

Korean Culture and Society: Continuity and Change

ASIA-3000 (3 credits)

South Korea: Society & Culture

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This course provides an interdisciplinary introduction to South Korea's society and culture, emphasizing the tension between enduring traditions and rapid transformations. Students explore how historical legacies, Confucian values, and family and community structures shape everyday life, and how forces such as democratization, globalization, and economic development have transformed social institutions. Topics include education, class, gender, religion, and generational change, with attention to how Koreans negotiate identity and belonging in a rapidly shifting society. The course establishes a foundation for understanding the program while field visits and cultural experiences offer firsthand perspectives on how continuity and change are lived in contemporary Korea.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Articulate the enduring influence of historical, cultural, and religious values on contemporary Korean families, communities, and systems.
- Describe the major forces, including democratization, rapid economic development, and globalization, that have driven profound social and institutional transformation in South Korea since the mid-20th century.
- Analyze the complexities of key social systems and categorizations, such as education, class, gender, and religion, and how they reflect the ongoing relationships between tradition and modernity.
- Distinguish between ideological representations of Korean culture (e.g., in media or politics) and the actual lived experiences of Koreans as observed through course materials and community engagement.
- Define and provide examples of how different Korean generations negotiate identity and belonging in a rapidly shifting social environment.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English.

Instructional Methods

This course is designed around the principle that learning is an active, holistic process that extends well beyond the classroom. Seminars introduce key concepts and interpretive frameworks that are then examined, complicated, and enriched through direct engagement with people, places, and contexts — field visits, expert briefings, guided observation, and community-based learning. Field-based learning is integrated into course design rather than treated as enrichment: faculty prepare students for each engagement, guide interpretation on location, and facilitate the reflection that connects experience to course themes. Students move through cycles of experience, observation, and analysis, progressively taking greater ownership of their own inquiry. This process is not always linear, and that is by design — developing the capacity to learn from unpredictable, context-dependent situations is itself a transferable skill and a foundation for lifelong learning.

Required Texts

To be assigned by course instructor.

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Criteria

1. Participation - 10%

Participation is assessed based on consistent, informed engagement in class sessions, simulation activities, and experiential learning. This includes preparation for discussions, constructive collaboration within teams, and professional conduct during site visits and guest engagements. Students are expected to contribute thoughtfully, listen actively, and engage respectfully with peers and external partners throughout the course.

2. Field Entry Portfolio – 20% (4 entries × 5%) + Meta-Reflection – 10%

Students will submit four portfolio entries across the semester — roughly one per month — each anchored to a specific field visit, site, or community encounter from the program (see the Assignment Timeline below). Entries are designed to capture learning that only you – present in that moment, in that place – could produce, and to demonstrate learning derived from experience rather than documentation of experience.

Each entry includes:

- A photo or artifact from the experience (captioned with date, location, and brief context)
- An analytical reflection (400–500 words) that moves beyond description. Students identify one or more broader course themes — cultural, familial, historical, religious, political, or economic — reflected in their observations, and analyze the experience

using at least one assigned reading as an interpretive framework. The reflection should address not only what the reading helps you understand about the experience, but how the framework explains — or fails to explain — what you observed.

Entries must be specific and grounded — generic observations, abstract summaries, or descriptive accounts without analysis will not meet the standard. Proper citation is required

Meta-Reflection / Synthesis (10%): At the end of the semester, students will submit a synthesis essay (1,000–1,200 words) that reads across their four entries. The meta-reflection shifts the question from “what did I see and experience?” to “what did I learn from the experience?” Students identify patterns across their observations, assumptions that were revised or overturned, and ways their interpretive frameworks changed over the semester. The strongest syntheses treat the student’s own earlier entries as primary sources to be re-read critically.

3. Oral History Project – 30%

Students will partner with a local community organization (e.g., a senior center, a neighborhood association, a multi-generational church group, a social services organization) to conduct and record an oral history interview with a community elder or long-term resident. The goal is to capture the interviewee’s personal narrative of family and community life over time, focusing on the influence of societal norms, values, technology, gender, class, religion, etc.

Language and interpretation: Interviews may be conducted in English or, where the interviewee prefers to speak Korean, with interpretation support arranged through the program or the partner organization. Students working through an interpreter will be prepared in interpreter-mediated interview methods, and the dynamics of translation — what travels across languages and what does not — may themselves become part of the analysis.

