

Special Feature

# A Case Study on Teaching Korean History in English in Korea

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## Introduction

When I took ancient Chinese history courses at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris from 1991 to 1993, Professor Donald Holzman used to read Chinese documents with Chinese pronunciation. It was very refreshing for me because I had been accustomed to reading Chinese classics and documents with Korean pronunciation in Korea. However, it was difficult for me to understand the Chinese phrases pronounced the Chinese way. That was the first time I realized that the Korean way of studying Chinese was not useful when abroad.

In 2003-2004, I was dispatched by the Korean Research Foundation to teach Korean Studies at Durham University in England. One day I struggled to explain to English students the Bronze Age culture of the Korean peninsula using photos of relics. When I mentioned that jade was popular with privileged people during the Korean Bronze Age, one of my students told me that most of the jade ornaments had been imported from China and Japan. He had learned that in a Japanese Ancient History class. I responded that jade items were considered precious in pre-modern Korea, and that Korean jade is still popular today. The following week, he came back to me and conveyed the reply of Professor Gina Barnes, a specialist in Japanese ancient history, that there had been no jadeite mine in Korea. I was not sure how to respond since I knew that various types of jade were being produced in contemporary Korea and I had never heard that the jade Koreans had been using for thousands of years had been imported.

Embarrassed, I remembered that I had been taught in the early 1970s that Korea had not had a Paleolithic period. This was an interpretation of Japanese colonialists. As of now, however, many Paleolithic remains have been excavated. In the Korean textbook I examined, there were many photos of prehistoric jadeite ornaments, excavated from ancient tombs

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but with no explanation of their origin. I made an enquiry to a Korean specialist by e-mail so I could give a more detailed answer explaining the difference in opinion between Korean and Japanese historians. I realized that various “historic battles” could occur if I taught non-Koreans the version of Korean history taught in Korean public high schools. Having been taught the national version of Korean history I inadvertently found myself to be a nationalist. But this perspective worked only in Korea. When meeting others, we realize what we really are. Now that Korean studies has encountered the English craze in Korea, we are supposed to explain Korean history in English. Nuances change when one language is translated into another. Furthermore, the use of English journal articles forces us to pay more attention to the perspectives of the non-Korean historians.

The *Korean History Lectures in English* project, funded by the Korea Research Foundation and carried out at Yonsei University, Wonju campus, from 2008 to 2009, was a program intended to design a course that would teach, to foreign exchange students, Korean history as interpreted by Koreans. However, contrary to our initial expectations, the majority of the students who took the course turned out to be Koreans and, subsequently, we had to alter the course in significant ways. From the spring of 2008 to 2010, I have taught Korean history in English in three very different kinds of classes at three different universities. Because I was not a native English speaker, teaching in English always presented more risks, but teaching Korean history to students of diverse backgrounds gave me a chance to reflect more objectively on the subject that I study and teach. In this report, I will report both on my experiences, in general, teaching Korean history in English in Korea, and on the progress we made on the *Korean History Lectures in English* courses. By doing this I will provide a way of catering to the different needs of these three groups by comparing different ways in which the three groups approach their classes. To do this, I will first explain the purposes and the methods employed in these courses. Then, I will describe the various reactions from three different groups of students who took these courses.

## Teaching Purpose and Method

### *Purpose*

The original aim of this class was to teach, to non-Korean students, Korean history as it is understood by Koreans. Korean history lectures are no exception to the expansion of “English immersion courses” caused by the English craze in Korea. But the majority of Korean teachers are skeptical about teaching Korean students Korean history and Korean language in English. In reality, both the quality and quantity of lectures suffer quite a bit when the lectures are carried out in English. Many issues that should be discussed are glossed over because both the teachers and the students are less comfortable having discussions in English.<sup>1</sup> It is hard even for me, having been teaching such courses for years, to always understand why I have to speak only English to students when we speak perfect Korean. It reminds me of Alphonse Daudet’s short story *The Last Lesson*. I feel especially skeptical when I try to speak English to my Korean students even during breaks. Korea is a nation with painful memories of being forced into speaking only Japanese in schools. Now, despite our independence, we have to learn to teach in English if we are to survive. Should we push to teach Korean students to learn even Korean history in English under the name of globalization, without a clearly justifiable reason to do so? In response to this, my students have summarized for me the advantages of learning Korean history in English.

