

Emerging Trends and Challenges for a New Generation of Korean Language Learners in Thailand

Introduction

In January 2024, the play *The Little Tiger for Korea* premiered at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. Based on a webtoon about the Korean War, the play begins as Pim, a Thai general surgeon and descendant of a Korean War veteran, visits Korea to find Kay, a K-pop idol who has suddenly disappeared. As the play progresses, Pim travels across time to when the Korean War is raging to meet her grandfather and gradually matures as she witnesses the accomplishments and sacrifice of the Thai veterans who fought in the Korean War. Thailand sent soldiers from all three of their forces—army, navy, and air forces—and was the first Asian country to proclaim its intention to fight in the Korean War, during which Thai soldiers were nicknamed “Little Tiger” because of their bravery.

One of the most intriguing features of this play is how it masterfully creates a link between the “Little Tiger” of the past, which is a point where Korea and Thailand begin their friendly relations as companions, and K-pop in the present, which is loved by Thai people, by using the device of a time slip. Even now, many Thai people consider Thailand’s decision to fight in the Korean War and remain stationed in Korea until 1971 as an important link between Korea and Thailand. The two countries formed official diplomatic relations in 1958 and have continued up to the present, for over 65 years, to maintain a cooperative economic relationship and active mutual cultural exchange (Soontaree and Lee 2020, 239).

As mentioned above, the play is based on *One Day, the Leader of My Favorite Idol Group Disappeared*, a Korean webtoon, which the Korean Culture Center in Thailand published on the Thai Kakaowebtoon platform as well as the daily newspaper *Thai Post*. After people working in entertainment in Thailand watched the play, they allegedly expressed interest in creating a drama based on it as well. The play was born from the exchange and cooperation

between Korea and Thailand, and it now holds potential for yet another form of cooperation in the future. In addition to how the play itself is moving, it also clearly shows how deeply Korean cultural contents are rooted in Thailand.

The Korean Wave in Thailand is no longer limited to K-drama or K-pop. It has long expanded to a wide variety of areas including webtoons, games, beauty products, and food, and with the development of online platforms, its contents crisscross boundaries to be expressed in forms of various genres fused together. Above all, the interest in diverse K-culture moves beyond merely consuming Korean culture and has progressed to the stage of seeking connections with and developing Thai culture through cooperation and benchmarking.

As a country rich with cultural assets in art, food, and tourism, Thailand is highly interested in developing cultural contents. The Thai government declared its policy to support soft power, namely, to develop export products of culture to create national revenue and foster creative industries. After 2021, when the discussion took place in earnest, soft power development is currently the foremost priority in all areas (Korea Creative Content Agency 2023). The Korean Wave in Thailand was a major benchmarking object and plays an important role in advancing the Thai Wave.

Culture not merely to consume but hopes to move forward together—this is what the Korean Wave is in Thailand. Under such changing circumstances, what is the current situation of Korean language education in Thailand, and what kinds of tasks of development does it face? This article borrows the voices of those teaching Korean in secondary schools and universities to find out.

Korean Language Education in Secondary Schools: The Emergence of “Korean-Speaking Kids”

In 2024, 47 secondary school teams took part in the Korean Speaking Contest held by the Korean Education Center in Thailand. During the preliminary rounds, which were held via YouTube, students confidently boasted their fluent Korean speaking skills to express their thoughts on a rather difficult theme, “The Beauty of Diversity Leading the Generation.” These days, it is quite easy to find Thailand’s Korean-speaking kids—those who are naturally exposed to the Korean language at a young age and go on to learn Korean during secondary

education to work on perfecting their language skills.

According to the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) of Thailand, aside from Chinese, Japanese, and European languages such as French, Spanish, Russian, and German, the Korean language is gaining popularity in Thailand. Interest in the Korean language has been trending recently thanks to the Korean Wave and Thailand’s interest in Korea’s technological innovation and advancement. The OBEC has accordingly presented a vision under the national developmental strategic goal to train fluent Korean speakers in Thailand and produce talented individuals who can positively impact the stabilization of mutual relations between Thailand and Korea in areas such as trade, tourism, investment, education, and so on. In other words, this shows the expansion of education beyond mere linguistic interest.