The final product can be a 5–7 minute digital story (short video, podcast, or interactive website) that interweaves the interview audio/video, historical images, and student narration with connections to course readings; OR a 7–9 page academic oral history paper; OR an alternative creative output, such as a graphic novel, that integrates the person’s story, course readings, and additional contextual evidence.

4. Interactive Field Guide – 30%

In small groups, students will choose one social system (e.g., education, religion, social services, transportation, food) and a specific identity lens (e.g., age, ability, gender, sexuality), subject to instructor approval of the pairing and of the group’s guiding research question. Groups then conduct structured fieldwork — observation protocols, site visits, and short informal interviews — to analyze how the system includes, excludes, sorts, or serves people through that lens.

The Field Guide has two integrated components:

1. An annotated city map in which each annotation functions as an analytical claim supported by field evidence — an argument about how the system operates through the chosen lens, not a catalogue of where particular groups gather.

2. A framing essay (1,500–2,000 words) that states the group’s research question, applies at least three course readings as analytical frameworks, and explains how the mapped evidence illustrates the complex relationship between traditional values (e.g., academic rigor, patriarchal norms) and modern realities (e.g., competitiveness, globalization).

Guides that list locations without analysis will not meet the standard. The analysis must include evidence from the field and link explicitly to course readings.

Assessment

Participation -10%
Field Entry Portfolio + Meta-reflection - 30%
Oral History - 30%
Interactive Field Guide - 30%

Grading Scale

94-100%	A	74-76%	C
90-93%	A-	70-73%	C-
87-89%	B+	67-69%	D+
84-86%	B	64-66%	D
80-83%	B-	Below 64	F
77-79%	C+		

Note on Attendance and Participation: Consistent participation in classes, site visits, and required program activities is essential to the academic experience. Students are expected to participate fully and may not opt out of required components, as these activities are integral to course learning and collective discussion. If circumstances such as illness affect attendance, students must communicate promptly with the Center Director or a designated staff member. Absences may affect academic performance and course grades, and repeated or unexcused absences may result in additional academic or programmatic consequences. When absences are unavoidable, alternative academic work may be required.

Program Expectations

To support a respectful, engaging, and academically rigorous learning environment, students are expected to approach this program with professionalism, preparation, and openness. Because this is an intensive, field-based program, individual conduct directly shapes the quality of the shared academic experience.

- **Learning Community:** Students are expected to engage respectfully with differing perspectives, including those of classmates, guest speakers, and local partners. Agreement is not required, but attentive listening, intellectual openness, and respectful dialogue are essential.
- **Content Considerations:** Course materials and activities may engage sensitive or challenging topics. The classroom is a space for thoughtful, respectful engagement with complex ideas. When possible, faculty will flag particularly intense content in advance.

Students who find that course content affects their ability to participate or keep up with coursework are encouraged to communicate with faculty and seek appropriate support.

- **Participation and Engagement:** Students are expected to come prepared and to engage actively in classes, discussions, and site-based learning. This includes contributing thoughtfully to discussion, asking questions, and engaging respectfully with faculty, peers, and guest speakers. Meaningful participation supports collective learning and is an essential part of the program experience.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Because this is a multi-country, field-based program, schedules and activities may change in response to local conditions or logistical realities. Students are expected to approach such adjustments with flexibility and professionalism. Adaptability is considered part of meaningful engagement in the program.
- **Academic Integrity:** Students are expected to complete all work honestly and ethically, in accordance with academic integrity standards outlined in course and program policies.
- **Managing Academic Work:** Students are responsible for maintaining reliable access to their academic work by keeping multiple copies using secure storage methods (e.g., cloud-based platforms or the learning management system). Technical issues such as lost files or device failures do not excuse late or missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Personal devices may be used for note-taking and course-related activities. Off-task use is not acceptable, particularly during discussions, site visits, or guest presentations, as it detracts from collective engagement.
- **Course Communication:** Course materials, assignments, and updates will be posted on Canvas. While the course calendar provides a general structure, adjustments may occur based on program flow or site-based learning opportunities. Students are responsible for checking the course site regularly and communicating promptly about access issues.
- **Recording Policy:** To support open discussion, recording of classes or program activities is not permitted without prior written approval from the instructor. Approved recordings are for personal academic use only. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Accessibility Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Credit Hours: SIT adheres to the standard that 1 credit hour equals no less than 45 hours of coursework. The calculation is based on the standard 50-minute academic hour. The number of credits each course carries determines how many total hours each course involves in a semester. Of the 45-hours for 1-credit hour, one third is designated for direct faculty instruction. Direct faculty instruction includes all learning activities led by the faculty whether in the classroom or in the field — lectures, guest speakers, site visits, hands-on field activities, etc.

