

## An Interview with Buchanan Prize Winner Yong Jin Choi



**T**his is our fifth consecutive interview with a winner of the Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. The Association for Asian Studies awards the prize annually for the development of outstanding curriculum materials on Asia. The 2001 winner was Yong Jin Choi, Director of Korean Studies for the Korea Society. She won the award for developing the 1–12 Curriculum Package that aids teachers in teaching about Korea.

**Lucien:** *Congratulations on winning the Buchanan Prize. Please inform our readers about your educational and work background before joining the Korea Society, and how you became interested in educating K–12 teachers about Korea.*

**Yong Jin Choi:** I received my B.A. in history from Sogang University in Seoul, Korea and completed my master's degree in anthropology at the University of Hawaii. I taught anthropology at Seoul National University and Hanyang University, both in Seoul.

I moved to New York in 1983 with my family, including my journalist husband, two daughters and a son. My awareness of Korean Studies in U.S. public schools began when my oldest daughter entered high school in the suburbs of New York City. Like all other New York State public school students, she took a world culture class in 9th grade that introduced her to non-Western cultures such as China, Japan, India, and the Middle East. But she and her classmates did not learn anything about Korea. I visited the high school and explored the possibility of including Korea in a Global Culture class. No success! However, I became convinced that teachers would teach about Korea if they had greater familiarity and knowledge about Korea's history and culture.

So, in 1987, I established the Korean Studies Council International to provide American educators with an opportunity to gain direct, firsthand experience in Korea. Then, in 1989, with financial support from the Korea Foundation, I launched the Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies program. In the inaugural year of the program, I took twenty teachers with me to Korea for a three-week visit which included university-level lectures, tours of museums, palaces and other historic sites in Seoul as well as an extended tour of the Korean countryside where they saw with their own eyes the cultural and scientific contributions of the three kingdoms period. The educators also had opportunities to meet shopkeepers, high school students, and a cross section of Koreans from various walks of life as

well as some leading professionals such as museum directors, university professors, traditional artisans, and cutting-edge architects. This was the only way I knew how to introduce elementary and secondary American educators to Korea and to get them interested in teaching about Korea.

When the Korea Society assumed responsibility for the Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies program in 1994, at the request of the Korea Foundation, I continued to serve as the program coordinator and subsequently was asked to join the staff of the Korea Society in 1995 as the first director of its Korean Studies Program. As the founder of the Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies program, it is deeply gratifying to me that over 300 public and private school teachers, textbook editors, curriculum developers, state board of education members, and museum curators and educators have visited Korea under the auspices of the program. And, of course, the ongoing success of the Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies program depends upon the institutional support provided by the Korea Society and the funding which the Freeman Foundation has provided for the program annually since 1994.

**Lucien:** *Please elaborate upon how you developed the Korea curriculum materials that were awarded the prize.*

**Yong Jin Choi:** A few years after launching the Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies program, I realized that teachers needed substantive curricular materials to support their efforts to teach about Korea. Clearly, the available materials were insufficient, and teachers needed more visual aids, multimedia presentations, and basic lesson plans. Moreover, these materials would be useful not only to the teachers who had participated in the program, but also to teachers who have never been to Korea.

With this in mind, I invited past participants of the Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies program, especially those who are leaders in the area of social studies, to a series of meetings where we defined the project, outlined its pedagogical framework, established goals and selected topics for lesson plans.

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The project was designed as a cooperative effort by a dedicated team of educators, including classroom teachers and university professors. We worked tirelessly over several years. The result was the Korea 1–12 curriculum package.

The package consists of three books—elementary, middle, and high school—which cover grade-level-appropriate topics like history, culture, customs, architecture, geography, the arts, literature, unification, Koreans abroad and women in Korea. It provides visuals to enhance the lesson content. I am confident that many more curriculum projects will follow because of the commitment of educators who want to share their knowledge of Korea in the context of world history, university scholars who know the benefits of educating students about Korea at the K–12 level, and because of Korea’s enduring contributions which are such an integral part of a balanced understanding of East Asia and the world.

