

Widening the Scope of Korean Studies: From intro-spection to Korean Studies in World Culture Studies

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Korean Studies, latecomer in East Asian studies after sinology and Japanology, has by now been established successfully in the curriculum of many universities all over the world. Fifty years after liberation, Korean culture has become known in the world as one of the cultures with the longest history, considered worth being studied and taught as an academic subject because of its achievements within world culture.

At the same time the world has changed both economically and culturally from a heavily regionalized one, concentrated around the concept of “nation” , to a globalized one. It is now time for Korean Studies to adapt to this global change.

I see three stages in this past and future development of Korean Studies:

1. focus on Korean culture, comparing Korean culture with outside cultures,
(establishing and defining Korean Studies “from within”)
2. focus on interaction between Korean culture and outside cultures
(establishing and defining Korean Studies “from outside”)
3. focus on Korean culture as an example of world culture
(Korean Studies as general culture studies)

Stage 1, comparison, finding answers to the questions of “ What is the meaning of Korean culture” , or “What is special about ‘Korean’ culture?” has been studied quite extensively. Outside of Korea, Korean Studies laid the groundwork during a period, when both Koreas recaptured and redefined their culture after liberation and the Korean War, and therefore a parallel development of introspection took place both in Korean Studies and in the Korean culture itself. I do not want to imply that no further research is necessary, but I want to argue that it is now time for also widening the scope: the more narrow concept of Korean studies,

concentrating on Korean culture as such, must be more extensively supplemented with stage 2, the regional aspect.

In stage 2, regional interaction, we have two approaches which must complement each other.

a) Cultural elements from outside have been incorporated into Korean culture (and *vice versa*). In respect to these influences from outside, researchers have shifted their interest from questions like “What outside influence is to be found in Korean culture” to “How did elements from outside cultures change, become ‘Koreanized’ , and adapted” .

As healthy as this trend is, and we still need much more research in this question, this point of view is actually just another comparative view, like stage 1, and is still based on the concepts of Korean culture on the one side and the other cultures on the other.

b) This kind of intro-spective research should now be supplemented by research into real inter-action. Little research has been done in the question of real interaction in the sense that cultural developments have taken place in an arena greater than geographical Korea. Was there no give-and-take in border areas or on sea-routes, where many processes have taken place in two or more cultures (or two or more national histories) simultaneously and interconnected, so certain developments must be attributed to a greater area? Was there no give-and-take in Neo-confucianism between China, Korea, and Japan, so that we should talk about a philosophical dispute not between countries and their cultural heroes, but philosophers in the East Asia area as a whole? In case Korean shamanism did not develop independently in Korea, why study Korean shamanism as being in contrast to other shamanisms only? How Korean (or Chinese...) was Chang Pogo, born of Chinese ancestry on the Korean island of Wan-do, whose major achievements were concentrated around China and the sea between China, Korea, and Japan, before he ventured into Korean politics? Or, to take an example from European culture: How important is the fact that Martin Luther was a German; is it not much more important to see him as part of European religious and intellectual history?

In more abstract words: Now, after the field has been established, Korean studies must put more emphasis on regional interaction. Some research has been done in this respect, but this aspect is still being neglected.

Stage 3, Korean culture as one example of world culture, starts from another point of view, and this aspect is the one I want to stress today. The feeling that it is necessary to add this aspect to Korean studies comes from both my concept of 'culture' and from my teaching experience.

Please, do not expect a thorough definition of "culture" in this short speech, I will rely on a common general agreement on what "culture" is. Point of departure for my reflections is that I see all cultures of the world as having a comparable deep-structure. The surface structures are different, as they are dependent on factors like climate, geography, center vs. periphery, regional interaction, and the like, but deep down there is man, the human kind. And I must also stress that I am a foreigner living and teaching abroad, and I talk about Korean Studies as a field in academic life outside of Korea.

First of all, in Korean Studies as studies on Korean culture, I want to stress that it is necessary to overcome the recent split between "traditional" Korean Studies like in the fields of language and literature, history, religion and philosophy, and the like on one side, and "modern" Korean Studies like in the fields of politics, economy, sociology, and the like on the other. This split seems to be widening lately, and I think that this trend must be reversed, and we have to return to a more comprehensive and coherent approach. These various fields have differences in their methods, and thereby enable to research specific aspects more deeply than would be possible with another method. But they also bring the danger of one-sided bias, and in Korean Studies we have to overcome these one-sided views and recombine them to a coherent picture of Korean culture. Looking from the outside, the frame for any research has to be Korean culture as a whole. We cannot talk about Korean industrial management systems without embedding our research in the frame of historical processes, philosophical background and linguistic studies in semantics, for instance. We cannot understand political speeches without taking into account implications provided by syntactical or socio-linguistic research. When we watch the modern musical "Chang Pogo" and compare it with what we know about the historical figure and its representation in historiography, we can grasp what is going on in contemporary Korean peoples' minds and in Korean society: the study of history and its various modern interpretations is the study of modern Korean man and society.

