

## Values Lesson Plan

### How Currency Reveals Cultural Values

By Mary Connor

#### King Sejong, 1397–1450: 10,000 won



**K**ing Sejong is the most well-known and celebrated ruler in Korean history. Even though he lived more than 500 years ago, the Korean people continue to honor him for his relentless efforts to improve the lives of the common people. He governed with compassion and wisdom and led Korea into a golden age of cultural and scientific progress.

In his youth, Sejong became known as “the reading prince” and began his lifelong quest to learn everything he could about the world around him. At the age of twenty-two, he became king and established the foundation of a royal household that would last into the early twentieth century. He believed that good government was based on selecting and training intelligent men to administer the various branches of government. He selected twenty of his most able scholars and allowed them to essentially devote all of their time to advanced learning. He also sought out talent in the countryside by establishing a system to select the most qualified people to serve in government positions, according to their abilities. To protect his homeland from invaders, he selected technicians to develop improved forms of cannon and artillery.

One of King Sejong’s main goals, and the one for which he is most famous, was to make his people more educated by making it easier for them to learn to read. At this time, Koreans used the Chinese system, which involved the memorization of thousands of characters that were complicated and difficult to learn. Literacy was also restricted to the ruling class. Wanting the best for all of the people, the king came up with the revolutionary idea of inventing a new writing system that would be easily learned by the common people. By 1433, he and his scholarly officials had created the *hangul* alphabet, a phonetic writing system that greatly increased the ability of the common people to become educated. In addition, he directed scholars to write books to improve farming techniques and increase production. Under his direction, a medical dictionary and an eighty-five-volume encyclopedia were completed, which included medical treatments, acupuncture, and herbal prescriptions to treat nearly 1,000 diseases. King Sejong also promoted art, music, astronomy, science, and improved printing techniques; and he is credited with inventing the rain gauge.

#### Shin Saimdang (Shin- Sa-im-dang), 1504–1551: 50,000 won



**S**hin Saimdang is considered the most respected and memorialized woman in Korean history. She is regarded as the ideal mother, exemplary wife, and dutiful daughter; and she is known for her artistic talents in calligraphy, embroidery, painting, and poetry. Shin Saimdang was also a scholar well-versed in the Confucian classics and other great works of the literary tradition. She was also praised as the mother of Yulgok, one of Korea’s most famous philosophers. Considering the firmly held belief of female inferiority and oppressive customs to which women were subjected during the Chōson dynasty, Saimdang must have been a woman of great inner strength and determination.

Shin Saimdang came from an aristocratic background. Her parents believed that their five daughters should be educated at an early age. It is believed that she started painting at the age of five. When she was as young as six, she surprised her parents by creating a nearly perfect replica of a landscape by a renowned landscape painter. In time, her landscape paintings became her most treasured works.

When she was nineteen, in the same year that she married, her father died. Because she came from a family where there were no sons, she had to balance her responsibilities between her duty to her mother and her own family. In spite of the fact that it was difficult to visit her mother because she did not live nearby, she remained a dutiful daughter and divided her time between visiting her mother and being a devoted mother of seven children.

Because Saimdang appreciated the fine education she received from her parents, she felt it was one of her familial obligations to be productive and utilize her artistic and literary skills. She also believed that she should make sure that her children were well-educated and constructive members of society. Her third son, Yulgok, reportedly mastered the Confucian classics at the age of seven, wrote poetry at the age of eight, and ultimately became one of Korea’s most famous philosophers.

Saimdang’s sense of devotion to her family, along with her artistic achievements, required a great investment of time and energy and may have contributed to her relatively early death at age forty-seven.

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## Yi I (Yulgok) 1536-1584: 5,000 won



Yi I is known for his wisdom and for being one of Korea's most famous Confucian scholars. Commonly known by his pen name, Yulgok, he was a disciplined and dedicated scholar, statesman, philosopher, and devoted family man.

He was fortunate to have been born to an educated family. His father was a scholar and a high government official, and his mother, Shin Saimdang, was highly regarded for her knowledge of the Chinese classics and her talent as an artist and poet. With the good guidance of his mother, Yulgok completed his basic studies of the Confucian classics by the age of seven. He began writing poetry at age eight, and by the early age of thirteen, he passed the literary civil service exam and became acknowledged as a *chinsa*, a kind of titled scholar. He continued his education by studying Buddhism and Daoism.

After his mother died when he was sixteen, Yulgok went into mourning for three years in the Kungang Mountains, studying Buddhism. After his retreat, he returned to continue his studies in Confucianism and received top honors in exams, and by the time he was twenty-nine, he passed his last civil service examination and was ready for service in government. He rose in the ranks of governmental service and became one of the central figures in politics by the time he was forty. His work,

*Book on the Way to Heaven*, was considered a literary masterpiece and revealed his knowledge of history, Confucian philosophy, and Daoism. Another of his famous books was titled *A Key to Annihilating Ignorance*.