First, because the students were forced to speak only in English during classes, their English improved a great deal. Second, because they had previously only learned Korean history as it was described in textbooks published by the government, it was refreshing to be able to learn the perspectives of non-Koreans through books and articles written in English. Third, because of the presence of foreign students in the class, they had a chance to learn, through debates and discussions, the ideas and values held by students of different backgrounds. It was particularly interesting to see how their opinions on Korean history differed from

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1. According Hyu-yong Park, “English education in Korea is strongly affected by the ideologies in neoliberal globalization, market fundamentalism, and linguistic (English) Imperialism” (Park 2009:143).

that of others. Fourth, they learned how Korean history is expressed in English, and therefore learned to how to explain basic Korean history in English.

Initially, what bothered me most, as it did many teachers in similar situations, was whether it was really necessary for Korean students and a Korean teacher to study Korean history in English. I doubted that learning Korean history in English is *either* the most efficient way of improving one's understanding of English *or* of learning Korean history. What my students have shown me is that changing the medium of communication from Korean to English enabled them to look at Korean history more objectively. In other words, it enabled them to think of Korean history as the history of Korea, rather than as the history of their own nation. It also gave them a chance to experience for the first time the way in which non-Koreans perceived Korean history. So I tried to introduce Western perspectives to Korean students, comparing those perspectives to Korean perspectives.

We should still remind ourselves, however, that a language is never a medium that is neutral and transparent; it is the very place of battle between different sociological ideologies. As Robert Phillipson has rightly pointed out, a language provides a framework with which one perceives reality and even the fact that English is identified as the language of the world, is one not-so-obvious result of the prevalence of American capitalism and colonialism (Phillipson 2005).

No matter what one's background is, one cannot *not* be influenced by many silent presuppositions that emanate from where one is educated. Most foreign countries where Korean historians have received their degrees are "developed countries" that have propagated imperialism at one point or another. Some scholars in these countries are still influenced by the perspectives of "the great powers" and Orientalism. It is necessary for those Korean scholars who assume that Korea leads studies in Korean history to examine the way in which Korean history is altered when it is translated or narrated in English. These are the kinds of advantages of Korean history courses being taught in English, by scholars who have been educated in Korea.

## *Method*

At the very beginning of the course, I discussed different ways of conceiving of history as a subject. In that discussion, I tried to emphasize the fact that history has been repeatedly used to justify and legitimize those in power. As was said “The tensions between patriotic presentations of one’s country and accurate reconstructions of national failures remain to be probed in the future...” (Appleby 1994:242). I emphasized to the students that doing history is not simple and as consumers we have to understand the purpose behind the historical information. Therefore a history teacher should not merely teach selected fragments. After the students compared the different ways in which history has been taught in different settings, they seemed to have attained a more profound understanding of what I was trying to say to them.

## **Texts**

Because the students differed so much in their mastery of English, it was difficult to use one textbook for everyone. In classes where the majority of students spoke neither Korean nor English as their first language, I mainly used *Korea through the Ages*, published by the Center for Information on Korean Culture and the Academy of Korean Studies. This is the translation of a book published by the Association of Korean History Teachers (AKHT) with many photographs, and is geared towards young Korean high school students (AKHT 2007). The Academy of Korean Studies distributes the books free-of-charge. Since the Chinese translation of the same text was also available, I advised the Chinese students to read it ahead of time. Both the Korean and Chinese students in this particular class had a lot of difficulties with English, and therefore I sometimes allowed them to use their own languages to do assignments in order to express their own ideas. I do not consider it absolutely necessary to be able to express one’s opinions on Korean history in English, especially since some students only had the kind of English equivalent to that of a grade school student.

For those whose first language was English, I used *Korea Old and New* and the British scholar Keith Pratt’s *Everlasting Flower*. The discussion of the pre-modern period in *Korea Old and New* was a translated excerpt from a book written by Kibaik Lee. In the forward Edward W. Wagner said, “it is an attempt to meet the need for a general history of Korea

that provides a detailed treatment of the post-1945 period” (Carter 1990). Although it contains many detailed accounts of Korean history, it tends to be dry and difficult to read for those who are not well versed in English. *Everlasting Flower*, appraised by Professor Lee Namhee of UCLA as the first book in the history of Korean culture to be written by a non-Korean, was written to introduce Korean history from the perspective of a European scholar to a general audience of similar background. Moreover, due to the author’s own evident knowledge of Chinese history, it provided more comparisons between Korea and China, and sometimes Japan (Robinson 2007:448).