The Korean language was first taught at a secondary school in Thailand starting from the second semester in 2008. The class was offered at Benjamarachutit Pattani School and taught by the professors of the Korean language of Prince of Songkla University. It was starting from the first semester of 2009, however, at the Mathayom Wat Makutkasat School, Korean was first included in the curriculum as one of the foreign language subjects (Chutima 2014, 219–20).

Korean language education provided at secondary schools in Thailand has steadily grown thanks to the continuous support and efforts from both the Thai and South Korean governments. These include clear accomplishments after the mid-2010s such as the development of curricula and teaching/learning material for secondary schools and the increase in secondary schools that choose to offer Korean as a foreign language. In 2016, the syllabus for teaching the Korean language during a single semester (12 weeks total, 6 hours per week) was developed, and based on this, a 6-volume Korean language textbook in Thai was completed and published in 2018, laying the groundwork for Korean language education in secondary schools.

These efforts resulted in the increase of Korean language learners during secondary education, which, after dipping for a moment following the Covid-19 pandemic, resumed its increase. According to the statistics provided by the Korean Education Center in Thailand, as of 2023, there are 208 secondary schools and 49,443 students who chose Korean language as a foreign language in Thailand and 4,009 students who sat for Korean as their second foreign language test during their university entrance examinations, placing

Korean second, only after Chinese, in this category.

Such continuous growth would clearly serve as an important foundation for the development of Korean language education in Thailand. To accommodate the increasing demand for Korean language education, there needs to be a corresponding increase in the number of schools that provide the subject. At the present, however, the prospects that Korean language education will continue to grow do not look hopeful due to financial difficulties and the lack of interest in the Korean language from the parents or schools. Improvement in the overall teaching environment, including the supply in language teachers and teaching material, is also essential. The followings encapsulate the concerns and considerations hidden behind quantitative growth.

“Compared to Earlier, the Status of the Korean Language has Improved, but It does Not Rank That High in Priority in Eyes of the Schools or Parents and Lacks Support Policies.”

Local teachers in Thailand perceived Korean to be among the lower ranks in most secondary schools compared to other foreign languages that have long ranked top. For most of the students attending secondary school, their parents have a strong influence on the students' career choices or choice of subject. Because of the long-standing relations and economic cooperation with China or Japan, the parents' generation tend to believe that being able to speak Chinese or Japanese will have a more positive impact on their children's future including their chances of employment. Secondary schools accordingly accommodate the parents' demands and tend to be reluctant to choose Korean as a foreign language subject. Moreover, while Chinese and Japanese language classes enjoy a stable status as independent majors, many schools place Korean language learners together with students majoring in other foreign languages.

This tendency is also related to the policies supporting each language. The local teachers onsite note a gap between the policy supporting Korean and the policies supporting other languages. For instance, the policy supporting Korean mainly focuses on teaching/learning material, whereas the students majoring in Chinese and Japanese can receive broader and more diverse support such as full scholarships and short-term overseas study programs. In the cases of French or German, there are a wider variety of opportunities for students to test their skills such as academic conferences or debates that go beyond speaking contests,

suggesting the need for benchmarking.

To further improve the status of the Korean language in secondary schools, there needs to do various efforts to improve the perception of the language such as holding presentations together with universities to provide information about the major or consulting sessions for secondary schools that do not yet offer Korean. These efforts should be able to construct and suggest detailed visions of how learning Korean can lead to opportunities of employment or overseas study.

Additionally, broader support for Korean language education should be provided based on the difference between Korean and other foreign languages as described by local teachers in Thailand. This includes creating more opportunities to newly learn about Korea and Korean culture, holding Korean language skill contests, and providing overseas study or training programs to improve the perception of schools and parents and to offer chances for more students to learn the Korean language.

“The Higher Levels of the Learners Call for More Competent Korean Language Teachers.”