**Lucien:** *You have been involved for some time in educating Americans and people from other countries about Korea. What are three or four really important things you wish all foreigners knew about the Korean Peninsula and in particular, the Republic of Korea?*

**Yong Jin Choi:** Location has been a key factor in Korea’s long history. Korea is a peninsula that sits at the crossroads of China, Russia, and Japan. The transmission and transformation of ideas are most prominent in the following areas: Buddhism, Confucianism, printing, and ceramics.

Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced to Korea from China during the Three Kingdoms Period. Korean Buddhist monks contributed to the development of Buddhism in China and Korea and also played a critical role in its transmission to Japan through their teaching and literary contributions, including widely read commentaries on sacred texts and chronicles of their physical and spiritual journeys to China and India.

Neo-Confucianism flourished in sixteenth-century Korea where great scholars like Yi Hwang (1501–70) and Yi I (1536–84) also made major contributions and influenced scholarship in Korea and Japan. As a reinterpretation of ancient Confucian thought, Neo-Confucianism eventually constituted a major strand of Confucian thought.

Korea’s role as a cultural bridge was also significant in sharing cultural and technological advances and generating its own unique contributions in areas like printing, ceramics, and naval architecture. Korean Buddhists were eager to spread Buddhist teaching and scriptures and contributed innovative developments in printing to do so. The earliest record of the use of cast metal type is a Buddhist scripture printed in 1234 during the Koryo dynasty that, unfortunately, has not survived. The earliest extant example is *Jikjisimche*, a Buddhist scripture printed with movable metal type in 1377, made seventy years before Gutenberg’s bible. The oldest example of wood block printing in the world is Korea’s Dharani Sutra, also a Buddhist scripture, dating back to 751. A truly stunning example of Korea’s printing technology is the Tripitaka Koreana, which is a series of 81,258 wood blocks that contain Buddhist scriptures. A

UNESCO World Heritage Treasure, the Tripitaka Koreana is an outstanding example of woodblock printing made even more remarkable because the blocks—which were created as a national effort to preserve the Korean legacy from destruction by invading Mongols in the thirteenth century—have survived.

One of the more globally appreciated cultural advances of Korea is in the area of ceramics. Production of the world-renowned blue-jade ceramics called celadon was enhanced during the Koryo Kingdom in the early part of the twelfth century. Technical innovations include decoration with carved inlay and relief, the use of white slip, and the introduction of copper and iron glaze. In fact, Korean celadon was so desired by Japan that Korean potters were kidnapped and sent to Japan during the Japanese invasion of Korea in the sixteenth century. There are many fine examples of Japanese ceramics that are actually Korean in origin.

In spite of the many outside influences, and in part because of them, Korea successfully developed its own cultural identity. Korea preserved its political and cultural independence until the later part of the nineteenth century.

Korea’s independent identity is also attributed to the fact that Korea is one of the longest unified political entities in the world. The Korean peninsula was unified in 668 under the leadership of the Silla Dynasty, which was succeeded by the Koryo Dynasty in 918. The geographical boundary of Koryo remained Korea’s political boundary for the next thousand centuries, until it was disrupted in modern times by what was intended to be a temporary division of the Korean peninsula after the end of World War II. The dynastic transitions occurred at intervals of hundred years—more than five hundred years in the case of the Choson Dynasty (1392–1910)—which enabled Korea to establish a stable society for its citizens.

*Hangul*, the alphabet invented by King Sejong in 1443, is considered by Koreans to be the most significant cultural achievement of Korea. Korea’s traditional elites used the Chinese language as the official writing system, but the simplicity of *Hangul* enabled even common people to read and write. Is it any wonder that Korea enjoys the world’s highest literacy rate of 98 percent?

One final topic with a contemporary resonance that can be felt in headlines daily, which I think it is crucial for educators to consider, is the “two Koreas.” One misconception about the “two Koreas” is the assumption that Korea always has been divided. This could not be further from the truth, as was indicated above. Moreover, the division originated not through the initiative of Koreans, but from the exigencies associated with the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II and the nascent Cold War era. Within three short years after the end of World War II, therefore, two separate states had emerged on the Korean peninsula, a socialist north and a democratic south, that mirrored the Cold War split between the former Soviet Union and the U.S. The north’s attempt to bring about reunification by invading the south in 1950 led to the Korean

War, which ended three years later with an armistice, complete economic devastation, and ten million families separated. This artificial Cold War boundary, one of the world's most heavily militarized borders, is the DMZ, or demilitarized zone.