Overall, I would have to say that the book *Korea Old and New* is more suitable for students with less knowledge about Korean history. It gives much more detail about Korean history and covers more issues than *Everlasting Flower*. On the other hand, *Everlasting Flower* may be better for those who already know something about Korean history, but just want to learn more about specific issues. Both books do a good job of explaining Korea history to a Westerner.

For Korean students who majored in history, I used *Everlasting Flower* as the main textbook. Most students said that the depth of the discussions was about equivalent to what one would learn near the end of grade school to early high school, and that it was refreshing to learn about the perspectives of Europeans about which they have never read before. This was also exactly the reason I picked this particular book for them. Some students criticized it for not being more organized, since it does not make clear distinctions among the issues of politics, economics, society and culture. It did become clear to me, however, that the students wanted to learn about different ways of interpreting Korean history.

### **Interactive learning: field trips, exploration of traditional music and movies**

For one class that contained many foreign students with varying degrees of English skills, I tried to include many types of interactive learning, such as field trips to museums, Buddhist temples and examples of ancient architecture.

The most accessible resource was the university museum. I would normally survey its antiquities, explain what I had found, and then ask them to choose a piece to investigate and write a report on. This was often done when I was covering the prehistoric and ancient periods, since the museum had particularly large collection from those periods.

Another type of interactive learning I used was to let them experience traditional Korean music, *pungmul*. This was possible because most Korean universities have traditional Korean drumming groups. We would invite the group of performers, watch them perform, learn to play the instruments for about thirty minutes, and then try to play them together. Because these are percussion instruments, one can easily learn to play with others by learning certain basic rhythmic patterns. I would explain to them that this was the kind of music enjoyed by lower-class people in Korea, and that such drumming groups were established at most universities after the Gwangju Resistance of 1980. My aim was to show them the way in which Korean college students who were mainly interested in Western culture redirected their interest to their own culture and, through it, to show the connection between the past and the present.

Another tool I used was field trips. One semester, after a lecture on Korean Buddhist culture, we made an excursion to ancient Joseon dynasty Buddhist temples and Confucian colleges (*seowon*). Some students from China, however, refused to go into the temples. They told me that their parents, because of Christianity, have made them swear since childhood not to go into such temples. One student was absent and some others waited outside. This is something that I had not anticipated, but half the Chinese students who did go to the temple said it was the most interesting part of the class.

I normally gave a three-hour lecture. Historical movies were a welcome change from the long lecture. Students these days are more familiar with video images than they are with written words. The historical documentaries produced by KBS have solid content, but were not accessible because they often do not have English subtitles or dubbing. Korean movies on the other hand were more accessible because they always have English subtitles. However, we could not watch an entire film, only thirty to forty minutes. Therefore I selected some scenes beforehand to augment my lecture.

I used "The Battle Field of Whangsan" to discuss the unification war among the Three Dynasties. "Frozen Flower" and "The King and the Clown" were good to prompt discussion and make comparisons between the Goryeo and Chosun periods as well as historical fact and fiction. I first explained the relevant historical incidents as they are described in historical texts, and then discussed how they were depicted in the movie. Watching movies is the favorite method for foreign students as well as Korean students.



## The Attitudes of Korean and Foreign Students toward Korean History Class in English

My students can be divided into three main groups: Korean, native English speakers, and Chinese. There were a few who came from Turkey, Sweden and Finland, but I will not discuss them here since there were very few. Table 1 shows numbers of students who enrolled in my Korean history courses conducted in English. Numbers include both the fall and spring semesters.

**Table 1. Number of students in the courses of 2009-2010**

	Year	A: English native	B: Chinese (non Chinese)	C: Korean	Total
I	2009	3	2	23	28
	2010	7	1	29	37
II	2009	1	38(2)	16	55
	2010	0	39	0	39
III	2009	0	1	5	6
	2010	0	16(3)	1	20
Total		11	97	74	185

Because they differ greatly in their knowledge of Korean history and English skills, it was difficult to offer the kind of content that interests all three types of students. I would like to compare the attitudes of the three groups towards my lectures.