Note on Late Assignments: Because this program integrates classroom learning with site visits and debriefs, assignments are designed to build on one another and connect directly to learning on location. *Timely submission is therefore important for maintaining continuity and full participation in the academic experience.* Extensions may be granted *in limited circumstances and on a case-by-case basis* with approval from the Program Director or a designated staff member. Requests should be made in writing as early as possible and no later than 12 hours before the posted due date. Students are expected to communicate proactively if challenges arise. Work submitted after an approved extension period may receive a reduced or failing grade, depending on the circumstances.

Note on the Use of Generative AI Tools: In this course, students may use generative AI tools only in ways that support their own intellectual work. Acceptable uses may include brainstorming questions, organizing notes, clarifying concepts, or supporting revision at the sentence or structure level. Students may not use AI tools to generate substantive analysis, strategic arguments, written sections, or oral responses that are presented as their own work. Because assignments emphasize applied reasoning, comparative judgment, and place-based analysis, students are expected to remain the primary source of ideas, interpretation, and decision-making.

Expectations for AI use may vary by assignment and will be discussed explicitly with faculty. In some cases, students and faculty may collaboratively establish guidelines for appropriate AI use for a particular task. Students are responsible for following the agreed-upon expectations and for seeking clarification if boundaries are unclear.

When generative AI tools are used in the preparation of an assignment, students are expected to acknowledge their use clearly and transparently, noting the tool used and the nature of its contribution (e.g., brainstorming, outlining, or language revision). This acknowledgment supports academic transparency and does not, on its own, imply inappropriate use. Policies on AI use may differ across courses and instructors within the program. Students should attend carefully to course-specific guidance and understand that responsible AI use is defined at the course level.

Sample AI Acknowledgment Statement: I used [tool name] for [purpose, e.g., brainstorming or sentence-level revision]. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are my own.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs.*

Module 1: Historical Foundations and Identity Formation

This module establishes the cultural and historical groundwork for understanding contemporary Korean society. The module examines how Confucian values have shaped family structures, social hierarchy, and educational aspiration, and how religious pluralism (Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Shamanism) reflects the layered history of the peninsula. Students also encounter the contesting meanings of 'tradition' and 'culture,' learning to distinguish between lived experience from ideological or touristic representations of Koreanness.

Session 1: Historical Legacies and Cultural Identity

Possible topics covered:

- Overview of Korean history from the Three Kingdoms to the contemporary era
- The colonial period, division, and their lasting cultural and psychological legacies
- Introduction to the concept of han and its role in Korean cultural identity

Required Reading:

Park, Eugene Y. (2022). Korea: A History. Stanford University Press. [Chapters 1–3]

Field component (possible): Visit to the National Museum of Korea, whose first-floor galleries present a chronological survey of the peninsula's history through artifacts and material culture, anchoring the module's historical overview in tangible objects.

Session 2: Family, Community, and Religious Life

Possible topics covered:

- The family as social institution: Confucian ideals vs. contemporary realities
- Changing household structures, marriage patterns, and filial piety
- The rise of non-religion and atheism in contemporary Korean society
- Religious pluralism in Korea: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Shamanism
- How religion structures community life, calendar, and ritual

Field component (possible): Guided evening walk up Inwangsan, one of the most significant mountains in Korean Shamanism in Seoul, with the possibility of a conversation with a practicing shaman and guide.

Required Readings

Baker, Donald. (2006). Sibling Rivalry in Twentieth-Century Korea: Buddhism and Christianity. In Buswell, R. and Lee, T. (eds.), *Christianity in Korea*. University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 149–166.

Kim, A. E., & Connolly, D. (2024). Institutions and countercultures: Christianity's impact on South Korean modernization. *Religions*, 15, 416.

