

Korean Civilization and East Asian Studies

By Robert André LaFleur

One of the challenges faced by teachers of East Asian Studies is to move beyond one's area of research expertise toward teaching that covers "the rest" of East Asia. It is often quite challenging to move toward teaching competence in premodern and modern China and Japan, but extremely difficult—without prior training—to take on the Korean peninsula. Trained as a premodern (Song-Ming) Chinese historian, I spent my first years of teaching working to create fuller offerings in modern China and Japan. I was bothered, however, by the knowledge that I was, quite simply, ignoring Korea. To be sure, I had always noted the process by which Chinese culture "filtered" through the peninsula to Japan, and even used occasional source readings to supplement my survey courses. Nonetheless, it appeared to me that the only way to incorporate teaching about Korea into my course offerings would be to embark on a plan—not unlike creating a postdoctoral "graduate field"—to gain a deeper understanding of the peninsula.¹

"FORGOTTEN" KOREA

Until recently, the vast majority of university graduate programs in East Asia have focused almost exclusively upon Chinese and Japanese studies. One way to account for this is to look at the history of such programs in the United States, which can be traced back to two organizing giants, John King Fairbank and Edwin Reischauer, who trained several generations of East Asian scholars, who in turn developed university programs in Chinese and Japanese Studies throughout the country.² There was, however, no comparable development in Korean Studies during the formative growth period from 1945 to 1970, with the result that, although most Chinese and Japanese specialists received at least some familiarity (and often a good deal more than that) with the language, culture, and history of the other area, they very rarely developed parallel knowledge of Korea.

The problem is even more pronounced when one looks to the realities of East Asian teaching in liberal arts colleges, where a relatively small number of professors in the humanities and social sciences are responsible for teaching the breadth of East Asia.



An evil-repelling tiger, 18th century.
Collection: National Museum of Korea

This is compounded by a dearth of library holdings and available teaching materials on Korea in most colleges. For example, although rich sourcebooks on China and Japan have been available since the publication of *Sources of Chinese Tradition* and *Sources of Japanese Tradition* nearly four decades ago—supplemented today by many

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more such collections—it is only in the last five years that an equivalent volume has been produced for Korea.³ General East Asian civilization textbooks also tend to give relatively short shrift to Korea. The sad fact has been that there simply has not been a critical mass of monographs, source collections, and surveys of Korean culture and history from which interested teachers and students could build their knowledge.

A REMEDY

Faced with the problem of neglecting (or, at best, marginally integrating) Korea in my East Asian Studies courses, I decided to create an experimental course that would merge the breadth of a survey with the depth of a research seminar. My goal was not only to put together a well-integrated course, but to create a place for Korea in my college's curriculum. That meant attracting student interest, working with library staff members on student projects, and ordering materials for the library. Although I did two years of preparation, the course ran on the presumption that all were on equal footing in the seminar. In fact, I wrote this piece, as well as a research article, as my own part of the course work.

The course attracted forty students, which included a large number of the Korean Americans on campus, but many others as well, who brought broad historical and cultural backgrounds to the course. Because of the large number of students, we divided the seminar into two different sections. Using Ki-baik Lee's *A New History of Korea* as our basic text, and working carefully through Peter Lee's *Sourcebook*,⁴ students spent the first half of every session discussing the text and the primary materials, and the second half discussing their research projects, which each had chosen early in the term. The result was a seminar that produced research papers on Chōson dynasty (1392–1910) literature, the Korean War, Three Kingdoms and Silla (57 B.C.E.–935) legends, Korean influences on Japanese art, architecture, and religion, as well as comparative papers dealing with

ROBERT ANDRÉ LAFLEUR is Assistant Professor of History and East Asian Studies at Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

ESSAYS



Yi dynasty painting.

Collection: The National Museum of Korea and the Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii

cross-cultural issues within East Asia and beyond, to Europe and the Middle East.

What was accomplished in a practical sense is substantial. In one semester, we created a group of students with a broad sense of Korean history and culture, who also spent significant time on specific research projects. A wide array of book recommendations came out of the course, to help in the absolutely necessary process of building the library's holdings in Korean Studies. A number of plans for the future are directly linked to the course as well. To begin with, it is now possible to significantly increase the Korea segment of our required East Asian Studies introductory courses through well-chosen source readings, library reserve materials, lectures, and films. Secondly, there is a new interest in Korea as a research topic on campus; there are several students who wish to pursue their studies of Korea in more depth who plan to write senior theses on aspects of Korean civilization and possibly continue on to graduate work. Third, the course itself will be taught every other year, with the necessary modifications now that it is no longer "experimental," providing important continuity in the process. Fourth, although it is not currently possible for us to offer Korean language courses, we are encouraging students to attend summer programs to begin their study or refine their skills. Finally, we have created a Korean Civilization Web page that will continue to be a resource for students at Colby College and beyond.

The background provided through our textbook and the links on the Web page

were invaluable. Lee's *A New History of Korea* provides an evenly-based survey of Korea from early times to the twentieth century, with the additional advantage that it represents a sensitivity to source materials that creates a particularly fine companion to Peter Lee's *Sourcebook*, because of its attention to traditional source materials and Korea's premodern history.