### *Group A: Native English Speakers*

Most of the Western students liked to go on field trips. The first thing that they noticed about palaces and temples was the use of many colors. Chinese students, on the other hand, thought they were very similar to Chinese architecture except in size. Western students tried to compare Korean architecture with European architecture, which tends to be monochromatic or feature only a few colors. European palaces tend to have only one color on the outside, and that color is usually white, gray, tan or brown. Therefore, Western students recognized that Korean architecture is much more colorful than European architecture. They wondered how the people in earlier times were able to create so many

different colors, since ancient Korean had to rely on natural dyes for their paint. One of them suggested that it may have been easier to obtain bold colors and I agreed with her. European aesthetics tend toward not using many colors at once. The only architectural feature in Europe that may have many colors is the stained glass windows of churches. This idea is fresh to Korean students as well as me.

One American student described her impressions as follows:

What I noted was the similarity between the appearance of the palace and of the temples I have seen in this field trip. Both have similar architecture and color. European castles and churches look more different from each other, I think. They use similar colors and building materials, but palaces are larger and more spread out. Churches may also be large, but usually the size is upward size. Churches are built with tall ceilings, maybe because the tall ceiling gives the impression of the spaciousness of the Heavens above. European palaces tend not to have wasted ceiling space. European palaces tend to have many floors, so that the palaces can house many guests and rooms. Churches tend to only have one floor, which is used for worship and ceremony. The Korean palaces and temples also only have one floor. I am not sure why this is, but, maybe it is because building numerous floors is more difficult and takes more materials. Korea is smaller than some other countries, so maybe in the past it had fewer resources to draw from for building. Another thought is maybe the buildings had one floor so that people are closer to the Earth instead of the sky. Maybe people felt they wanted to be closer to the Earth. Eastern belief systems tend to support closeness with nature, so, maybe being closer to the ground is a way to be closer to the natural world.

I already had explained to them that temple architecture originated from palaces in ancient China, but she missed it. I should emphasize important issues several times. However, her comparative perspective provides a good example to Asian students who had little experience with other cultures and did not realize how special their traditional architecture was. One Chinese student expressed that most Chinese thought Korea copied Chinese culture. From the field trip she realized that Korea not only copied Chinese culture, but improved on it in many ways. It seemed like she was proud of Chinese culture and had good impression of its preservation in Korea.

Most of the foreign students liked to watch movies. After watching

the film “Whangsanbul,” I asked whether the war initiated by Silla could be justified as an attempt at unification. Many Korean students said it could, but all the foreign students disagreed. Because of students’ general tendency to agree with the teacher, I presented many different views on the issue without expressing my own. One American student stated that she was not sure that there was as strong a Korean identity at the time of the 660 war as there is today. Of course there was no notion of being “Korean” in the contemporary sense. So with that understanding, we concluded that Silla’s “unification” was motivated by the desire to gain power, rather than by the concern for the people themselves. My students felt that the outcome was perhaps a stronger state in the long run, but it came at a devastating cost to the common people, especially those of Baekje and Goguryeo who lost their own solidarity and had to endure the catastrophes of war. They were concerned with the present circumstances of North and South Korea arising from the so-called Unification war. They pointed out that the notion of Koreans invading other Koreans is strange and it was perhaps the result of policies made by a few powerful elites on either side of the 38th parallel that pitted one brother against another for the sake of their own power.

*A Frozen Flower* is a mildly provocative film about a fictional king from Goryeo and the events that transpire as the result of his relationship with his guard. Some of the themes of the movie include relationships, sexuality, gender, and power. We discussed some of the sexual themes that occur in the movie. For instance, the fact of the king’s Mongolian wife gave us a chance to discuss exogamy. American students were less hesitant in the discussions of sexual issues than Asian students were. King Gongmin and King Mokjong were reported to have had male lovers. We discussed many possible reasons for this. For one, having a male partner meant that the king could have sexual relations without producing an heir. Another possibility is that being a king means having power, and part of having power is having an ability to have numerous lovers and to command people to indulge their whims. So although the king in the film was probably fictional, it could have been inspired by real events or situations. After watching it, my American students researched the difference between the film and historical records. The results are as follows:<sup>2</sup>

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2. I cited the responses of my students mostly from the assignment board of [www.kci.go.kr](http://www.kci.go.kr).