The two Koreas took divergent paths in economic development. One of the world's poorest countries only a generation ago, South Korea's GDP was comparable with the levels of the poorer countries of Africa and Asia. Its per capita GNP was \$100 in 1963 but exceeded \$10,000 by 1997. Today, its economy ranks 13th in the world, and its GDP is 13 times that of North Korea, which remains one of the world's poorest countries. Its citizens are caught in a heavily bordered country where travel is very restricted and trade severely limited.

In addition to its spectacular economic growth, South Korea is also a precious example of a country that has emerged from decades of military dictatorships as a democratic state. South Korea established a democratic government in 1993 with a democratically elected president, Kim Young Sam. Korea is a real success story because so few military countries have achieved this level of healthy democracy by elections.

**Lucien:** *Please inform our readers about the Korea Society and its activities—particularly its activities that are intended for elementary, secondary, or university teachers and students.*

**Yong Jin Choi:** In the area of educational programming for the secondary and tertiary levels, the following are the major activities of the Korea Society:

#### **Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies**

This program offers U.S. educators a unique opportunity to learn about Korea. Currently in its fourteenth year, the program organizes a three-week study/tour of Korea each summer

in collaboration with the Korea Foundation and Korea University. Participants are recruited through a nationwide open competition.

#### **Fall Fellowship in Korean Studies**

Now in its fifth year, this program consists of a docent-led, two-week educational tour of Korea for a select group of textbook writers/editors, educational software specialists, museum educators, and social studies administrators in state-level departments of education. It serves as a meaningful complement to the summer program by offering a parallel opportunity for educational professionals who support and supplement the efforts of classroom teachers. The two-week October program begins with lectures on Korean history, culture, economy, society and the arts by Korean specialists and concludes with a five-day field trip.

#### **Teachers Conferences/Summer Institute**

The Korea Society has offered biannual Korean Studies conferences for teachers in the Greater New York Area since 1994. These all-day programs consist of three lectures on various aspects of Korean culture and history during the morning session followed by hands-on workshops in the afternoon. Guest lecturers are scholars in Korean Studies or specialists on the chosen topic. The conferences offer teachers an opportunity to learn about Korea, sample Korean food, network with Korean specialists as well as other area teachers, and gather helpful curriculum materials, visual aids, and other resources.

A one-week intensive summer course also is offered as a general introduction to Korea. Mornings are devoted to lecture/discussion sessions, and guided field trips to Korea-related venues and organizations are arranged for the afternoons.



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**Consortium Project**

From Fall 1999 through Spring 2001, the Korea Society collaborated with the Japan Society and the China Institute on a consortium project entitled Focus on East Asia: China, Korea and Japan. The project was inaugurated with a course called "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Modern East Asia" that was offered during the Spring 1999 semester. This is believed to be the first collaborative course with a comparative focus on the three major countries of East Asia made available to teachers in New York State. It offered substantive academic lecture-discussion sessions by renowned East Asia scholars and provided an overview of the major themes and events that shaped life and society in China, Korea and Japan. In a continuation of this successful collaborative effort, subsequent courses were offered for graduate credit, including "Contemporary East Asia," in spring 2001.

**School Visit Program**

Student outreach is a vital component of the Korea Society's educational programs. The School Visit Program arranges unique visits to area schools by Korean authors, musicians, storytellers and other professionals with special expertise on Korea. They conduct workshops, assemblies and other enrichment activities for K-12 students. The program has proven to be an inspiring way to enrich classroom activities and bring Korean culture to life.

**Production of Curricular Materials**

An emerging but important area is the production of curricular materials. We have produced *History of Korea: A Bird's Eye View* by Dr. Young Ick Lew, a distinguished professor of Korean Studies at Yonsei University. As the title suggests, the text is a brief overview of Korean history written for junior and senior high school students. One of its unique features is a detailed chronology of major events in Korean history compared with benchmark events in world history. We continue to publish a series of *Teaching More About Korea* prepared by the participants in the Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies programs. Audiotapes of Korean folktales and stories narrated by professional storyteller Cathy Spagnoli were produced for classroom use. *Curriculum Development Guide for Modern Korean Literature for High School* edited by professor Heinz Insu Fenkl, at New York State University in New Paltz, will soon be published.