Park, Insook Han, and Lee-Jay Cho. (1995). Confucianism and the Korean Family. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 26(1), 117–134

Module 2: Economy, Democracy, and Urban Life

This module examines the forces that have most dramatically reshaped Korean society since the mid-twentieth century, devoting a full session to each of three interlocking dimensions: economic development, democratic politics, and urban transformation. The first session traces the 'Miracle on the Han River' – rapid industrialization, the chaebol system, and the social costs of compressed growth. The second examines Korea's democracy movement, from the Gwangju Uprising to the candlelight protests of 2016-2017, and the role of civil society in shaping political life. The third turns to Seoul itself as a site where economic and political forces become visible in built space: in gentrification, displacement, megaprojects, and the ongoing negotiation of who the city is for. Together, the three sessions ask students to see continuity and change not just as abstract forces but as lived, spatial, and political realities.

Session 3: Economic Development, Class, and Inequality

Possible topics covered:

- The 'Miracle on the Han River': rapid industrialization and the chaebol system
- State-led development and its relationship to authoritarian governance
- Class structure in contemporary Korea: the emergence and anxieties of the middle class
- Globalization and its effects on work, consumption, and aspiration

Required Readings

Oh, I., & Rowley, C. (2024). Corporate governance and firm legitimacy: Chaebol governance and political corruption in South Korea. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 25, 87–93.

Oh, I., & Jun, H. (2016). Economic miracle: From post-war reconstruction to post-crisis affluence. In M. J. Seth (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History* (pp. 295-314). Routledge.

Session 4: Democratization and Civic Life

Possible topics covered:

- Korea's democracy movement: from authoritarian rule to civilian government

- The Gwangju Uprising of 1980 and its place in Korean collective memory
- The June 1987 uprising, the transition to electoral democracy, and the limits of democratization
- Civil Society organizations – labor unions, religious groups, student groups, NGOs – and their role in Korean public life.

Field component (possible): Visit to Gwanghwamun Square and the area of the former Blue House. The square has been the stage for nearly every major political protest in modern Korean history — from the democracy movement through the 2016–2017 candlelight protests to the demonstrations following the December 2024 martial law declaration — and students examine its political symbolism alongside its historical and popular-culture significance.

Required Readings:

Brazinsky, G. A. (2016). Democratization in South Korea. In M. J. Seth (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History* (pp. 314-326). Routledge.

Jeong, J. (2016). Trade union movements in South Korea since 1945. In M. J. Seth (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History* (pp. 275–295).

Session 5: Urbanization, Space, and the Politics of the City

Possible topics covered:

- Urban redevelopment, gentrification, and displacement
- Gangnam vs. Gangbuk: spatial inequality and the social geography of Seoul
- The smart city and surveillance

Field component (possible): Paired site visit to Gangnam and Seoul Forest, allowing students to observe spatial inequality, redevelopment, and the contested social geography of the city firsthand.

Required Readings:

Han, Y. (2026). Countdown city: Contingency as urban condition, hustle as exit, and everyday crisis in Seoul. *City*, 30 (1–2), 455–471.

Seo, J., & Kim, J. (2025). Exploring the influence of the private park on spatial equity in urban parks: A case study in Seoul, South Korea. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 1-10.

Module 3: Social Systems: Education, Gender, and Generations

This module turns to three of the most socially contested domains in contemporary Korea: the education system, gender relations, and generational identity. Korea's education system – renowned for its intensity, competitiveness, and the ubiquitous hagwon (private cram school) –

is a window into deeper values about merit, mobility, and hierarchy. The module then examines how gender roles are being renegotiated in a society where Confucian expectations persist alongside a vibrant and often contentious feminist movement. The module closes by considering generation as a key axis of identity, with a discussion of how younger Koreans are navigating new challenges and opportunities.

Session 6: Education, Social Mobility, and Pressure

Possible topics covered:

- The Korean education system: structure, intensification, and the role of hagwons
- Education as the primary route to class status and social mobility
- Mental health, student wellbeing, and the hidden costs of academic competition

Field component (possible): Guided engagement with the hagwon system (e.g., a walk through a hagwon district such as Daechi-dong), including, where possible, conversations with education providers, parents navigating the system, and former students who have pushed back against it.

