

## Sinification of East Asia The Spread of Chinese Civilization: Korea

### *Introduction*

Because of the remarkable durability of Chinese civilization as well as its marvelous technological and economic innovations, other cultures began to imitate China. Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were all drawn into China's cultural and political orbit in the postclassical period. Each of the three areas interacted with China differently. Of the three, Japan was able to retain its complete political independence, while Vietnam and Korea were subjected to varying degrees of Chinese imperialism. The latter two regions had less control over the nature of cultural borrowing than did Japan. In all of the areas, Buddhism played a significant role in cultural transformation. Eventually, adoption of Chinese culture caused Japan, Korea, and Vietnam to remain relatively isolated with the exception of their links to China.

### **Korea: Between China and Japan**

Chinese culture influenced Korea more heavily than any other region, even though indigenous dynasties continued to rule the peninsula for much of the postclassic period. The people who inhabited the Korean peninsula were different ethnically than those who came to consider themselves Chinese. In 109 B.C.E., a Han dynasty emperor conquered the Korean kingdom of Choson and settled Chinese colonies in Korea. These Chinese colonies provided the conduit through which Chinese culture was transmitted. As Chinese control of Korea weakened, the indigenous Koguryo established an independent kingdom in the northern part of the peninsula.

Koguryo contested control of the peninsula with two smaller kingdoms, Silla and Paekche. In all three kingdoms, Buddhism supplied the key links to Chinese culture. In Koguryo, rulers attempted to institute the Chinese examination system, Chinese writing, and a bureaucracy. Opposition to Sinification by the Korean aristocracy led to failure of the plan.

### *Tang Alliances and the Conquest of Korea*

The Tang emperors conquered Korea for China for the second time. In the process of conquest, the Tang allied themselves with Silla in order to defeat the other two dynasties. When Silla proved resistant to external control, the Tang emperors agreed to recognize the Silla monarch as a vassal in return for the payment of tribute. The Chinese withdrew their armies from Korea in 668, leaving the kings of Silla as independent rulers.

### *Sinification: The Tributary Link*

Under the kings of Silla and the succeeding Koryo dynasty (918 - 1392), Sinification was thorough. The Silla rulers intentionally modeled their government after the Tang dynasty. The tribute system was critical to the process of cultural exchange. Tribute missions offered access to Chinese learning, art, and manufactured goods. Scholars from Korea were able to study at Chinese schools and Buddhist monasteries.

### *The Sinification of Korean Elite Culture*

The aristocracy of the Korean kingdom of Silla clustered about the capital city of Kumsong. There they became immersed in Chinese culture, including Confucianism. Despite the interest in imitating all things Chinese, the Korean elite preferred Buddhism to Confucianism. The Koreans

learned the initial secrets of pottery from the Chinese, but Korean artisans produced masterworks that often rivaled the efforts of their teachers.

#### *Civilization for the Few*

Sinification was largely limited in Korea to the elite, who monopolized most political offices and dominated social life. Much of Korea's trade involved supplying luxuries for the elite. To support the importation of luxuries, Korea exported raw materials. Artisans remained in the lower ranks of Korean society. Korea failed to develop a distinctive merchant class. The lower ranks of Korean society existed to serve the elite. Salvationist Buddhism promised an afterlife as a release from the drudgery of service to the Korean aristocracy.

#### *Koryo Collapse, Dynastic Renewal*

Periodic rebellions against the Korean government and aristocrats eventually weakened both the Silla and Koryo regimes. Following the Mongol invasion of Korea in 1231, the Yi dynasty was founded in 1392. It survived in much the same format as its predecessors until 1910.