**Support for Professional Development Activities**

The Korea Society participates in major events for educators such as the annual meetings of the National Council for Social Studies, the National Council for Language and Arts, and the National Council for Geographic Education. Through these events, we provide ongoing support for past summer fellowship participants and encourage them to remain actively involved in their professional organizations, distribute innovative resources for teaching about Korea, foster networking and interaction among teachers, and publicize future educational activities.

**Introducing the Korean Musical Tradition:****A Lecture/Demonstration Tour**

This is an ongoing series of lecture/demonstrations by the Korean American composer/performer and Korean music specialist Jin Hi Kim at colleges and universities throughout the United States. These programs seek to establish a cultural context for a better understanding of the East Asian, and in particular, Korean contributions to world culture. Approximately sixteen programs are presented each year at colleges and universities around the country.

**Old Roots-New Branches: Korean Performing Arts Tour Program**

Two tours by established Korean performing arts companies are presented annually at universities and other public venues around the country. As feasible, the artists also conduct master classes, workshops, and school outreach programs.

**Korea Studies in the Korea Society Quarterly**

A complimentary subscription to our official publication is offered to all past participants of our Korean studies programs and other interested educators. Each issue of the *Korea Society Quarterly* contains a variety of resources for teaching about Korea, as well as information about our Korean Studies activities, which makes it a useful resource for teachers.

**Lucien:** *In addition to the Korea Society, what other organizations with expertise in Korea would you recommend that teachers who are interested in the peninsula contact?*

**Intermediate College Korean**  
Clare You and Eunsu Cho

This companion volume to *College Korean* enables students to continue their development of Korean language skills. Because language is a fundamental component of culture, the text incorporates themes relating to Korea's customs and social issues. A reference section includes an index to patterns and grammar notes, a glossary, spelling tips, a list of connectives, and irregular verb charts. \$21.50 (paper)

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**Yong Jin Choi:** There are Korean Cultural Centers in Washington DC (202-797-6343), New York City (212-759-9550) and Los Angeles (323-936-7141) which have services of lending films and video strips, and limited free publications about Korea. The Korean Cultural Center in Los Angeles publishes a journal called *Korean Culture*, which contains articles on the traditional and contemporary culture of Korea. Korean National Tourism Corps in New Jersey (201-585-0909) provides free posters and other print materials. Korean Studies centers at Harvard University, UCLA, and University of Hawaii also have resources.

**Lucien:** *Mrs. Choi, you have been working in the field of Asian Studies outreach for some time. Do you see improvements in American understanding of Asia in general and the Korean Peninsula in particular since you began outreach work? Why or why not? Also, how do you think schools and universities in this country might do a better job in insuring that all American students better understand Asia?*

**Yong Jin Choi:** A recent study by the Asia Society reported that U.S. students want to learn more about Asia. Lack of resources, time and training were cited as reasons why Asia is not covered as much as the public would like in schools. These same reasons plague the study of Korea, and many other countries, in classrooms today.

The study of Korea has only recently taken off and is an exciting and growing field. The recent interest might be attributed to the influx of Korean-American students coming to universities in the U.S. as well as Korea's economic development in the 1980s, which catapulted the nation into international headlines. However, much more progress needs to be made at the K-12 grade levels. Not enough teachers are teaching about Korea. Reasons are varied: some are unfamiliar with Korea, others lack teachable resources, still others say they cannot squeeze one more country into their world history classes. Even teachers in New York City, home of the largest Korean American population in the country, have little or no information about Korea and, sadly, even a concept of what Korea is. I believe that if teachers show some initiative and interest, there are lots of areas in which lessons about Korea can be integrated into their curriculum, at any grade level. It takes one good teacher who is devoted to and excited about teaching Korea in the classroom that inspires others to do the same. These teachers should share their resources with other teachers and show them how to incorporate Korea into their frameworks.

Scholarly publications like *Education About Asia* are valuable educational resources. I hope to see more articles on Korea, which can enhance Korea's visibility. The National Consortium on Teaching About Asia is a very effective mechanism to promote awareness about Asia. I think we need more close collaborations among outreach organizations to achieve our goals.

**Lucien:** *Thanks so much, Mrs. Choi, and again, congratulations. ■*

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