

Four Famous Koreans

By Mary Connor

Originally Published in **Education About Asia (Fall 2001)**

The purpose of the lesson is to provide an opportunity for students to learn about famous Koreans through readings and/or dramatizations. It is primarily designed to introduce students to famous people who have helped shape Korean history. In the process of studying the four portraits, students will not only learn about influential Koreans, but they will also become familiar with some of the distinctive elements of Korean culture. It is hoped that the lesson will stimulate interest, provoke questions, and encourage further study. The lesson can be implemented in various ways depending on class size, student interest, and available time. It could begin a unit on Korean history and culture or individual portraits could be interspersed chronologically in the study of world history. It would be of great interest to compare the achievements of King Sejong to well-known European monarchs.

Grades: Possibly Upper Elementary, but highly recommended for Secondary

Subjects: Asian Studies, Cultural Studies, Ethnic Studies, and World History

Time Required: Two Class Periods

OBJECTIVES

1. Develop an appreciation of people who have helped shape the history and culture of Korea
2. Become aware of some of important events in Korean history
3. Examine various leadership styles and determine those the students might want to emulate
4. Provide an opportunity to dramatize history by impersonating important figures

MATERIALS REQUIRED

While this lesson is complete in itself, it can be enriched by books on Korea and updated regularly by checking the Internet for current information.

PROCEDURE

1. Introduce the lesson and make a brief introductory statement about each of the famous Koreans.
2. Ask students to volunteer in dramatizing one of the portraits. They are encouraged to practice the reading and, if inclined, dress the part. Ideally, there will be dramatizations of all of the characters. If not, ask or assign students to read the individual portraits.
3. Divide the class into groups before the dramatizations/readings begin. Each group is assigned a task. Group #1 reports about what they learned about the times in which the person lived. Group #2 explains what they learned about the culture and the values of the time. Group #3 explains what they learned about leadership and/or the person's contribution to his/her country.

All students who have completed readings or dramatizations should then be asked to state their conclusions about the varied experiences of the Korean people in the different periods they have studied.

Portrait #1 QUEEN SONDOK

(Reigned 632–47 c.e.)



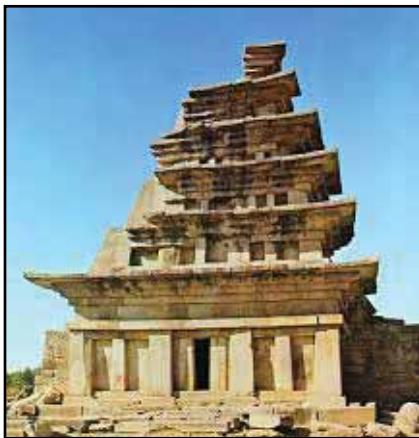
The above scene depicts the legend of Queen Sondok's pre-science, as recorded in the *Reminiscences of the Three Kingdoms*.

Source: *New World Encyclopedia* site:
http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Queen_Sondeok_of_Silla

kingdom. In Silla we had no prejudice against women rulers. My people believed in Buddhism, Daoism and Shamanism.

I am very kind, respectful, wise and far-sighted. I am known for my powers to predict the future. The people of Silla are fortunate to have me for their leader. The Korean peninsula is a very violent place. We struggle with two other rival kingdoms: Koguryo and Paekche. Paekche, under King Mu, is intent upon destroying Silla. The kingdom of Koguryo is so strong that it even defeats the forces of the emperor of T'ang China. When Koguryo and Paekche ally against Silla, I seek help from the T'ang dynasty. Thus, I initiate a pro-T'ang policy that would help pave the way for the unification of the peninsula under Silla.

In spite of the fact that I have to worry about the defense and security of my kingdom and even a plot to usurp my throne, I dedicate myself to improving the life of my people. Since I value the importance of education, I send students to China to receive the best education possible. Even though my reign is relatively short, there is much



The pagoda at Punhwangsa. The only surviving stone pagoda of pre-unified Silla.