For many students, the Korean Wave still remains the most influential factor for motivating them to learn the Korean language. The desire to understand the lyrics of a song sung by a singer they like or to watch television entertainment shows and dramas without subtitles is a frequent answer given by students in Thailand when asked why they learn Korean. The Korean Wave had already deeply taken root in Thailand since the parents' generation of the students who are currently learning Korean in secondary schools, meaning that these students shared its culture with their parents and peers since they were young. It is not rare for them to choose Korean as their major because it felt familiar after growing up while being naturally exposed to the Korean language through cultural contents.

Under such circumstances, it is difficult for the students to learn Korean uniformly, starting from the Korean vowels and consonants and how to say hello in Korean. Some students are already highly proficient in the language through exposure to cultural contents, while some show large differences in terms of specific listening, writing, and speaking skills. This being the case, training and producing qualified new local Korean language teachers is essential,

just as re-educating current teachers is extremely important. Current teachers onsite find it difficult to lead students simply by following the set curriculum and constantly feel the need improve their Korean language skills.

The Korean Education Center in Thailand in fact runs many courses for the training and re-education of Korean language teachers in Thailand. Starting from 2021, Chulalongkorn University offers a program for training and producing local Korean language teachers, during which students majoring in Korean language or students aspiring to become Korean language teachers can learn Korean linguistics, general linguistics, Korean culture, and teaching theory as well as receive onsite training in the field. Silpakorn University runs the Korean Teaching Training Center in Thailand (KTTC), where they provide various programs for the re-education of secondary school Korean language teachers in Thailand.

Although many seminars, workshops, and training programs related to Korean language education continue to be provided in this way, they remain at the level of improving the participants' skills related to the Korean language. There should be deeper consideration of building a training program that is linked to the issuance of teaching licenses or certificates and to the actual employment at secondary education sites, thus realistically producing Korean language teachers. In addition, the training of new Korean language teachers and the continuous self-improvement programs for current Korean language teachers should be closely linked and developed together.

Korean Language Education at Universities: Transitional Period for Strategic Reorganization

Korean language education at universities began in Thailand starting from 1986, when it was taught as an elective course for general education at the Pattani Campus of Prince of Songkla University. In 1988, Chulalongkorn University also began to offer a general education Korean language course for undergraduates (Sirirat 2017, 257). After the Korean Wave craze started to sweep across the Thai society starting from 2001, interest in Korea rose, showing an increase in people hoping to learn the Korean language, and many universities subsequently started to offer Korean language courses.

According to a survey of Korean language education provided at

universities under the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESI) in Thailand that was conducted in 2023, there are currently 31 universities with Korean language courses. The creation of these courses as majors in universities particularly stands out after the 2010s. Since 2000, Korean language courses for majoring have been created in 3 universities steadily every 5 years, and between 2020 and 2023, they were created in 5 universities. This marks the highest number of Korean language course for majoring created in the past 4 years after it was first created in 1999.

Among the 31 universities with Korean language courses, 18 universities offer Korean language courses for majors, and 9 universities offer Korean language courses for majoring and minoring both and as general education. Korean language courses in universities increased the most between 2010 and 2014, and with the rise in Korean language courses for majoring during the past 3 to 4 years, the conditions for stably providing Korean language education during higher education in Thailand are organically forming.

On the surface, Korean language education at universities in Thailand looks as if it has settled into place, particularly at major universities, and is on the rise as a popular subject within the humanities department of the schools. However, securing a supply of Korean language teachers is also a problem for universities and is a main reason why Korean language courses are not being offered. The creation of Korean language courses for graduate students, in addition, is not seeing much progress. Despite the popularity of Korean, the language is still not an easy choice for learners to choose as their major given its prospects career-wise. The following sections discuss other issues that need to be resolved for the development of Korean language education at universities.

“Every Year, the Difference in Korean Language Proficiency among Students Grows Larger. It is Difficult to Improve the Language Proficiency of Each Individual Learner in a Stepwise Manner when They are All at Different Levels.”

The class is a gathering of students who have chosen the Korean language course to explore their majors. During introductions, one student stumblingly explains in beginner-level Korean that one developed interests in Korean after wanting to find out more about oneself and one's love for K-pop. When another student starts speaking at his/her turn, however, all the other classmates turn to look at

the student, surprised. This is because the student talks, in fluent Korean, about the experience participating in a Korean language program held in Korea for Thai secondary-school students while in high school as well as hopes to apply to a university in Korea.

