

## Rylan Sekiguchi, Rennie Moon, and Joon Seok Hong



*This is our fourteenth consecutive interview with winners of the Franklin R. Buchanan Prize.*

*The Association for Asian Studies awards the prize annually for development of outstanding curriculum materials on Asia. The 2010 prize was awarded to the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) curriculum units, U.S.–South Korean Relations and Uncovering North Korea.*

**Lucien:** *Congratulations on winning the Buchanan Prize for publication of curriculum guides on the two Korean states. I know giving a short answer to this question is difficult, but will you summarize the most important key concepts regarding each nation that you would like high school students to learn from these guides?*

**Rylan Sekiguchi:** Thank you for the congratulations! We are honored to receive the Buchanan Prize for our two curriculum units, and we hope they help inspire students to learn more about Korea—a region we feel is critically important to the world, especially the United States—yet relatively unstudied in US classrooms.

As curriculum writers, we constantly ask ourselves that very question as we develop a unit, regardless of the topic. What are the fundamental points students should understand about this topic? What are the key messages? When the topic is Korea, most American students are only familiar with the Korean War. While the war is undeniably a landmark event in Korean, US, and world history, it provides only one lens—a very focused lens—through which to understand Korea. In developing these curriculum units, we wanted to equip students with a more multifaceted lens that would allow for a broader, more complete understanding of Korea. As such, we incorporated lessons on politics, economics, security issues, human rights, culture, and society. Of course, volumes could be written on any one of these aspects of Korea, so our challenge was to build lessons that were rich in information yet clear and easy to follow, with each lesson reinforcing just a couple of salient points.

In the case of our first unit, *U.S.–South Korean Relations*, there are probably two central themes: (1) the US–South Korean relationship has been generally strong, is sometimes complicated, and is significant both historically and in the present day, and (2) South Korea today is an important player on the world stage. Each lesson in the unit serves to highlight and illustrate these two messages using the particular “lens” of that lesson. We are able to emphasize these points in the economics lesson, for instance, when we ask students to view and analyze statistics of past US aid to South Korea, and of South Korea’s stunning economic growth. In the security lesson, we ask them to do

a textual examination of the US–South Korean Mutual Defense Treaty and to participate in a simulated negotiation to formally end the Korean War. Although these exercises and activities examine specific aspects of South Korea or US–South Korean relations, they are meant to simultaneously reinforce those two big-picture themes.

The second unit, *Uncovering North Korea*, also has a few important messages, but perhaps the biggest is that North Korea is widely misunderstood and often misrepresented. As a corollary, common Western ideas of North Korea are often biased, incomplete, and possibly inaccurate. To illustrate this point, the unit begins by juxtaposing stereotypical or iconic media images of North Korea (e.g., a starving child, a sea of North Korean soldiers marching with guns drawn, Kim Jong-Il) with less familiar, everyday images of North Korea (e.g., a man riding his bike through Pyongyang, a woman working in an office, a group of laughing schoolchildren). We ask students to compare the two sets of images and then reflect on what they currently know—or think they know—about North Korea. In particular, in the first lesson and throughout the rest of the unit, we encourage students to question and challenge their own preconceived notions about the country.

**Lucien:** *Many of our readers teach survey-level university courses. Even though the guides are marketed for high school and even middle school students, I enjoyed using elements of the education content from the U.S.–South Korean Relations guide in a comparative education unit I teach at the university level. Can you elaborate upon any lessons or units from either or both of the guides that, in your opinion, particularly lend themselves to use in undergraduate survey courses?*

**Rennie Moon:** Elements from both curriculum units, *U.S.–South Korean Relations* and *Uncovering North Korea*, may be used for different purposes by instructors teaching various undergraduate-level courses. The majority of the lessons, while focusing on Korea-related issues, address broader academic issues and debates that encourage a level of thinking that is also appropriate for students at the collegiate level. For example, instructors may engage students in the examination of the political histories of either South or North Korea while considering different definitions of “democracy” (Lesson One

in *U.S.–South Korean Relations*) or leading a discussion on varying conceptualizations of “human rights” (Lesson Four in *Uncovering North Korea*). In this way, instructors may adapt the content and activities in the lessons to suit the particular goals of their undergraduate courses.

The handouts throughout both units provide solid, updated information on the political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of South and North Korea that undergraduate students may find useful to reference as background information. Students may also consult the references of scholarly articles and books cited throughout the handouts when working on Korea-related research papers and class projects.

From my own experience as an instructor at a teacher’s college, I find some of the lessons especially suitable for analysis in teacher education courses on pedagogy and multicultural education. This is because many of the lesson activities and content in the handouts aim to help students understand how knowledge is created and how it is influenced by the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases of individuals and groups—important aspects of multicultural teaching. In Lesson One of *Uncovering North Korea*, for instance, students are asked to examine their conceptions or misconceptions of North Korea. The lesson aims to bring students to the realization that North Korea, like any other country, is a complex and multifaceted entity.

