Korea is located on a peninsula that juts south from the Chinese mainland. Because of its location, Korea has been strongly influenced by China. The earliest Koreans probably migrated from Siberia and northern Manchuria. They evolved their own ways of life before they were influenced by China. In 108 B.C., the Han emperor, Wudi, invaded Korea. The invasion brought with it Confucian traditions and Chinese ideas.

Between A.D. 300 and 600, local rulers forged three kingdoms in Korea: Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla. The three kingdoms often warred with one another or with China. Still, Chinese ideas continued to spread there. Missionaries brought Buddhism to Korea. Korean monks then traveled to China and brought home Chinese arts and learning. In 668, the Silla kingdom united the Korean peninsula. Under the Silla dynasty, Korea became a tributary state of China. As Chinese influence increased, Confucian views took root. However, Koreans adapted Confucian ideas to fit their own traditions.

The Koryo dynasty replaced the Silla in 935. Confucianism and Buddhism were both influential during this time. Koreans used woodblock printing from China to produce Buddhist texts. They learned to make Chinese porcelain. They then perfected the technique for making celadon, a porcelain with an unusual blue-green glaze.

The Mongols first invaded Korea in 1231 and occupied the country until the 1350s. When their rule collapsed, the Koryo returned to power. However, in 1392, the Korean general Yi Song-gye overthrew them and set up the Choson dynasty. This was the longest-lasting, but final, Korean dynasty.

In 1443, King Sejong decided to replace complex Chinese writing. Sejong had experts develop hangul, the Korean phonetic alphabet. Hangul spread quickly because it was easier to use than written Chinese. Its use led to an extremely high literacy rate.

In the 1590s, the Japanese armies invaded Korea. To stop the invaders at sea, Korean Admiral Yi Sun-shin sailed armored ships into the Japanese fleet. After six years, the Japanese armies withdrew from Korea. As they left, they carried off many Korean artisans in order to introduce their skills to Japan.

Review Questions
1. How did Korea’s location affect its cultural development?

2. Why did Japanese invaders carry off many Korean artisans?