

Korea in focus

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Religion

Religion in today's Korea covers a broad spectrum of faiths and beliefs. Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam and numerous other indigenous religions exist in Korea. Although none of them dominates, they all influence contemporary culture.

Despite the coexistence of many different religions, Korean history has never witnessed internal strife or conflict caused by religious differences. Rather, the various religions have united and rallied to support the nation in times of crisis.

The religious population of Korea today is more than 22.6 million, about 50.7 per cent of the total population, according to a 1995 National Statistics Office survey. Buddhism remains the major religion of perhaps 23.1 per cent of the population, although Protestantism is the most dynamic religion and is followed by almost 19.7 per cent of the Korean population. However, most Koreans observe certain customs and practices, which are clearly Confucian. Folk beliefs remain alive, and "gut" (shaman ceremonies) is still performed in certain places.

Education

Education has been at the heart of Korea's growth, by training and supplying the manpower needed for rapid industrial and economic expansion.

A multi-tiered educational system is currently in use, encompassing elementary school (six years), middle school (three years), high school (three years), and college (four years), as well as various graduate and professional programmes. Elementary school education has been free and compulsory since 1953. Free and compulsory education was extended to middle schools in rural areas and offshore islands in 1985, and it will become nationwide beginning from the 2004 school year. Both high schools and colleges require students to take standard qualifying examinations. Today, about 90 per cent of the nation's youth graduate from high school. About 40 per cent of high school graduates each year embark on four-year programmes of study at universities and colleges and another 33 per cent enter two-year junior colleges. In 1999, 2.5

million students enrolled in either a university or college, including junior and correspondence colleges. The national literacy rate exceeds 95 per cent.

The government has also signed agreement with 80 countries for the exchange of information and promotion of international understanding through cooperative programmes in education and culture. Korea also participates in international exchange activities coordinated by UNESCO.

Transportation

The tremendous pace of domestic economic growth in the past four decades has been reflected in the

Seoul, Gimhae near Busan, Jeju and Cheongju. Korean Air's worldwide network serves 61 cities in 28 countries and Asiana Airline has regular service to 36 cities in 14 nations.

The Incheon International Airport opened on March 29, 2001, on Yeongjong-do Island after more than eight years of construction since the ground was broken on November 12, 1992. The opening marked the completion of the first phase of construction. The US\$5.1 billion new airport has two parallel runways and is capable of handling 170,000 flights, 27 million passengers and 1.7 million metric tons of cargo annually. When the final stage

Korean ports. A ferry service links Busan with Jeju Island and the Japanese ports of Shimonoseki and Hakada, the Chinese port of Yantai and the Russian port of Vladivostok. Another ferry service links Incheon with the Chinese ports of Weihai, Qingdao, Tianjin and Dalian.