**Lucien:** *Most, if not all, EAA readers are quite aware of the contemporary importance of the Korean Peninsula and of Korea’s rich heritage and culture. However, Korea is often not taught in schools and universities. Since the curriculum development team spent considerable time thinking deeply about Korea in the process of doing their work, what advice can you offer EAA readers that might better enable them to convince colleagues and administrators of the importance of teaching about Korea in schools and colleges?*

**Joon Seok Hong:** It is true that Korean studies in the United States, especially at the secondary level, have not yet become well established or institutionalized in the general curriculum. The study of Korea must compete with an ever-growing range of issues and countries for the attention of students and teachers. In this context, the coverage of Korea can often become narrow, superficial, or even non-existent. Despite such difficulties, we feel that there are at least a couple of ways to encourage schools and teachers to better integrate Korean studies into their curriculum.

The first method is a matter of framing. Often, regional or country-specific studies are overly concerned with highlighting how one society or nation is different or unique. Of course, this assumption of particularity may be valid and warranted, but in our experience, getting people interested in a topic often depends on connecting it to their personal lives, i.e., to something familiar. Therefore, it may be more effective to frame Korea, not as exceptional, but as representative and illustrative of a larger topic or problem. For example, in *U.S.–South Korean Relations*, we felt that the topic of democracy in South Korea offered very compelling information with which American high school students could identify. The ROK is a nation whose citizens have fought hard for democracy, and it faces many of the same concerns and issues that the American public debates today. Another instance is the role of the state in the South Korean example, which has historically been more intensive in the developmental state model. South Korea offers many lessons for the United States, which has grappled with similar issues since the start of the recession in late 2008. This is at the heart of comparative studies, where students are encouraged to analyze and make linkages across temporal and geographical boundaries. Finally, by framing Korea in this manner, we not only better connect Korean studies to the wider curriculum, but we also position ourselves to highlight the unique and compelling aspects of Korea, which students will hopefully encounter during the course of their studies.

Second, we think it is very useful and effective to take a problem-oriented approach. We recognize that schools and teachers face time constraints, so it is helpful to have a focused lesson that opens the door to Korea for many students. Granted, some students will need general background information to contextualize a specific issue regarding Korea, but depth can compensate for breadth in the long term by capturing the attention of students in a very specific way. For example, the North Korean nuclear problem, South Korean popular culture, and North Korean human rights are specific topics that serve as provocative gateways to more exploration of Korea-related topics. Therefore, when we developed the units on Korea, we envisioned each lesson or handout as both self-contained and connected to larger themes to allow educators greater flexibility and more options to integrate Korean studies into their curriculum.

**Lucien:** *Thanks so much for your good work on these guides! ■*

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**RYLAN SEKIGUCHI** is a Curriculum Specialist at the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE). He has authored and contributed to various SPICE curricula, including units on inter-Korean relations, China’s urbanization and economic development, historical memory in East Asia, and the Silk Road.

**RENNIE MOON** (Stanford, PhD ’09, International Comparative Education) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at the College of Education at Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea. She also serves as a curriculum consultant to SPICE.

**JOON SEOK HONG** has worked at SPICE since 2007. He is currently pursuing a PhD in political science at UC Berkeley, where he specializes in international relations and public law, particularly in East Asia. He holds master’s degrees from Stanford University and Columbia University and a BA from Yale University.

## TEACHING TIP

### Human Rights Watch on North Korea

**INDEPENDENT SOURCES** such as the highly respected international organization, Human Rights Watch, offer students an excellent alternative to typical media treatments of North Korea. The following are excerpts from their most recent 2010 report on North Korea, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87398>. The entire reading can easily be used in the classroom and is available for download in Acrobat PDF.

Despite lip service to human rights in the constitution, human rights conditions in North Korea remain dire. There is no organized political opposition, free media, functioning civil society, or religious freedom. Arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and ill-treatment of detainees, and lack of due process remain serious issues. North Korea operates detention facilities including those popularly known as “political prison camps” where hundreds of thousands of its citizens—including children—are enslaved in deplorable conditions for various anti-state offenses. Collective punishment is the norm for such crimes. Periodically, the government publicly executes citizens for stealing state property, hoarding food, and other “anti-socialist” crimes.

North Korea criminalizes leaving the country without state permission. Border-crossers face grave punishments upon repatriation such as torture, lengthy terms in horrendous detention facilities, and even execution, depending on what they did and who they met while abroad.

Most North Koreans escape through the country’s northern border with China. Hundreds of thousands have fled since the 1990s, and some have settled in China’s Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. Despite its obligation to offer protection to refugees, Beijing categorically labels North Koreans in China “illegal” economic migrants and routinely repatriates them. Many North Korean women in China live with Chinese men in *de facto* marriages. Even if they have lived there for years, they are not entitled to legal residence and remain vulnerable to arrest and repatriation. Some North Korean women and girls are trafficked into forced marriage or forced prostitution in China.

Thanks to Professor Donald N. Clark (Trinity University) for calling our attention to Human Rights Watch: North Korea.