Source: <http://www.wondermondo.com/SouthKorea.htm>

Under my direction the Buddhist temple of Punhwangsa, the nine-tiered pagoda of Hwangnyongsa, and one of the oldest astronomical observatories in the world, Ch'omsongdae, are completed. In your time this observatory is still considered one of the most important structures in Korea. I also order the construction of the famous nine-tiered pagoda of Hwangnyongsa to protect us from foreign invasions. While it does protect us, it will be destroyed during the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century; however, enough of the foundation remains, so you can still get an idea of its former glory. If you travel to Korea, come to Kyongju, the ancient capital of the Silla, and you can see the mounds covering the tombs where our leaders are buried. You will be impressed by the splendid gold crowns, necklaces, pendants and earrings that have been discovered in our burial mounds. These are just a few of the jewels of my queendom. They exemplify a golden age in Korean history.



Typical burial mount of the Silla leaders.
Source: *Cultural Heritage Administration* site:
<http://www.cha.go.kr/>

I was born on May 15, 1397, the grandson of T'aejo, the founder of the Choson dynasty, a dynasty that lasts even longer than the Koryo dynasty. I am born near the Kyongbok Palace, a palace that you can visit in Seoul today. My oldest brother is supposed to become king, but is passed over in my favor. I am highly motivated, interested in learning, and widely read. It may sound strange to you, but I am married at age twelve to a girl two years older than I. This is the custom in my day and prevailed through the early years of the twentieth century.

When I am twenty-two the king, who is very impressed with me, decides that I should become the crown prince. In 1419, I assume the throne, and my reign is considered the high point of the Choson dynasty. Indeed, the whole of the fifteenth century is marked by noticeable cultural and political achievements.

I am praised for my commitment to my country. I care deeply about my people, devote my life to establishing good government, and develop ways to improve the quality of life for everyone. I am admired for my mastery of the Confucian classics, but I am in my later years a devout Buddhist, especially after the death of my wife. I am fascinated by the world of science, especially astronomy. During my reign we chart constellations, refine rain gauges, various sundials and water clocks. Since our economy is based on agriculture, it is important that we find ways to improve agricultural production. Handbooks to improve agricultural production and medical books are completed in my time. To protect our homeland from invaders, our technicians develop new forms of cannon and artillery.

I believe my responsibility is to seek out talented people and to train them in the art of good government according to the Confucian classics. Once they are trained, it is important to give them tasks that will fully utilize their talents. I establish an excellent library and select very able scholars to devote all of their time to improve the quality of education. I also seek out talented people in the countryside and make sure that these people get appropriate recognition from their provincial governor. These people also work in government or in posts that are appropriate for their abilities.

My main goal is to find ways for my people to become more literate. We use the Chinese system of writing, which involves memorizing thousands of characters that are very complicated and difficult to learn. I decide to develop a simple and effective system of writing. What is created is *han'gul*, a phonetic writing system that is very scientific and easy to learn. Koreans now have their own system of writing. This is my greatest accomplishment.

I have many other interests. I desire to have a book written to help the common people become more successful farmers. This leads to a farmer's handbook that improves farming techniques and increases production. I am also very concerned about the health of my people. Under my direction a medical dictionary and an encyclopedia are written. The encyclopedia, in eighty-five volumes, consists of medical treatments to cure nearly one thousand diseases. Some of the treatments include herbal prescriptions and acupuncture. I also promote art, music, astronomy, science and practical inventions. I am credited with developing a rain gauge two hundred years before a similar instrument is developed in Europe. I also advance the use of movable type. You might not know that Koreans invented movable type nearly two hundred years before Gutenberg.

I also have some impressive political achievements. I am able to defeat the Japanese pirates who are menacing our coasts and also extend the territory of Choson up to the Yalu River, the border of North Korea today. I also try to raise the moral standards of my country.

In my later years I become paralyzed. I have great difficulty speaking. If this is not bad enough, I develop cancer and die at the age of fifty-two. A street named after me is near Kyongbok Palace, near to where I was born nearly six hundred years ago. People continue to be amazed by the social, political, academic and scientific achievements of my reign. It is a golden age for Korea.