- ① The biggest difference in this segment is that the King and Hong Lim had a sword showdown at the end of the movie and ended up killing each other. I think the director twisted the truth for many reasons to make the movie more enjoyable for the audience. It has a lot more love involved rather than random sex, people don't want to see that. Also because this way, more passion is shown and there are fewer characters that the movie has to revolve around. I really liked this movie and the story behind it because many stories like this are not told in main stream history classes!
- ② This is historically true as I read that indeed Goryeo kings during that period were married to Mongolian princesses. This was to preserve Mongolian power and influence in Korea at the time. The movie also demonstrates polygamy, since the king is allowed to have a wife, but also concubines, if he chooses. The movie also shows the importance of an heir. Having an heir seems important in Confucianism but is particularly important for kings since it preserves a dynastic lineage. Related to the movie, I read that King Gongmin had difficulty producing an heir and that his wife died in child birth. Perhaps the movie was inspired by that situation, but decided to add a twist to that idea by portraying the king as a homosexual.
- ③ This movie takes bits and pieces of the truth and twists and molds them into a blockbuster movie plot (which is completely understandable). ... I believe that the character Hong Rim is based off the historical figure Hong Ryoun. Both fathered the child that would be the heir to the throne and both murdered King Gongmin. So while the movie made this whole ordeal seem like a torrid love story, in actuality it seemed to be all business.

Although the movie was criticized for its historically inaccurate costumes, my students thought that they were beautiful and that the characters were engaging. Historical inaccuracy aside, these new blockbuster movies set in old Korea made it possible for these American

students to appreciate its colorful splendor, which had been impossible until recently because of financial constraints in movie-making. Since the movie explored a theme of sexuality, we discussed the sexuality of pre-modern Korea, the subject which I had not tried to discuss before. American students were most active in the discussion, which I assume had mainly to do with the cultural difference. Many of the Korean and Chinese students were shy about expressing their opinions.

After we watched “The King and the Clown,” I asked the students to consider the different ways in which the directors depicted two different dynasties. American students mostly pointed out the difference in colors. As expected, visual materials tend to leave more vivid impressions on the students’ minds.

- ① One of the first things I noticed about the films was the difference in costumes. The costumes seemed less vibrant in *The King and the Clown*. This was probably because some of the main characters were poor. But, even in the palace, the clothes were not as vibrant. The guards wore red and the ministers wore blue. However, in *A Frozen Flower*, there were rich purples, red, gray, and other interesting and rich color-combinations. The hats seemed slightly different from *A Frozen Flower* as well.
- ② I noticed that the king wore a beard and the women wore wigs in *The King and the Clown*. The apparel worn by the women was yellow, pink, and blue. So maybe the apparel of women was more colorful than in *A Frozen Flower*. It is possible that people wore different colors in Goryeo and Joseon dynasties. It is also possible that the colors were different because *The King and the Clown* featured low class characters. Another possibility is that the colors were darker in *The King and the Clown* because the movie was darker. It was set in a more tyrannical period of Korean history.
- ③ The settings of the movie were also different. In the first movie, the setting was mostly in the palace and among the elite. *The King and the Clown* on the other hand, showed life outside of palace and among poor people. In *A Frozen Flower*, no one outside the royal life was of any importance. Because the second movie shows the life of poor people, it shows a possibility of what life was like in Choseon for people who weren’t well off. Obviously it was hard and there was little upward mobility. But,

in the end, it was the people who rose up against the king and his tyranny. Maybe this could represent that ordinary people had power to band together and challenge the king, whereas, maybe in Goryeo, this was less common. Maybe because of the introduction of Hangeul, people in Choseon were more empowered.

- ④ In the first movie, there was exogamy with Mongolian princesses. In the second movie, this was no longer the case. The first movie was also very concerned with having an heir, but there was no mention of this in the second movie. There was no indication that the king in *The King and the Clown* had offspring. Despite this, there seemed to be no pressure on the king to have an heir. That could be a characteristic of the movie rather than of society though. Both movies shared themes of bisexuality and perhaps homosexuality, which means that maybe in both Choseon and Goryeo, kings may have had flexibility in their sexuality.

Because of their fluency in English, they were able to express themselves in much wider spectrum than Asian students. The discussions on sexuality and marriage were the issues that were also discussed in class. The students whose first language was English confessed me that they had hardly learned any Korean history at school. Therefore, while they lacked basic knowledge, they also had no biases concerning Korean history. They had the advantage of being able to understand the lectures and express themselves much more accurately compared to Korean and Chinese students.