The progress seen by Korean language education in secondary schools in Thailand has resulted in the production of students whose Korean language skills have already been perfected even before attending university. Their presence in Korean language classrooms at universities, which they attend as students majoring in Korean, is disconcerting to both their classmates, who will be learning Korean alongside them, and their language teacher, who must teach students with varying levels of Korean language proficiency. In fact, this has already been the reality for a long time now, and the long thought put into the question about university education's future is currently being carried out as specific alternatives.

For instance, Chulalongkorn University now allows some previously mandatory Korean languages courses to be optional starting from the 2023 to 2024 academic year. If all students had to take "Korean 3," for example, students now are able to choose not to if they think they do not need to and directly choose to take more advanced-level Korean language classes. The Korean language courses therefore are taken along two tracks for freshmen: students who are learning Korean for the first time take "Korean 1" and "Korean 2," which are beginner-level Korean language classes, and students whose Korean is already advanced take "Korean: Reading" and "Korean: Writing."

As this example shows, universities in Thailand are currently greatly interested in the reorganization of their curricula. Such efforts are necessary because learners at different levels of language proficiency cannot study from the same starting point, and ultimately this is part of the task to bring students up to a certain level when they are graduating from university.

“There Needs to be More Diverse Opportunities for Students who Majored or Minored in the Korean Language to Develop More Professional Expertise to Make the Most out of Their Skills and Find Employment.”

Every year, the Korean Language Education Research Center (KLERC) sets short-term priority tasks in order to further develop Korean language education

in Thailand and resolve the pressing issues it faces. The theme chosen for 2023 in relation to Korean language education at universities was "Korean Language Majors: Exploring Careers and Expanding Employment Options." As an increasing number of students who majored in Korean started to graduate, the issues of what the career choices for Korean language majors were currently like and the difficulties they experienced in choosing a career have become important.

Compared to China and Japan, with whom Thailand has long maintained exchange and trade relations, Korea has few businesses located in Thailand. In other words, unlike other Southeast Asian countries around Thailand such as Vietnam, there is an extremely high threshold that Korean language majors must climb over if they want to find employment at a Korean business in Thailand. Recently though, a wider range of opportunities are being provided for these graduates due to the increased demand for Korean translation and interpretation of many contents as well as the larger number of Thai business or global enterprises that carry out work related to Korea.

According to research by the KLERC, the area where Korean majors found the most employment was in translation and interpretation work, at 28%, which is followed by areas of education, service, and trade, in this order. When asked how much Korean they used at their current job, around half of the graduates who were surveyed replied that they used Korean more than 50% of their time, and the percentage of those who used Korean during 75% and 100% of their time was relatively high as well, at 31%.

What is of note is how university graduates who majored in Korean listed their lack of confidence in the language as the difficulty they experienced when finding jobs or carrying out their jobs once they were hired. This shows how Korean majors still find the Korean language difficult when conducting their everyday lives out in the society. Instructors teaching Korean at universities are currently making efforts to respond to the higher language skills of the learners and become more fluent in business-related talk as well as translation and interpretation.

In the future, a more comprehensive program that equips students majoring and minoring in Korean with practical language skills and an understanding of Korean business culture will be necessary. By operating a language program that brings together business Korean, Korean corporate culture, and field trips to Korean businesses, students will be able to

communicate more clearly in Korean and adapt more efficiently to their jobs, ultimately producing talented individuals with more competitive edge when seeking jobs at Korean businesses.

From the Korean Language to Korean Studies

Korean studies in Thailand developed based on Korean language. For mere interest in K-culture and curiosity about the Korean language to lead to a sustainable motivation for learning and to produce specialists in Korea, however, the field of Korean studies itself must continue to advance as well. Although very few in number, there are educational institutions in Thailand that provide professional and intensive Korean studies and Korean language programs. At the present, there are a total of three institutions where students can major in Korean studies.