Required Readings:

Kang, Y. (2024). Not to study, but to experience: Parental aspirations, children's happiness and alternative pathways to going global in South Korea. *Global Networks*, 24, e12493.

Kang, Y., & Kim, Y. (2026). Educational aspirations on the move: Parenting, social class, and children's mobilities in South Korea. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*. Advance online publication.

Kim, M. (2026, February 4). South Korea questions cram school culture and childhood stress. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/04/world/asia/south-korea-cram-schools-childhood-stress.html>

Session 7: Gender, Sexuality, and Generational Change

Possible topics covered:

- Gender roles in historical and contemporary Korea: Confucian ideals, feminist movements, and backlash
- The 'escape the corset' movement: feminist body politics and anti-feminist responses
- LGBTQ+ identities and the politics of visibility in Korean society

Field component (possible): Visit to Itaewon and Euljiro, neighborhoods central to LGBTQ+ life in Seoul, to observe how the politics of visibility plays out in urban space.

Required Readings:

Jung, G., & Moon, M. (2024). "I am a feminist, but . . .": Practicing quiet feminism in the era of everyday backlash in South Korea. *Gender & Society*, 38(2), 216–243

Shin, K. (2021). Beyond #WithYou: The new generation of feminists and the #MeToo movement in South Korea. *Politics & Gender*, 17(3), 507–513.

Module 4: Japan Excursion: Comparative Perspectives on Continuity and Change

This module comprises the multi-day Japan excursion. The sessions prepare students for the excursion by introducing the Korea-Japan relationship, colonial legacies, and the scholarly frameworks for comparative social analysis. The excursion itself - centered in Tokyo - is an intensive field experience in which students observe Japanese society through the thematic lenses developed across Modules 1–3.

Class Session 8 and 9: Colonial Legacies and Japan-Korea relations

Possible topics covered:

- Introduction to the Korea-Japan relationship: colonialism, postwar settlement, and contemporary tensions
- Historical memory as a social and political force: comfort women, forced labor, Yasukuni, and the politics of apology
- Comparative social frameworks: what does it mean to compare Korea and Japan? What are the risks and possibilities?

In-class screening (possible): A Korean film or drama episode engaging colonial memory, examined as cultural work — how contemporary artists and creators process this history and deploy it to construct specific narratives about contemporary Korea.

Required Readings:

Lind, J. (2009). The perils of apology: What Japan shouldn't learn from Germany. *Foreign Affairs*, 88(3), 132–146.

Lie, J. (2022). The persistence of monoethnic ideology in multiethnic Japan. In K. Um & C. Takenaka (Eds.), *Globalization and civil society in East Asian Space* (pp. 1–15). Routledge.

Jonsson, G. (2015). Can the Japan-Korea dispute on "comfort women" be resolved? *Korea Observer*, 46(3), 489–513.

Jo, E. A. (2022, November 28). Japan and South Korea Are Still Haunted by the Past. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/japan/japan-and-south-korea-are-still-haunted-past>

Module 5: Contemporary Korea: Identity, Multiculturalism, and Looking Forward

The final module brings the course into the present, exploring how Korea navigates the tensions between its self-image as a culturally homogeneous society and the realities of increasing diversity, immigration, and global interconnection. It examines digital culture, the Korean Wave, and migration as sites where Korean identity is being actively remade. The module also asks students to synthesize their learning across the entire course - what does it mean to live between continuity and change in contemporary Korea, and how has this course changed how you see that?

Class Session 10: Identity and Multiculturalism in Contemporary Korea

Possible topics covered:

- Digital culture and social media in Korea: connection, surveillance, and mental health in a hyper-wired society
- The Korean Wave (Hallyu) as both cultural expression and instrument of soft power: who benefits?
- Migration and multiculturalism in Korea: marriage migrants, foreign workers, ethnic Koreans (gyopo), and North Korean defectors

Required Reading:

Kim, T. (2025). Soft Power, Popular Culture, and Diplomacy in the South Korean Context. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 26(1), 282-288.

Class Session 11: Course Reflections and Wrap Up

Possible Topics Covered

- Final synthesis discussion: What does it mean to live between continuity and change in contemporary Korea?
- Student reflections: What assumptions did you arrive with? What shifted? What remains unresolved?