### *Group B: Chinese Students*

Group B mostly consisted of Chinese students. Most of them were not familiar with Korean history. Some of them only stayed in Korea for four months as foreign exchange students. They very much liked the field trips; they did not seem to have many opportunities to travel during their stay in Korea. On the day of the field trip, we visited two places. Fortunately, we had an opportunity to watch a traditional wedding ceremony. Chinese students thought Korean temples were similar to Chinese ones in style, but smaller in size. They seemed to take pride in

this fact. Because of financial constraints, Chinese students generally had less opportunity to travel and experience Korea the way Western students did, but some of them (mainly the female students) were fond of Korean popular culture as the result of new-found popularity Korea has been enjoying in other Asian countries. They admitted that they were not so concerned with the history of other countries. As a result of this course they became more interested in Korean history. According to my Chinese students, they are supposed to learn Korean history as part of world history in middle school as well as in high school. Hence a few students had acquired some basic knowledge of Korean history, but most of them had not.

Most Chinese students told me that they were surprised to read the history textbooks used in South Korea. For example, they were told that China had helped Silla unify Korea in 660 as well as Korea in 1950, and felt proud. However, China is depicted as an invader in history textbooks used in South Korea. For example, regarding the T'ang Troops of the middle of the seventh century, it is described in *Korea through the Ages: Volume 1*, "Upon the collapse of Baekje, T'ang unveiled its ambition of conquering the Korean peninsula by establishing five local offices run by generals in the old territory of Baekje" (AKHT 2005:82).

They were also taught that China played an important role in defending North Korea in the Korean War that was provoked by Americans, as well as in maintaining the general peace in East Asia. They realized there are not only two different Koreas, but diverse interpretations of the same historical experience.<sup>3</sup>

One Chinese student said,

I learned much about Korean history, especially the advanced period. The first general feeling for me is that there were some similarities between Chinese history and Korean history, in spite of their differences in the system, culture and economy. After all, two different countries existed in the same period and both of them were in the

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3. Recently there is movement to compile East Asian teaching materials to broaden shared historical understanding in Korea. They pointed out that, "Chinese textbooks are strongly lacking in accounts related to Korea. In 'World History,' the only mention of Korea is in a sidebar entitled 'Ancient Choseon.' In 'Chinese History,' not only did the role of Goguryeo in the fall of the Sui Dynasty disappear after 2000, but there is no mention of the Choseon-Japanese War in 1592" (The Hankyoreh 2010).

same Asian culture circle. T'ang dynasty affected Silla, especially the Confucian academy and Buddhism.

They were not sure which version was the true history. They described their feelings as follows:

- ① I felt Koreans never stopped trying to get what they wanted. At that time, there was no doubt that T'ang was the most brilliant dynasty in the world, so Korean knows what they could study from T'ang to advance themselves. Confucian academy and Buddhism were very popular at that time, so these two cultures were adopted by Korean. Because Western countries are the leaders of world economy now, Koreans have been trying to utilize western system to develop their economy since the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century. So we can see now Korean is developing very well in Asia even in the world. As I heard, Korea is a smart nation. Since ancient times, Chinese and Korean have had long, profound relationship. History tells us of so many similarities between us. However, in modern times, these two countries have totally different ways of developing within the system. Korea is developing continually, but China is not. From a big strike since Qing dynasty, China fell down from brilliant history. Because of history, we feel proud of ourselves; but also because of history, we feel shame. I can't doubt Korea's achievement in recent years – the same way I can't doubt Korean's past. Actually, Korea knows what the best is for them and they are always trying so hard. China needs to study their spirit in this aspect.
- ② As a Chinese, now I am in Korea in order to understand Korean history. I want to understand the history of this nation. I always know Korea from its economy and its entertainment spread. So I choose Korean history class to know more about its history, and now I know a lot of things. I see its civilization and the great people who marked history, and I see its relationship with ancient China. Now I have a new appreciation of Korean culture. I still hope to know more about it in my future study.

They reported that reading textbooks used in South Korea that depicted China as an invader made them think more about the way they had been conceiving China as the greatest nation. They were also very



impressed with the way Korea has been advancing in recent years and thought China should follow in its footsteps. One Chinese student, who confessed that she had never really been interested in other nations, told me that the class made her realize that each nation has its own special culture and history. Students realized that the main aim of history education in China is to build up national pride and to justify political power.

### *Group C: Korean Students*

Korean students enjoyed the movies and field trips as well. Understandably however, Korean students did not find them as new and interesting as non-Korean students did. For them, the most interesting component of the class was perhaps the perspectives of Western historians which they never had a chance to learn in their high school education.

