The Influence of China on Korea’s Development

Korea is a peninsula jutting out from the Asian mainland. It is bounded by mountains in the north, the Yellow Sea on the west, and the Sea of Japan (East Sea) on the east. In the south, Korea is about 125 miles from Japan’s southern islands.

Korea is mountainous, with only about 1/3 of its land capable of being farmed (arable). It has hot summers and very cold winters.

Early History

In its early history, Korea was not unified. Different parts of the peninsula were controlled by various clans or tribes. Around 100 BCE, Korea was conquered by the Han Dynasty of China, which installed a military government and imposed control.

From the Chinese, Koreans learned about centralized government; writing systems; and Confucian and Buddhist ideas.

Eventually, as a result of revolts against Chinese rule, the peninsula split into three kingdoms. While all three were separate (each with its own king), all adopted Buddhism and writing systems based on Chinese characters.

Korean scholars traveled to China, and Korean students were taught the elements of Confucianism.

A period of wars led to the pre-eminence of the **Silla Kingdom** around 600 CE.

The Desire to Mimic Chinese Styles (and Stay Safe)

Under the Silla monarchs, who ruled from 668 until the late 9th century, and the Koryo dynasty (918-1392) that followed, Chinese influences peaked and Korean culture achieved its first full flowering. The Silla rulers tried to turn their kingdom into a miniature of China. They regularly sent diplomats and **tribute** (protection money) to the Chinese court, where Korean scholars collected Chinese texts and noted the latest fashions in court dress and manners.
The Koreans' regular appearance at the Chinese court was a key sign of their prominent and enduring participation in the Chinese tribute system. At various times, the participants in the system included. Other Asian peoples also practiced this, but none were more committed to the tributary arrangements than the Koreans.

Thus, the Chinese empire did not try to conquer the Koreans and other surrounding peoples. Most Chinese emperors were content to receive Korean officials. These officials offered tribute in the form of money and splendid gifts and acknowledged the superiority of the Chinese emperor.

For the Koreans, this seemed a small price to pay for the benefits they received from China. Not only did submission and tribute guarantee continuing peace with the Chinese, but it brought them artistic and trade advantages.

The tributary system provided the Koreans privileged access to Chinese learning, art, and manufactured goods. Tribute missions normally included merchants, whose ability to buy up Chinese manufactures and sell their own goods in the lucrative Chinese market hinged on their country's participation in the Chinese system.

Missions from Korea and other areas influenced by Chinese culture, such as Japan and Vietnam, also included scholars. They studied at Chinese academies or Buddhist monasteries and purchased Chinese scrolls and works of art to fill the libraries and decorate the palaces back home.

Thus, the tribute system became the major channel of trade and intercultural exchange between China and its neighbors.

**The Sinification (Imitating Chinese Styles) of Korean Culture**

The Silla rulers rebuilt their capital at Kumsong on the to look like the Chinese royal court. The streets were laid out on a regular grid; there were central markets, parks, lakes, and a separate district to house the imperial family.

To escape the boredom of the backward rural areas and provincial capitals and "be where the action was," the aristocratic families who surrounded the throne and dominated the imperial government crowded their mansions into the areas around the imperial palace. With their large extended families and hundreds of slaves and hangers-on, they made up a large portion of the capital’s population.

Some aristocrats studied in Chinese schools, and a minority even submitted to the rigors of the Confucian examination system introduced under the Silla rulers.

But most of the aristocracy opted for the artistic pursuits and entertainments available in the capital. They could do so because most positions in the government continued to be occupied by members of the aristocratic families by virtue of their birth and family connections rather than their knowledge of the Confucian classics.

Most of the Korean elite continued to favor Buddhism over Confucianism. They and the Korean royal family sponsored monasteries and patronized works of religious art, which became major forms of Korean cultural creativity.
The capital at Kumsong soon became crowded with Buddhist temples, which usually were made of wood. Buddhist monks were constantly in attendance on the ruler as well as on members of the royal family and the more powerful aristocratic households.

**Korean Art**

Korean artwork and monastic design reproduced, sometimes splendidly, Chinese prototypes. Even the location of monasteries and pagodas in high places followed Chinese ideas about the need to please local spirits and balance supernatural forces (feng shui).

Sometimes the Koreans borrowed from the Chinese and then outdid their teachers. Most notable in this regard was the pottery produced in the Silla and Koryo eras. The Koreans first learned the techniques of porcelain manufacture from the Chinese. But the green-glazed bowls and vases of the late Silla and Koryo were masterworks that were prized by Chinese collectors.

Korean pottery is noted for the simplicity of its forms and its fine, delicate glazes.

Although few paintings survive from the Three Kingdoms period or the subsequent Unified Silla (668–935) period, Buddhist devotional works produced during the Koryo dynasty (918–1392) include lavishly detailed paintings of Buddhist deities and illuminated transcriptions of sacred books. Evidence of painting in Korea is more complete for the Choson dynasty (1392–1910). Early Choson painting is represented by the landscapes which drew upon Chinese themes and techniques.
1. Why did Korea send scholars to China, much as Japan did?

2. What were the primary and secondary aims of paying tribute to the Chinese?

3. Why did aristocratic families move to the imperial capital?

4. How was the Korean governmental bureaucracy different from that of China’s?

5. What were most significant art forms produced in Korea?