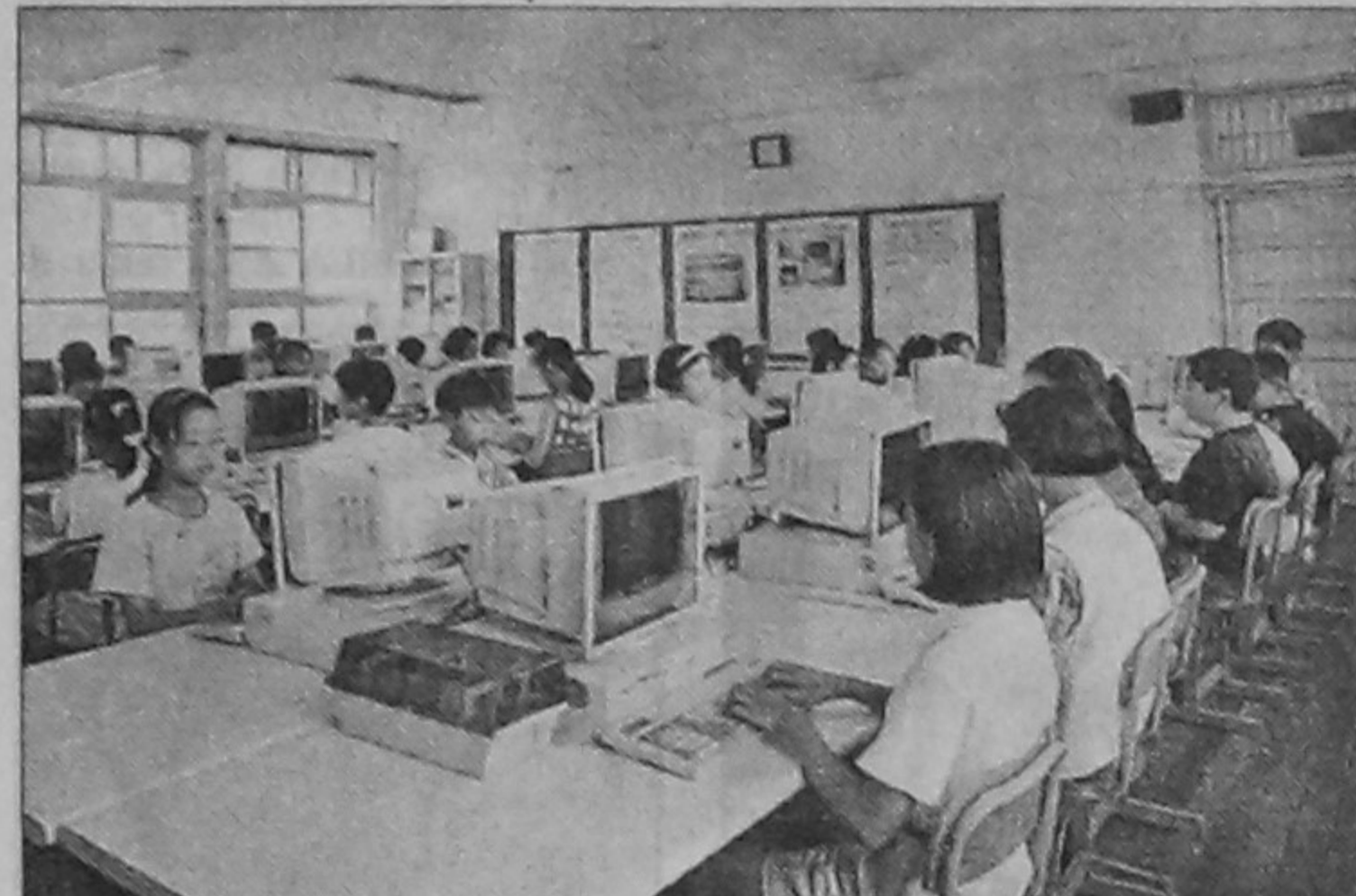
Telecommunications

Telephone service has rapidly expanded in the past decade or so. In 1987, the number of telephone lines had exceeded 10 million, with virtually every household having a telephone; and by 2000, the number had increased to 24.5 million lines with 21.9 million subscribers. The number of phones per 100 persons has increased to 45.4 and all telephone circuits are now connected by automatic switching systems. Mobile communication services also increased dramatically in recent years and 26.8 million mobile phones were in use in 2000.

International transmissions are handled via three satellite systems, a microwave communication system and a submarine coaxial cable system between Korea and Japan. These will be reinforced in the future by an additional satellite system and a global fiber optic communication network.

In addition, more and more Koreans are using computer-related communications, including on-line services and the Internet. The number of on-line service subscribers increased from 718,000 in 1995 to 16.8 million in 2000 and Internet users from 366,000 to 19.0 million during the same time period. In particular, the high-speed Internet service gained explosive popularity at the end of the 1990s. The number of high-speed Internet subscribers was 4.0 million at the end of 2000, ten times larger than the end of 1999.

To prepare for the information age, the Government, in 1995, launched a two-phase plan to build an information superhighway. Under the first phase that was completed in February 2001, major public offices, universities and research institutes have been connected and in the second phase a network is connecting those in the private sector and individual households. With this plan, the Government expects Korea will emerge as one of the world's top 10 information societies by 2002.



Computer education for middle school students

expansion of transportation facilities and the increases in Korea's annual passengers and cargo volumes.

Seoul has a well-developed mass transit system of subways, buses and taxis. Airport shuttles or city buses are conveniently available and operate throughout the city. The subway system is the fourth longest in the world, carrying about 4.7 million persons a day. Its eight lines reach most major locations in the city.

The domestic air services of Korean Air and the Asiana Airlines serve seventeen airports: Seoul (Gimpo), Incheon, Busan, Jeju, Daegu, Sokcho, Gwangju, Jinju, Yeosu, Ulsan, Gangneung, Pohang, Mokpo, Yecheon, Gunsan, Wonju and Cheongju.

There are five international airports, in Incheon and Gimpo near

of construction is completed in 2020, the airport will be able to handle 100 million passengers and 10 million tons of cargo annually, becoming the most efficient hub in Northeast Asia.

An expressway system also connects Seoul with provincial cities and towns, putting any place in mainland South Korea within a one-day round trip of the capital. Express buses transport passengers to and from all principal cities and resorts in the country.

The railways also serve the entire country through an efficient and extensive network. The super-express train, Saemaeul, runs 444.5 kilometres from Seoul to Busan in four hours and 10 minutes. There are also ordinary express and local trains.

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