It is normally a big cultural shock for a Korean student to experience Western perspectives for the first time. James Palais' article, "A Search for Korean Uniqueness" is representative of the way Korean history is understood in America. As the unique characteristics of Korean history, he lists ① slave society, ② *yangban* and aristocracy, ③ hereditary factionalism, ④ weakness of absolute monarchs, and ⑤ longevity and stability of the dynasties (Palais 1995). When I first read the article, I found it very refreshing that he discussed the issues that Korean historians hesitate to discuss because they worry about going against the popular nationalism. I also got the impression, however, that he did not stray too far from the kind of interpretation used by the colonialist historians of the early twentieth century who reconstructed Korean history according to "modern" concepts.<sup>4</sup> Japanese historians, for example, argued that Korean society

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4. At the conference "Reflections on Teaching Korean History in English" Held July 1, 2009 at Cambridge University, Albert Park of Claremont-McKenna College criticized me saying that he has never used this article in his class and asked me my reasons for using it to represent the perspective of Western historians. Since we do not make much use of the research done by Western historians when we study pre-modern Korea, I only found out about the article when I was researching for a Korean history class in Durham University in 2003. I think the article is quite informative for Korean students, considering the lack of articles that provide an overview of Korean history and the status enjoyed by an article published in a Harvard journal. James Lewis from Oxford University agreed with me at that time.

was an ancient society precisely because they had the slavery system until the late nineteenth century, and taught Koreans during the annexation that the root cause of Joseon's fall was the extreme factionalism.

The following are typical of the written responses I received from my Korean students:

- ① I don't agree with that of T'ang and Silla's relationship. He described T'ang aided Silla to defeat Baek-jae and Koguryo, and then price of T'ang's help was territory of Manchuria and North of Korea. But I don't think this to be true. T'ang had ambition to conquer and defeat all Korea. In some history records, we know that Silla was prepared to defend against T'ang's invasion. After Silla unified all Korea, a war broke out between Silla and T'ang. Finally Silla lost Manchuria and North of Korea. Although there were some differences between Silla and T'ang they continued their trade on culture and goods as usual because there were some profitable things in the trade. In my conclusion, Silla and T'ang's relationship was not protection but pragmatism.
- ② I think Korean slave system is quite different from others because Korean slaves are not exactly slaves. We call Korean slaves *No-Bi*. There are some differences between slaves and *No-Bi*. Killing slave is not illegal, but killing *No-Bi* is illegal. And all personal *No-Bi* (excepting public *No-Bi*) could have some property; this is different then what slaves were allowed. It is the reason why I think *No-Bi* is not slave, and Goryeo and Joseon was not a slave society.
- ③ I disagree with the writer's idea that the reason of longevity of Korean dynasty was the protection of China. It could be true that keeping good relationship with a powerful country was beneficial to Korea. However, the expression such as protection does not fit the relationship between Korea and China at that time because there were many historical wars between China and Korea. Also, considering many benefits China could get from Korea, it was not a protection. The relationship was a trade.
- ④ I did not quite understand why *yangban* and the king could get along with each other for such a long period? Kings' power was kind of being limited because of *yangban*. Why did not kings capture the power of *yangban*, or why did not *yangban* overthrow the kings? Was the author really sure about the materials

he used were not made by Japanese scholars despite historical facts when he wrote his paper?

Most of the Korean students disagreed with his interpretation and also felt upset. The attitudes of Korean students were quite different from those of others. For example, a Chinese student in same class expressed her thoughts in the following way:

The author said the special geographical location made it possible for Korea to continue its existence despite many invasions it suffered. I wonder why this is the case, since if powerful countries invaded the Korean peninsula and controlled the peninsula, they could get much more economical benefits by running the trade and business themselves. Furthermore, the location might make it easier for those foreign countries to defeat Korean armies. Therefore, I do not think the location of Korea was the key reason for its continued existence. I think there were some other reasons, such as Manchu organizing Korean force in order to defeat the remains of Ming's power.

An American student said, "I think that he makes many good points in this article, in that Korean scholars should delve more into the parts of their history that they think is bad or shows some weakness. At the same time I think he exaggerated far too much in his article. He made it seem as though Korea was nothing more than a copy of China, which I don't think to be the case."