First of all, Korean studies at Chulalongkorn University was created in 2008 as the first Korean studies master's program in Thailand. This graduate program aims to train and foster experts with professional knowledge of Korea in the areas of the economy, society, politics, international relations, and businesses of Korea. As an interdisciplinary program, it is the result of the collaboration between the Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Political Science, Faculty of Communication Arts, and the Institute of Asian Studies at the university. The faculty of the program is also formed by specialists of Asia and international relations from each university.

The Pattani Campus of Prince of Songkla University is the first university to provide Korean language education in Thailand. Later, a Korean studies program was created at the Phuket Campus of Prince of Songkla University. The Korean studies program is distinct from the Korean language program in that it takes a comparative cultural perspective of Thai culture and covers politics, economics, and history. Students also carry out many Korean studies-related research activities that cannot be easily handled during undergraduate Korean language courses.

The Korean studies program at Thammasat University is part of the Area Studies curriculum and emphasizes a comprehensive education of Korea. Because Korean studies in Thailand has concentrated mostly on building Korean language education programs until then, Thammasat University created

a Korean studies program to enrich students with comprehensive knowledge of the culture in addition to the language skills. After it started off as an elective subject in 2012, students were able to minor in Korean studies starting from 2018, and in 2022, a Korean studies major was created.

In short, Korean language in Thailand has established itself as a major, minor, and general education subject in main universities and is also popular among middle and high school students as a foreign language they wish to learn. In contrast, however, Korean studies in Thailand still received less attention compared to Chinese or Japanese studies and is relatively highly dependent on related institutions in Korea. One of the reasons behind this is the lack of infrastructure and teachers who can teach Korean studies properly. Although the way Korean studies institutions continue to carry out research and academic activities in the field, together with the spontaneous movements taking place at major universities seeking to develop Korean studies beyond Korean language education, is hopeful, such efforts still harbor many tasks to resolve.

“Help and Support from Related Institutions in Korea is Needed, but above All, Interest and Cooperation in the Development of Korean Studies within Thailand is Crucial.”

Those among the community of Korean studies in Thailand look to themselves for the reason why Korean studies has still not been able to grow stably in Thailand. Some universities and Korean studies research institutions are finding it difficult to manage due to the lack of budget and interest on the part of the Thai government and the universities as well as the poor internal leadership. Many universities run research facilities for Chinese studies or Japanese studies, while Korean studies exist as a part of Asian studies, creating an environment in which it is relatively difficult to produce any accomplishments. This is why many agree that the most important task is to solidify the system of cooperation among related organizations within Thailand.

Fortunately, the rapid growth in the demand for the Korean language during the past 10 or so years is gradually catching the attention of the Thai government. To clearly demonstrate the need for more knowledge on Korea and the expansion of research in the field of Korean studies, higher education institutions and research centers in Thailand must work together to draw out both internal and external demands and support from Thai and Korean

organizations.

Recently, such cooperative movement between the institutions and centers in Thai has been spreading. A representative example is the united conference held among universities in Thailand with Korean language majors. If these movements within Thailand come together to raise the interest of other universities and the Thai government, this will lead to a more solid system of cooperation with related organizations in Korea.

“The Development of a Curriculum that Reflects the Demands of Learners, along with the Training of Thai Experts who can Teach the Curriculum, is Needed.”

Even learners who began to study the Korean language simply because they like K-pop and K-dramas start to show an interest in other various areas as their knowledge in the language and culture of Korea deepens. In particular, learners who seek to work in fields related to Korea based on their Korean language skills tend to explore their interests and the industries they want to work in more in depth. For instance, many students these days show a keen interest in the game industry, media, architecture, and visual art of Korea.

However, because Korean studies in Thailand has been dependent on the research system of schools until now, the main subjects offered are history, economy, and politics. Both the learners and faculty all demand change in terms of the diversification of the curriculum. It is therefore essential to develop a curriculum that reflect the changing relations between Thailand and Korea, the latest trends, and the interests of the learners, while also encompassing Korean art, culture, and other areas as well. Online courses such as the K-MOOC platform should also be actively utilized.

Above all, the locally hired Korean language teachers should be further trained as professionals, and experts in Korea should be fostered and produced. So far, the Thai teachers who were hired locally were mostly Korean language education majors. Korean studies courses are dependent on the cooperative system between schools and currently require support from Korean universities or organizations. Research in the field of Korean studies tends to be conducted in Thailand by scholars who are specialists in other fields and developed an interest in Korea later.

