

# The Role of Education in US–South Korean Relations

A modified excerpt from the curriculum  
unit *US–South Korean Relations*

STANFORD PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL  
EDUCATION (SPICE), FREEMAN SPOGLI INSTITUTE FOR  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, 2008

By Rylan Sekiguchi and Joon Seok Hong

This lesson examines the important role that education plays in the cultural and social relationship between the United States and South Korea. Students will also learn about education in Korea and complete independent projects on various education-related topics. Ultimately, students will consider how this aspect of the US–South Korean relationship has influenced the individual lives of Koreans and Americans. (Note: The full lesson introduces the important roles of sports, media, and the arts in US–Korean relations as well.)

## MATERIALS

Handout 1, *Education and US–South Korean Relations* (on page 56)

Handout 2, *Education in Korea* (on page 57)

## TEACHER PREPARATION

Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts. Each student will receive both handouts.

## PROCEDURES

### On day one

1. Begin the lesson by leading a brief introductory discussion using the questions below.
  - In what ways have Korean culture and American culture interacted throughout history?
  - In what ways do they interact today?
  - In what ways has education served as an important point of dialogue and interaction between the two societies?
  - How are education systems in South Korea and the United States similar and different?
2. Tell students that they will learn more about education in Korea. Distribute one copy of handouts one and two to each student. Once students have finished reading both handouts, ask them to choose which activity they would like to do. Students may work in small groups (three students or fewer) or do the activity alone, but must first receive teacher approval for their project. Note: Some activities (e.g., skits) work well in groups, while others (e.g., essays) work better as solo projects. If a group's proposed project is not appropriate for its size, either suggest that students choose another project, or alter the project assignment to be more appropriate for them.
3. For the remainder of class, allow students to work in their small groups. For homework, instruct students to research their topics and/or gather relevant materials for their project. Inform them that they will have the next class period to work on their projects.

### On day two

Allow students to work on their chosen projects in their groups, sharing resources and materials with each other. If they do not complete the projects in class, ask them to complete the projects for homework.

### On day three

Collect group projects for assessment. Some projects may need to be displayed around the classroom or presented orally. ■

---

**RYLAN SEKIGUCHI** is a Curriculum Specialist at the Stanford Program on International and Cross-cultural Education (SPICE). He has authored and contributed to various SPICE curricula, including units on U.S.–South Korean relations, China's urbanization and economic development, the Silk Road, and war crimes tribunals.

**JOON SEOK HONG** has been working at SPICE since 2007. He is currently pursuing a PhD in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, where he specializes in international relations and public law, particularly in East Asia. He holds master's degrees from Stanford University and Columbia University and a BA from Yale University.

## Handout 1 Education and US–South Korean Relations

Ever since the earliest days of US–Korean relations, education has been an important point of interaction between the two societies. Throughout the years, countless people have traveled between Korea and the United States for educational exchanges, and that trend has become even stronger today. The role of education in US–South Korean relations is crucial, not only for the movement of people across borders, but for the exchange of ideas and values between the two societies. Such cross-fertilization of academic and social knowledge decreases cultural gaps and promotes closer relations.

One of the very first Americans to visit Korea was Mary Scranton, a Methodist missionary and educator. In 1886, she founded the *Ewha Hakdang*, a school for young Korean girls with an enrollment of one student. Today, *Ewha Hakdang* has become Ewha Womans University, South Korea’s most prestigious and largest institution of higher learning for women (and one of the world’s largest), with an enrollment of about 20,000.

Perhaps the most famous American family in Korea has been the Underwood family, which lived in Korea for 119 years (from 1885 to 2004) and served Korean society in several capacities, but most notably in education. Presbyterian missionary Horace Underwood immigrated to Korea in 1885 and founded Joseon Christian College in 1915, which later became part of Yonsei University, one of South Korea’s top two private universities and the country’s oldest. Through the decades, his son, grandson, and great grandson (all named Horace) have served the school as professors, principals/presidents, board members, deans, directors, and administrators. Third-generation Horace Underwood helped found Seoul National University in 1946, South Korea’s first national (i.e., public) university, and the country’s most prestigious. His son served as the Director of the Fulbright Commission in South Korea—the second largest exchange program in the world—helping to promote US–South Korean educational exchanges.

From the nineteenth century to today, the educational links between the United States and South Korea have continued to strengthen. South Koreans now constitute the largest group of international students in the US, with more than 100,000 active students studying in American middle schools, high schools, and universities at the end of 2007. Furthermore, in South Korea, students study English in school, and parts of the South Korean educational system, such as its medical and law schools, are being reconfigured to resemble American systems. Meanwhile, US universities have seen the expansion of the academic field of Korean Studies, with programs and research centers established at universities across the country, including Stanford, Columbia, Harvard, Berkeley, UCLA, Johns Hopkins, and others. These facts stand as legacies of, and testaments to, the long history of educational exchange between the two societies.