The Korean students' responses on the other hand, can even be interpreted as emotional. One can see from it an effort to interpret one's own nation's history in a favorable light. This is probably because of the education they received. The Chinese student paid more attention to the subjects that involved China. The American student seemed to be the most objective of the three; she accepted Palais' argument that one should face the unfavorable and disadvantageous aspects of Korean history.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching a group of students with diverse backgrounds was very difficult and interesting at the same time. The students reacted very differently to exactly the same material. These courses gave me an opportunity to

compare different ways of understanding Korean history.

Non-Korean students expressed the greatest satisfaction with experiences outside the classroom, such as Korean movies, field trips, and exploration of Korean traditional music. Korean students, on the other hand, were not as enthusiastic since they were already familiar with these things. On the whole, all three groups enjoyed the movies. Discussing the gap between historical facts and fiction, they had an opportunity to examine the way history is being consumed through media in today's Korea. When historical information is conveyed through mediums other than written texts, it becomes much more vivid and interesting. Despite their historical inaccuracies, movies were useful tools in that they could make Korean history much more interesting for the foreign students.

Korean students were shocked to see the way Korean history was understood in Western countries. Believing that Korean history had been misrepresented, they often felt offended at first. As time went by, they sometimes found it refreshing to learn about other ways of interpreting Korean history. Chinese students also felt confused at first when they realized the discrepancy between the version of history taught in China and those taught elsewhere. Western students often did not know much about Korean history and had very few preconceptions. Many of them felt that Korean history as narrated by Korean textbooks was heavily nationalistic as were many of the Korean students in class. Studying with people of diverse backgrounds, the students rediscovered themselves. At the same time, they shared the surprises that came with discovering new ways of understanding Korean history. This is perhaps the most important benefit of Korean history taught in English.

The Korean government's globalization policy puts even more emphasis on the importance of English skills in Korean society. As we enter the twenty-first century, an increasing number of foreign students have come to study in Korean universities. As result, there is now greater demand for courses on Korean history taught in English. In a way, this implies an expansion of the market for Korean history courses. So far, such demand has been met mostly by the native speakers of English who received their degrees in English-speaking countries. Their perspective is not always on par with that of Korean historians in Korea, but it is not easy to relay the fruits of

the scholarship advanced in Korea despite its long history and leadership in the subject. This is because, unlike other subjects, Korean history has much to do with the sensitive question of how it is to be interpreted.

Foreign students studying in Korea need to learn not only the perspectives of European and American scholars, but those of Koreans themselves. Indeed, what my American students were most curious about was the opinions of Korean scholars. The main advantage of teaching Korean history in Korea in English, is that the students are already experiencing various aspects of Korea in their everyday lives and the lectures are intended to show them how those things that they experience every day came to be from an historical point of view. Through interactive learning, they not only learn about Korea intellectually, but experience it. Therefore, this method of teaching is especially useful for a class with many foreign students. For a class geared towards Korean students majoring in Korean history, it was more helpful to focus on the way the scholars of English-speaking regions perceive Korean history compared to those in Korea.

One difficulty was that there were not enough materials in English written by Korean scholars. I think it is therefore necessary to increase publication in this area. Korean teachers in Korea also need to advance themselves. This is not something that an individual can easily accomplish without institutional support. Although there are some inherent limitations to learning a language one did not grow up with, academia and the government must find ways to nurture Korean historians educated in Korea who can fluently teach in English.

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a report as well as a case study of teaching pre-modern Korean history in English by Korean teachers who have studied in Korea. The students who took these courses consisted of three different groups: American exchange students, Chinese students, and Korean students. Each of these groups showed varying interest based on their intellectual backgrounds. The American students exhibited more interest in interactive learning such as Korean traditional music and field trips to sites of various examples of Korean historical architecture, while the Korean and Chinese students found this architecture familiar and were not as enthusiastic as the American students. Regarding the three groups' general responses to the course, the Chinese student were surprised to find China being depicted as invaders, while the Korean students were intrigued by different interpretations of their national history than they had been accustomed to. The American students, on the other hand, were quite unemotional concerning the various interpretations of Korean history. These reactions showed how ones' perspective on history is heavily influenced by ones' educational background. Overall, these courses were very interesting and helpful as they allowed both students and lecturers to widen their understanding of how Korean history is perceived and perpetuated by different academic societies.

**Keywords:** Korean History, teaching in English, Korean teacher, English immersion education, interactive learning