Portrait #2
KING SEJONG
(1397-1450)



Image source: *Enhawiki Mirror* site:
mirror.enha.kr



Image source: The Korea Insights Web site:
<http://korea.insights.co.kr/english/fmp/fmp.02.html>

Portrait #3

ADMIRAL YI SUN-SHIN

(1545-98)



Image source: *Who is General Yi Sun Sin? | Seon Wellbeing Academy site:*
<https://seonwellbeingacademy.wordpress.com/category/yi-sun-sin/>

I am Admiral Yi Sun-Shin, one of the most famous military heroes in Korean history. I am well known as the inventor of a Turtle Ship, an ironclad warship that looks like a turtle. I use this ship to defeat the Japanese at a time when their ships and armies are causing death and destruction throughout our country. I am a brilliant military strategist, a great patriot and a defender of Korea.

I am born into an impoverished *yangban* (aristocrat) family, but through hard work and determination I become a very respected man. At twenty-one I begin to learn about military arts through self-study and work hard as an apprentice to manufacturers of weapons. When I am twenty-eight, I take the government examinations to become a military officer. During the practical part of the exams, I fall off my horse and fail the exam. I am devastated. I disappoint my family and know that I now will have to wait four long years before the next exam. Finally, at age thirty-two, I pass the exam. I am commissioned as a junior officer and go on assignment in a far-away place along the Tumen River on the northern border of Korea. I hold various posts in different locations, but then I am promoted to commander of a naval station in Cholla province. It is in this capacity that I achieve fame by defeating the Japanese in their invasion in 1592 under the direction of their great conqueror, Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

Before Hideyoshi's anticipated invasion, I build my famous Turtle Ship. I create the world's first ironclad long before your Monitor of Civil War fame. My first ship is nearly sixty-five feet long, fifteen feet wide amidships, with sides nearly eight feet high. On the sides are portholes through which cannons are fired to blow the Japanese out of the water. Thick iron plates with iron spikes on the deck will prevent the enemy from boarding. There is a fearsome dragon's head on the bow of the ship. By burning a combination of sulfur and saltpeter, clouds of smoke are emitted through the dragon's head and create a protective smoke screen.

In 1592, when my Turtle Ships engage the Japanese, we manage to cut off their source of supplies. We easily destroy twenty-six of their thirty ships. On land, guerrilla armies are formed; aristocrats, peasant farmers, Buddhist monks, women and slaves fight together with Ming troops and force the Japanese to retreat. Five years later Hideyoshi tries again and launches a second invasion. This time we are even better prepared. I only have twelve ships, but I lure the Japanese into a narrow strait. We wait patiently for them to enter the channel and when they do, we destroy their ships, a fleet of over 300 strong! As the enemy retreats, a stray bullet hits me, and I die. The great Hideyoshi also dies soon after. The war is now over. Korea has been saved. Japan's forces retreat to their home islands and will now pursue a policy of isolation for over 250 years. Only in 1853 with the force of one quarter of the United States navy will Japan open her ports to the world.

Though my victory is many years old, it pleases me that I remain one of Korea's great heroes. When you visit Seoul, you will see a statue of my ship and me in downtown Seoul. And if you visit the Korean War Memorial Museum, you will find a magnificent replica of my famed Turtle.



Illustration depicting Admiral Yi Sun-Shin and the 'Kobukson' or turtle ship in 1592.
Image source: http://www.yisunshinusa.com/pic_5.htm

I am one of Korea's most famous independence fighters. I am very young, just sixteen years old, but people believe that I contribute significantly to the Independence Movement against Japan. I am enraged by what has happened to our country during the occupation and organize and provoke people to resist Japanese colonialism. I help plan the March 1, 1919 demonstration, a nonviolent peaceful protest similar to your Martin Luther King's civil rights march on Washington in 1963. While most people followed King's march on Washington, we plan our protest secretly. We catch the Japanese completely by surprise, a tribute to our careful organization as well as to the overly confident police. The peaceful demonstration sparks a nationwide movement in the following months and involves over one million people. Massive demonstrations on this scale are unprecedented, and it is clear that the Japanese do not think we are capable of such a concentrated effort.

We suffer greatly under Japanese rule. The idealism of Woodrow Wilson and his Fourteen Points raises our hopes at the end of WWI. We believe, perhaps naively, that Wilson's proclamation of self-determination for subjugated peoples will somehow lead to Korean independence. Our hopes are very high.