### Choose one of the following activities:

1. In 2007, Ewha Womans University opened its newest college, Scranton College, named in honor of Mary Scranton. US Ambassador to South Korea, Alexander Vershbow, spoke at the opening ceremony of Scranton College saying, “Education is one of the many important shared values that link the American and Korean people.” Write an essay that describes how education has linked the American and Korean people. In addition, how big of an impact has education had on the US–South Korean relationship, past and present?
2. Choose a famous graduate of Yonsei, Ewha, or Seoul National University who has played a role in improving US–South Korean relations. Design an exhibit that features this person and his/her accomplishments. Where would you place the exhibit? What would be your rationale for the venue you select?
3. Using art, develop a design for a school-related item (e.g., pencil, backpack, yearbook page, textbook cover, etc.) that visually represents how education has impacted US–South Korean relations.
4. In the realm of education, there are many opportunities for social exchanges between Americans and South Koreans, including pen pal programs, sister school programs, teaching-abroad programs, and actual student exchange programs. Research some of these programs and write a brief report of the best programs, summarizing your findings. As an extension, ask your teacher if you can pursue and coordinate some of these opportunities for the class.
5. Design your own original project.

## Handout 2

### Education in Korea

There is a Korean adage that, “One should not step even on the shadow of one’s teacher.” In Korea, educators—and education—are held in the highest regard. South Korean primary school teachers are recruited from the top five percent of college graduates. Students take their schooling very seriously, and it is common for high school students to return home after 9:00 PM on weekdays, after enduring a full day of school, after-school study groups, extracurricular activities, and extra sessions at a cram school or with a tutor. They attend school 220 days a year, compared to about 180–190 in the United States (depending on the state). South Koreans have one of the highest PhD per capita rates in the world. The reasons for Korean enthusiasm for education are varied, but many important factors lie in history.

Korean society, like others in East Asia, has many social legacies of Confucianism. Confucian philosophy places great emphasis on education, and as Koreans adopted Confucianism thousands of years ago, they also adopted its high regard for scholastic achievement. Korea has had well-structured school systems since ancient times, at least as far back as the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE–668 CE), when national academies taught aristocratic youth Confucian classics and prepared them for government positions. In addition to state-run national schools, regional schools and private academies, as well as academic libraries and even scholarship funds, flourished in Korea during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn Dynasties (918–1392 and 1392–1910).

In the tenth century, Korea established a civil service examination system that was meant to select the most qualified students for government posts. For about a thousand years, these civil service examinations represented one of the few ways select individuals could improve their social status. Koreans’ long experience with this examination system reinforced the cultural connection between success and scholarship. This legacy is still evident in South Korean society, where universities, governmental agencies, and many big companies administer their own entrance examinations.

Education for the masses first appeared in Korea in the 1880s, with the establishment of several modern institutions such as the English School, Yugyeong Gongwon, and Ewha Haktang. The true educational renaissance, however, did not take place until the end of World War II. Today, South Korea has a literacy rate of about ninety-nine percent, and its national reading, math, and science scores consistently rank among the top five in the world. Beyond that, enrollment in tertiary (post high-school) educational institutions has also risen dramatically, from sixteen percent in 1980 to sixty-eight percent by 1997. Furthermore, contemporary South Korean views have become increasingly globalized, with students at all levels studying English and other foreign languages, either to study abroad or prepare for the most competitive jobs on the market.

### Choose one of the following activities:

1. Until the fifteenth century, all Korean documents were written using Chinese characters, and most Koreans remained illiterate. In 1446, King Sejong introduced a new writing system called *hangeul* that consisted of only twenty-eight consonants and vowels, instead of thousands of characters. (Only twenty-four are still in use today.) It is perhaps the most unique and well-documented written language in history. Conduct research on the *hangeul* writing system, its development, and its logic. Prepare a creative way to share your findings with the rest of the class. Do you believe that the invention of *hangeul* has helped Koreans become more literate and educated? Explain.
2. Many countries honor their most celebrated historical figures by commemorating them on national currency. In the United States, most banknotes honor past Presidents and founding fathers. South Korean banknotes commemorate famous Korean scholars—Yi Hwang (also known as Toegye), Yi I (also known as Yulgok), and King Sejong. What do you think this suggests about the importance of education in Korean culture? Conduct research on one of these scholars, and design plans for an exhibit of him. Why is this person so celebrated in Korean culture? What legacy has this person left in Korean society?
3. Research the school system in South Korea. How are grades divided by school level? What subjects are taught to South Korean students? Which school does a student attend, and how is this decided? What kinds of examinations do they take? Write a research paper detailing your findings and explaining the structure of the South Korean school system. Finally, compare the South Korean school system to your own school system, and assess the pros and cons of each.
4. Research South Korean school holidays, and compare them with the holidays that US schools observe. Do South Korean and American schools observe some of the same (or similar) holidays? What holidays are observed only in South Korea, and what are the history and traditions behind them? Likewise, what American holidays are specific only to the United States? Prepare a brief presentation on your findings.
5. Design your own original project.