2-3 of the events. Challenge each group to discuss how these historical events may have impacted Korean national identity at the time they occurred as well as today.
10. Have each group share their thoughts.
11. Ask students whether they think that, given current global realities, the criteria for national identity would be better based on blood/ethnicity, or rather on legal and political factors? This question was discussed yesterday in the context of America, but today students should consider the case of South Korea.

EVALUATION:

Students will choose one of the following essay questions to write upon. Students should consult the *Koreana* articles and also do independent research in responding to the following:

- How can events that occurred long before any current members of a society lived still impact how those people think and view the world?
- How should nations relate to their own histories? Is the best course for a nation that has been the victim of imperialism (such as Korea) to try to “leave the past behind,” or is the preservation of the memory of past oppression important in helping the nation move forward?
- Within a few decades, the last remaining survivors of the Korean War will die. Many Korean citizens are concerned that the opportunity for reconciliation between the North and South will dwindle as those older Koreans with siblings living across the border will no longer be alive to make an emotional plea for a unified Korea. Examine the how historical memory impacts the relationship between North and South Korea.
- How are the concepts of “national identity” and “personal identity” related? Is it useful to discuss how a nation thinks? Or is there too much diversity among the thoughts of individuals within a nation to make much sense out of the concept of a “national psyche”?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:

It may be useful to have students compare the relationship of Korean history with Korean national identity to the relationship between Chinese history and Chinese national identity. An

article by Orville Schell in the August 4, 2008 volume of *Newsweek*, entitled “China’s Agony of Defeat,” examines how China’s “100 years of national humiliation” at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialists continues to impact how many citizens of China understand the role of their government and how their government should interact with other nations. Have students explore the similarities and differences between Korea and China in how they have attempted to overcome their histories as victims of imperialism.

Another issue ripe for exploration is an examination of how nations construct their own histories in an attempt to shape national identity, particularly with regard to those aspects of the past that are painful or ignoble. Recently declassified CIA documents have revealed a darker side to South Korea’s military tactics during the Korean War, pointing to the mass execution of North Korean prisoners (see the July 6, 2008 edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. Authors Charles J. Hanley and Jae Soon Chang published an expose entitled “Buried Truth of Korea Killings Exposed.”) How should South Korea come to terms with this aspect of its past? It may be useful to compare this to the difficulties Japanese citizens have faced in coming to terms with the horrifically violent actions of its military during the Rape of Nanking and other episodes of World War II, or with the struggles of Americans to come to terms with the genocide the American Government perpetrated on many indigenous people.

RESOURCES:

Choe, Hyun. “The Challenges of Korea to Become a Truly Multicultural Society.”
Koreana (Summer 2008): 24-29. Available online at <http://koreanamagazine.com>

Han, Geon-soo and Kwon, Tae-kyun. “Korea Transforms Itself into a Multicultural Society.” *Koreana* (Summer 2008): 8-13. Available online at <http://koreanamagazine.com>

Hanley, Charles J. and Chang, Jae Soon. “Buried Truth of Korea Killings Exposed.”
Chicago Tribune (6 July 2008): A1.

Schell, Orville. “China’s Agony of Defeat.” *Newsweek* (4 Aug 2008): 39-41.

HANDOUT 1: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN AMERICAN?

Directions: Rank the following 8 options in order of the criteria you think is most relevant for determining whether someone should be considered an American, to the least relevant (1=most relevant, 8= least relevant).

- _____ Has a mother or father who is an American
- _____ Was born in America
- _____ Carries on America's cultural traditions
- _____ Can speak English
- _____ Respects America's political system and laws
- _____ Contributes to the development of America
- _____ Has acquired American citizenship
- _____ Thinks of himself as an American

HANDOUT 2: UNDATED TIMELINE OF KOREAN HISTORY

The events below are listed out of order (chronologically). Place the events below in what you think might be an accurate chronological order.

- _____ the Mongol Invasions
- _____ the Seoul Olympics
- _____ unification of Korea under the Silla Kingdom
- _____ the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars
- _____ the rise of the Koryŏ Kingdom
- _____ the successful defense of the nation against Japanese invaders by Admiral Yi and his turtle ships
- _____ the establishment of the Chosŏn Kingdom along with the construction of Neo-Confucian schools
- _____ the Kwangju uprising
- _____ the development of hangul by King Sejong
- _____ the annexation of Korea by Japan and the subsequent colonial period
- _____ the Korean War