The leaders of the movement write a Declaration of Independence, expressing our desire to be free and independent. Thirty-three Korean nationalists sign this document.

Three years before the demonstrations begin, I start attending the Ewha Girls' School in Seoul, one of Korea's earliest schools for women. I study very hard and become known as someone with firm convictions and commitment. When I return home during the summers to my small village, I teach people to read and expose them to Western science and geography, which is very different from the traditional Chinese classical education they are receiving.

In 1919 the determination to be independent from Japan reaches a climax when King Kojong, who abdicates his throne in 1907, dies in Seoul amid rumors he has been poisoned by the Japanese. My classmates and I join the nation in our sorrow for the king. Leaders of the Independence Movement decide to capitalize on the mood of the country and agree to massive demonstrations on March 1, two days before the king's funeral.

When my friends and I get copies of the Declaration of Independence, we pledge that we will participate in a mass demonstration in Pagoda Park in downtown Seoul. Our principal strongly advises the students not to participate. However, on March 1, seven of us cut class and join the crowd at Pagoda Park. A few days later I join the protests, but this time I am arrested, though only for a short time.

When the governor-general closes all the schools in Seoul because of the unrest, I return to my hometown where I convince my brother and several friends to hold a rally similar to the one in Pagoda Park. With the help of members of a local church, I begin to organize a demonstration. I travel from village to village to get additional support. I announce that the signal for the demonstration to begin will be a lighted torch on the mountaintop. I personally light the torch and carry it to the mountaintop.

The next day I address a crowd assembled in the market place. We wave the national flag, which is outlawed by the Japanese government. We shout for independence. The police appear and shoot down many people. My parents are among the first to be killed. They arrest many people, including me.

I am tortured for many days. Then I am transferred to a prison in Kongju. I am later tried, found guilty, and sentenced to three years in prison in Seoul. Prison life is very difficult for me. After a period of torture and suffering, I die. My last words are "Japan shall fall." I die along with an estimated 7,500 others in demonstrations that sweep the country in a period of ten months. There are approximately 45,000 arrests.

The movement fails terribly. Our country will not be independent until the Japanese are defeated in 1945. The twentieth century is a time of terrible sorrow for my people: occupation, war and political division. Yet we never give up hope to be a unified nation.

I am glad that I am remembered for my role in our history. I am often called the Korean Joan of Arc. I give hope to my people when they need it the most. There is a shrine in my memory in Ch'onan, the village of my birth. I am buried on the mountain where I carried the torch for freedom many years before. In Seoul there is a statue in my famous pose, arm outstretched, torch in hand.

Portrait #4
YU KWAN-SUN
(1904-20)



Image source: The Web site page *Ryu Kwan Sun's Dungeon 800 Words*:
<http://www.crosswinds.net/~sroney/dungeon.html>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Eckert, Carter J., Ki-baik Lee, Young Ick Lew, Michael Robinson, and Edward W. Wagner. *Korea Old and New: A History*. Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers, 1990.

Kim, Yung-Chung. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. Seoul: Ewha Women's University Press, 1976.

Korea Foundation. *Korean Cultural Heritage, Vol. 4*. Seoul: Samsung Moonhwa Printing Co., 1997.

Korean Overseas Information Service. *A Handbook of Korea*. Seoul: Samhwa Printing Co., 1993.

Lee, Peter H. *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization, Vol. 1 and 2*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Nahm, Andrew C. *A Panorama of 5,000 Years: Korean History*. Seoul: Hollym Corporation, 1987.

Saccone, Richard. *Koreans to Remember: Fifty Famous People Who Helped Shape Korea*. Seoul: Hollym Corporation, 1993.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this article was developed as a lesson plan for the Korea Society. We would like to thank the Korea Society for assistance in the development of this manuscript.

MARY CONNOR taught AP U.S. History and Asian Studies at Westridge School, Pasadena, California. In 2000, she received the Korea Society's Fellowship in Korean Studies to study and travel in Korea. Her lesson is a result of this fellowship.