With the advancement of Korean language education, however, more and

more graduates are Korean language or Korean studies majors or graduates who minored in Korean language and seek to major in an area related to Korean studies. Among them, the number of students who studied abroad in Korea to gain knowledge related to Korean studies is rising, and they are showing an increasingly diverse range of interests. Korean studies-related professionals and experts of the next generation who are equipped with language skills and knowledge related to contents should be trained and fostered to produce more professional local Korean language teachers in Thai.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reviewed the present state of Korean language education in Thailand by looking at Korean language education in secondary schools and during higher education, the present condition of Korean studies, and other voices from the scene. The Korean language education craze, which began roughly 20 years ago, is still ongoing in Thailand, but it has taken on a different character from 10 years ago. The issues go beyond simply developing teaching/learning material and increasing the number of language teachers and now touch upon how to accept and teach the continuously changing profile of learners.

First, Korean language education at secondary schools has grown, boasting the largest number of learners in the world thanks to the popularity of the language. Korean is no longer an unfamiliar language to the generation who grew up naturally enjoying Korean culture from a young age. This sense of familiarity towards Korean due to early exposure made it a language they wanted to learn and know more about. As an increasing number of students wanted to learn Korean, their parents' generation and schools teaching the language faced the need to present the vision of Korean more clearly and to elevate its status. It has also become clear that the more advanced Korean language education becomes, the more it becomes important to train and re-educate local teachers recruited onsite.

Second, Korean language in higher education lies at a turning point as a result of the active Korean language education provided at secondary schools. The learners sitting in the university classrooms to learn Korean are a mix-up of learners who have already studied the language for quite a while and learners

who are new to the language. Universities now have reached the stage where they need to innovate the curriculum in order to overcome the large differences in language proficiency among their learners. In addition, diverse ways to ensure that learners who majored in or minored in Korean are able to find jobs they want, to study abroad, and to become experts need to be developed.

Finally, efforts should be directed not only at teaching Korean as a foreign language but now at linking Korean studies and Korean language education for a more in-depth exploration of Korea and its culture. Until now, Korean studies has not received much attention compared to Chinese or Japanese studies. However, the interest in Korean studies is on the rise, and the increase in learners who are fluent in the Korean language should be fully taken advantage of when seeking to further develop Korean studies.

As mentioned in the introduction, K-culture in Thailand is no longer merely culture to consume but culture to share and develop together. Those who are currently learning the Korean language hopefully will not be satisfied with simply watching and listening to Korean-language contents but will instead connect it with Thai culture and contemplate its development in the future. Now is a time to consider how Korean language educators and related organizations can work together to foster and produce learners in Thai who will play the role of bridging the Korean Wave and the Thai Wave.

References

- Chutima, Areeyathanawal. 2014. "Taeguk eseo ui Han'gukak yeon'gu hyeonhwang" [The Present Condition of Korean Studies in Thailand]. *Han'guk munhwa yeon'gu* [The Korean Cultural Studies] 26: 215–35.
- Korea Creative Contents Agency. 2023. "Taeguk nae Hallyu contents sobi donghyang gwa jeonmang" [Trends and Prospects of Hallyu Contents Consumption in Thailand]. *Korea Creative Contents Agency*. Accessed August 30, 2024. <https://welcon.kocca.kr/ko/info/trend/1953328>.
- Larprungrueng, Soontaree, and Sang Beum Lee. 2020. "Korean Studies Education in Thailand." *Han'guk Taeguk hakhoe nonchong* [Journal of Korean Association of Thai Studies] 26 (2): 239–60.
- Sirirat, Sirinat. 2017. "Taeguk daehakkyo eseo ui Han'gugeo gyoyuk hyeonhwang josa yeon'gu" [Research on the Current Status of Korean

Language Education in Thai Universities]. Paper presented at the 27th International Conference of the International Network for Korean Language and Culture, Thammasat University, Bangkok, June 23.

JEONG Hyeseon (naviona00@gmail.com)
Chulalongkorn University

Translated by Boram SEO