Aside from being a philosopher, Yulgok was also a social reformer. He thought it was important to implement Confucian values in government administration. He emphasized learning and self-cultivation as the basis for good government. Although he espoused a society based on the Confucian social order, he appreciated the dignity of every human being, regardless of his or her position in society. He also had great foresight about national security. He feared that the Japanese might invade Korea and proposed a policy to strengthen the army, but it was rejected. His concerns were well-grounded because, soon after his death at age forty-eight, the Japanese invaded Korea in what is known as the Imjin War (1592–1598). ■

**Editor's note:** Lesson plan is on the next page.

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MARY CONNOR taught United States History and Asian Studies for thirty-five years. She is the author of *Asia in Focus: The Koreas* (2009) and the recipient of the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award; the Prime Minister's Award from the Republic of South Korea; and the Daekyo Enopi Award, a newly established, prestigious award available to American educators. She is also Past President and Program Director of the Korea Academy for Educators (2004–2012), a nonprofit organization that informs educators about Korean history and culture and the Korean-American experience.

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Grades: 5–12

Subject: Social Studies, Cultural Studies, Math, and Economics

By Mary Connor



- |               |            |              |             |
|---------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. 1 won      | = _____ \$ | 7. \$1.00    | = _____ won |
| 2. 50 won     | = _____ \$ | 8. \$10.00   | = _____ won |
| 3. 100 won    | = _____ \$ | 9. \$150.60  | = _____ won |
| 4. 1,000 won  | = _____ \$ | 10. \$20,500 | = _____ won |
| 5. 10,000 won | = _____ \$ |              |             |
| 6. 30,000 won | = _____ \$ |              |             |

#### Part Two

#### Travel and Shopping in Seoul, South Korea

- You are planning a visit to Seoul and want to see as much as possible while you are in the city. Your parents have told you that you need to save money to help pay for the cost of your trip. You decide to go to the Internet to get a sense of how much your trip will cost and what you need to save. At the top of your list of places you want to visit is the Gyeongbokgun Palace. You are informed in your Internet search that a ticket to the palace is 1,000 won. How much is this in US currency?
- You know you want to shop in Insa-dong, a famous place for tourists to purchase gifts. You want to buy a celadon vase for your grandmother and several gifts for your classmates. You are told that the vase will be about 40,000 won and that gifts for your friends will cost about 20,000 won. What is the total in US dollars?
- You want to learn more about the Korean War and plan to visit the Korean War Museum. The cost is 3,000 won for an adult and 2,000 won for a student. How much will it cost in US dollars for your father, mother, you, and your sister?
- You have heard that a great way to see the beauty of Seoul is to ride the Mount Namsan Cable Car to the Seoul Tower Restaurant. You are told that you can expect to pay about 7,000 won for lunch. How much will this cost you in dollars?
- You want to go to the Hanok Village to learn about life in premodern times and are happy because it is free. You also want to visit the Seoul National Museum and the Folk Art Museum and find that both are also free. You know you will need to take the subway to these places, so you do an Internet search to find out about public transportation in Seoul. You learn that Seoul has a very convenient and fast public transportation system. You discover that for destinations involving ten stops, the cost is 1,000 won. How much is this in US dollars?
- You are checking out the rates of hotels and have heard about the Westin Chosun and the Seoul Shilla hotels. One night at the Westin for two adults is 280,000 won, and the Shilla costs 440,000 won. Convert the price of each in US dollars. You search for a less-expensive hotel for your family and find one with good reviews for 150,500 won. How much will this cost per night in US dollars? ■

#### Objectives

- Examine the currency of South Korea and the United States to determine how the images reflect the cultural values of each nation.
- Learn about currency exchange and calculating the cost of a tour in Seoul.

#### Procedures

- Provide your students with three images of Korean currency and four images of US currency.
- Briefly discuss George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Hamilton, and Andrew Jackson. Why do you think they were chosen to be on United States currency, and what might this show about American cultural values?
- Read summaries about King Sejong, Shin Saimdang, and Yulgok. Why do you think each of these famous Koreans was selected to appear on the currency, and what might this reveal about cultural values in Korea? What insight do you now have about the values of Korean-American families?
- What do the currencies of Korea and the United States show about cultural differences and similarities between the two cultures?
- Without the use of the Internet or a calculator, complete the Seoul travel worksheet, and convert Korean won to US dollars. When you travel to Seoul, you will be glad you had a lesson on currency exchange.

#### Part One

#### Currency Values

#### Current Exchange Rates

Research the most current exchange rate between the Korean won and US dollar to calculate how much Korean currency notes and coins are in US dollars and cents. Also, convert US dollars to Korean won (Google “currency exchange”).