My argument for a reorientation towards Korean Studies as comprehensive cultural studies must be seen against two backgrounds from my

experience: modern development in academic interests in general, and expectations of the students in regard to what they are being taught.

Modern developments in academic life are characterized by increasing specialisation. The danger is that, the deeper we research in a smaller and smaller areas, the more we lose the comprehensive picture of “What is Korean culture”, and ultimately “What is man”, “what is life”, “What is culture”, that is the basic questions in humanistic studies. If cultural studies like Korean Studies can overcome this trend, we would be in the forefront of important future trends: overcoming the trend towards expertise in special fields without having this expertise embedded in the whole.

In modern life generally, and in academic life in particular, one of the problems is an oversupply of unrelated news and data, while losing the frame and techniques how to put this flood of information into a proper frame. Studying various aspects of Korean culture and learning to make such a frame (in this case called “Korean culture”), is an exercise which leads to learning techniques which can be used elsewhere: a possible contribution to academic life outside of Korean Studies.

The other experience is from my life as a teacher in Korean Studies. What students are really looking for is not so much to be given detailed answers to a number of unrelated minute questions. What they are looking for is a frame, a structured set of guidelines, how to cope with being confronted with Korean culture. The student is first of all interested in “How can I survive in this foreign culture”, “How can I understand news from this foreign culture”, and so on.

This approach leads to possibly an important contribution of Korean Studies to world culture and ultimately even to more peace in society and the world. Making the student learn how to get some understanding for this foreign culture “Korea”, making him see himself and his own culture more clearly through the confrontation with Korean culture, is one way to make him learn how to accept different ways of life as being equally legitimate.

Studying Korean culture always involves three levels: The individual, the systematic (“Korean culture”) and the general (“human culture”). My suggestion is to put stress in teaching on proceeding from the individual to the systematic level of “Korean Studies”, from there to comparing

analogues in the students' culture, and from there to the general level of "human culture" .

We live in a world of competition between economies, political areas and cultures, being equals in competition (and within many countries increasingly we find a number of different cultures being lived side by side). I thoroughly disagree with Huntington's idea of a "Clash of Civilisations" , but the enormous echo to his book shows that he has struck a chord and many people see a problem there.

Korean Studies as inter-cultural studies, studying "the own" through "the other" , could contribute to the solution to these problems: The student who has learned the techniques "how to understand" Korean culture has ? hopefully ? acquired a feeling for and technique how to understand not only this one particular foreign culture, but other foreign cultures as well. He can apply his experience to get a better understanding of , for instance, Islamic cultures as being different from Christian cultures but equally legitimate, he has a more differentiating and more understanding approach to the inter-cultural problems involved, and he may even find better ways to communicate with his Korean, Spanish or Arabic minority people in his neighborhood.

After liberation, 50 years of research into Korean culture have established a more clearcut picture of Korean culture as being different from Japanese and Chinese culture. Korean culture has now been recognized in international cultural studies as an entity in its own right. The image is no longer that of a minor extension to Japanese and/or Chinese culture. Now we have to shift focus from "Korea" to "Korea in world culture" , and to "Korean culture as one example of world culture" . This necessity of widening of the scope developed within the growing Korean Studies, but it is also well fitting for our age of globalisation.

Let me now add a last string of thoughts, which is very seldom discussed. A scholar outside of Korea looking at Korean culture will always try to be as objective as possible. He or she will clearly state what made them get interested in a particular question or problem, and will always give the arguments which led to the methods applied. However, scholars outside of Korea are also part of another, a foreign, culture, bound in the academic and social traditions of their particular culture. The kind of questions asked, the observations made, and the answers given, are tinted by these factors. The image of Korean culture will always be slightly subjective. This is not to be seen as negative at all: looking at a mountain from two different

perspectives always results in different images, both of which are true, legitimate, and complementary. Korean Studies in this way is always involving two cultures, Korean culture and the researcher's culture.

But the picture is even more complicated. Korean Studies outside of Korea is not evenly spread around the world, with Korean Studies in North America being strongest. Most books and articles are being produced there, and many are taken as main reference works world-wide, together with works from scholars in other countries. European, Chinese, Japanese scholars always have at least three, but in most cases even more, cultures involved: Korea, America, and French, German, Dutch, English, Japanese, Chinese, and so on, depending on what secondary material they use in their research.

In Korean Studies we therefore must get to know the peculiarities of Korean Studies in various cultures. During a long scholar's life this will come sort of automatically. But there is a way to speed up this process: direct contact and interaction. And one of the best ways for direct interaction is to gather at one time and in one place, get to talk to each other and exchange views in discussions. This is where the 1st World Conference of Korean Studies opening today comes in in due time. It is a great chance for us scholars from many cultures to meet each other and our Korean colleagues, and in light of the aforesaid I wish us all fruitful discussions leading to friendship and even better international cooperation.