COMPARING WAR MONUMENTS IN NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA

GRADES: 10-12 **AUTHOR:** Gordon A. Monaghan

SUBJECT: World History, AP World History, Art History, Contemporary Issues

TIME REQUIRED: One 85-minute class period

OBJECTIVES:

1. Identify similarities and differences in monuments.
2. Identify symbols in monuments.
3. Analyze the purpose and message of public monuments.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Images of monuments in North and South Korea
- Student copies of handout: "Analyzing the Message"
- Video projector and computer

BACKGROUND:

Korea has been divided into two countries since 1945. Separated by a 2.5-km wide demilitarized zone that runs along the 38th parallel, the two Koreas have developed in very different ways and under very different ideologies. While the two societies are vastly different, when examining their monuments one can see that they share many features.

History texts tend to emphasize the ideological, economic and social differences between the two Koreas. The purpose of this lesson is to suggest to students that there are similarities between the two Koreas, especially in terms of national identity. This lesson could be used to introduce a more general comparison of the societies and histories of North and South Korea, or to introduce a unit on ideologies in the post-Cold War world. You may also want to use this lesson as part of a larger unit on the Cold War, twentieth century ideologies, propaganda techniques in the Cold War, or twentieth century art and its use by the state.

Monuments, while meant to commemorate important historical events, are also designed to convey political information. While monuments may appear to be simply educating citizens about important events or figures from the past, powerful symbols within the sculptures convey ideological messages. This is especially true in North and South Korea. Monuments in both countries are used to legitimize those with political power or to emphasize a particular interpretation of seminal historical events.

Most students will understand the propaganda use of public sculptures by dictatorial governments. Through this lesson, students will see that both the authoritarian North and the democratic South use monumental sculpture to propagandize. In this lesson students will begin to see how both North and the South portray the Korean War by analyzing war monuments in Seoul and in Pyongyang.

PROCEDURE:

1. You may want to prepare students for this lesson by giving them more extensive background information than that which is contained in this handout.

2. Begin the lesson by discussing the purpose that monuments serve for societies. If students are reluctant to answer, suggest to them that monuments can educate people about history and commemorate events that a community doesn't want forgotten. Eventually you should introduce the idea that monuments can be used to shape a community's understanding of events, or can be used to promote a particular interpretation of an event. You may want to discuss a monument in your local area, or perhaps a nationally known monument, to illustrate this idea.

3. Show the students the photograph of a Korean War monument in Seoul, South Korea (image file: "korea lesson a.jpg") using the video projector. Inform the students that the monument shows a putatively historical reunion of two brothers during the Korean War. The larger figure is a South Korean soldier. The smaller is a North Korean soldier. As they view the image, ask students to comment on what they see in the monument. Ask them if the figures look realistic. What features look unrealistic? Why is one figure larger than other is? What does the body language of the two figures tell us? Finally ask them if they see any message in the monument. You may want to ask what they think the monument is trying to teach the viewer. Clearly, the South Korean towering over his smaller and submissive North Korean sibling is meaningful.

4. Next, show students the detail of the Victorious Fatherland Unification War Monument in Pyongyang, North Korea (korea lesson b.jpg). Ask the students what details they see in the sculpture, making sure that they notice the handcuffs, the old man, the peasant woman, the young man looking at the peasant woman, and other features. What archetypes or symbols are being used in the sculpture? Ask them what emotions are on display. What does the body language of the various figures tell us? Finally, ask them what the message of the sculpture is, given their answers to the previous questions.

5. When you have finished with the two images, ask the students what purpose these monuments seem to serve. Possible answers may include beautification of public spaces or the commemoration of important events or people.

6. After discussing student answers, pass out the handout "Monuments in North and South Korea: Analyzing the Message." Ask the students to complete the handout either individually or in pairs. You may want to project the images again if they don't copy well. The image files are called "Korea lesson handout (number).jpg", and are numbered in the order they appear on the handout.

7. As a class, discuss students' answers to the questions on the handout. If you chose to have students work in groups, have them report back to the whole class. Focus the discussion on the last two questions, those about the message of the monuments.

ASSESSMENT:
Students' answers to the handout questions may be collected and graded. Additionally, students may be asked to write a reflective piece, perhaps in a journal, answering the questions:

1. What similarities and differences can you see in the monuments from North and South Korea?
2. How do the monuments we viewed help us understand the way Koreans may view the Korean War?

LESSON SUGGESTIONS:
If the lesson is taught in a traditional 45-50 minute period, you may want to assign the handout for homework. If that is the case, then at the beginning of day two, review the images from the previous day, and then proceed to discussing the handout. In order to fill out the full period, you could assign the reflective writing as an in-class assignment.

HANDOUT 1: ANALYZING THE MESSAGE

BACKGROUND:

For most of its history, Korea had been an independent state. In 1905, that ended when Japan occupied Korea and ran it as its colony. For 40 years, the people of Korea suffered under Japanese rule. At the end of World War II, in August 1945, with the Japanese surrender imminent, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to divide Korea, at least temporarily. Japanese forces north of the 38th parallel would surrender to the Soviets and those south of the 38th parallel would surrender to the Americans. The repercussions of this partition are still evident today.

With the decision to divide the Korean Peninsula, the 1,000 year-long unity of Korea was ended. Though the Allies never intended the partition to be permanent, the division of Korea into two zones of control evolved into two separate Korean states. In the North, the Soviet-backed communist government of anti-Japanese guerilla fighter Kim Il-sung ran the country. In the South, the United States backed anti-communist exile Syngman Rhee. The victorious Allies stated that Korea would someday be a unified country, but they refused to specify how that would happen.

Through the rest of the 1940's, Kim Il-sung and Syngman Rhee solidified their positions in power in the North and in the South. Both leaders were intent on restoring Korea's unity, but each on their own terms. Both spoke of invading the other's half of the peninsula in order to achieve unification. Small scale armed incursions by both the North and the South across the 38th parallel were regular occurrences by late 1949. Despite this, in 1949, both the Soviet Union and the United States had mostly withdrawn their forces from the Korean Peninsula.

While some historians disagree about who started the war, North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel, which divided North from South, in the early morning of June 25, 1950. The Korean War (or as the North Koreans call it, the Great Fatherland Liberation War) lasted from 1950 to 1953 and was devastating for both North and South Korea.

After the war, both nations developed national mythologies surrounding the wars, erecting monuments to memorialize events in the war and commemorate heroes. Monumental sculpture of the kind built in both North and South Korea serves several important purposes. While these monuments commemorate important historical events, they often are designed to convey a political message. Powerful symbols and archetypes in the monuments convey messages about what virtues or traits citizens should value, who the heroes are and most importantly, what the official version of the event is. Monuments are used to teach citizens the correct interpretation of important historical events.

The photographs that you'll be analyzing in this activity are of war monuments in North and South Korea. These monuments commemorate events slightly before and during the Korean War, or they celebrate the war itself. Discuss the questions on the next page using these photographs.