Still, the heart of the course centered on analysis of primary materials. Students wrote weekly e-mail discussion notes prior to class to register their initial responses to the readings as well as weekly response papers that reflected their thoughts about the materials after each seminar session. One of the drawbacks of a seminar-style course that emphasized source materials as directly as this one did was that the geographical and historical background was not tested as directly as it might have been in a survey-level course. In future offerings, I will provide students with more nuts-and-bolts background about major periods and figures in Korean history. It will be possible to remedy this by making the Web page background more thorough, and including short lecture segments and assignments dealing with prominent individuals and periods, while not losing the emphasis on longer-term themes in the sources.

The research projects took up the vast majority of the students' time. In this modified seminar format, students gave biweekly reports on their projects rather than one longer report at the end of the semester. I also required several short updates in writing as the term progressed—a paragraph-long summary of the planned project and a skeletal bibliography in the third week, a complete proposal and bibliography in the seventh week, and a draft in the twelfth. This assumed a great deal on the part of both students and instructor, but the research responsibility was made easier because of the help of library personnel, who aided seminar students in their projects.

The effectiveness of this experiment has shown that, from the introductory level through advanced coursework and research (ideally including language work), it is possible to find a place for an area of East Asia that has been traditionally slighted in our curricula. It is important to note, however, that little would be accomplished by merely replacing significant aspects of the curriculum with Korean materials. Our goal needs

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to be to truly make students understand—by understanding ourselves—how Korea fits into the “bigger picture,” from our introductory-level teachings all the way to seminars and independent research. The rest of this article is devoted to some of the themes teachers may wish to draw upon in order to better integrate Korean materials into existing East Asia courses. I have included a short bibliography that may provide a starting point for such planning.

THE PLACE OF KOREA IN EAST ASIAN STUDIES

One of the most prominent themes in any East Asian Studies course is the influence of China on Japan’s early development. In fact, there has been significant cross-fertilization throughout East Asian history. Although many of us note in our courses that Chinese cultural influence worked its way through Korea, there is a danger of implying that Korea was merely a conduit for Chinese (or Japanese) ideas. What must not be neglected is the importance of Korean innovation in this process, which is particularly significant in art and philosophy. For example, Korean innovations on Chan Buddhism (Sŏn in Korea)—introduced as early as the mid-seventh century C.E.—were profound, and went on to influence Japanese Zen thought and practice.

Many Korean writers spoke of their relation to China as that of a “junior” state, and their texts speak of Chinese rulers and thinkers as part of their own tradition. Many of my students noted with surprise that our sources—especially those written before the mid-nineteenth century—quoted heavily from the Chinese classics, to the point that some students with less background in East Asian Studies were unclear about the authors and origin of the passages.⁵ Perhaps the most important point for students to grasp is that the Chinese tradition, when used by Korean thinkers in their own writing, was their own. There is perhaps no greater lesson in an integrated East Asian Studies curriculum than for students to realize the powerful results of this kind of borrowing. Through careful reading of sources, students can see examples of Korean (and, in a well-rounded course, Japanese) writers making use of a common literary and philosophical tradition that had its origins in China, but developed additional layers of richness when merged with other traditions.

COMPARISONS

The addition of Korea to East Asian courses also brings with it the possibility of comparative depth. There are a number of institutional, social, and cultural features of East Asian history that, when compared between China, Japan, and Korea, give students a deeper understanding of the manner in which borrowed elements “fit” into each civilization. The examination system captured the imaginations of both Korean and Japanese political architects, but the fit in the two societies was quite different. A comparative look at the aristocracies can also be instructive. In Korea, the *yangban* aristocracy (which controlled offices and land) was separated from the rest of society by far more rigid class lines than we find with the relative social fluidity of China.

Korea also contrasts markedly with China in economic development. The disdain expressed for commerce and merchants, often with reference to the idealized four occupations (scholar, farmer, artisan, and lastly, merchant), was far more intense during Chŏson times than was found in China during the Ming (1368–1644) or Qing (1644–1911). Factionalism, too, was far more pronounced during this time period than even during the height of such periods in Chinese history—notably the northern Song (960–1127). In fact, factional politics dominated court life in Korea during its later period in a way that deeply influenced political culture well into the nineteenth century.

Like the early Qing and Tokugawa (1603–1868) periods, later Chŏson represented a profound flowering of traditional culture—with a richness of art, philosophy, and historical writings, as well as vernacular fiction and traditional crafts, that represent a high point in the minds of many later writers. Nineteenth-century critics also pointed to the same period for the roots of East Asia’s weakness in facing the West. In fact, a study of the encounters between the West and Korea gives students a deeper perspective on both aspects of this period of Korean history. The prominent scholar Yi Hang-no (1792–1868), for example, complained that Catholicism could not possibly replace the Confucian traditions that had become so much a part of Korean civilization, concluding that the Europeans, although their talent for technology was impressive, should not think that those skills would win Koreans over to their way of thinking:



Maitreya. Gilt bronze
Old Silla or Paekche period,
6th–7th century c.e.
National Museum of Korea



A picture of an orchid and the writing of Kim Chong-hui (1786–1856)

Europeans do have a remarkable talent for technology. They easily surpass the Chinese in that area. But that achievement makes them arrogant, and they think that they can convert the whole world to their way of thinking. They need to think again!⁶

It is with the confidence of a member of a great civilization that Yi Hang-no responded to the West in the early nineteenth century. It was with a very different tone that Koreans struggled with Japan, China, and the West in the century that followed, ending with the fall of the Chōson period in 1910. When the Korean perspective is added to our more typical studies of Chinese and Japanese encounters with the West, students develop a rich picture of this clash of cultures, and have the tools for comparative analyses within three distinct East Asian societies.

INNOVATIONS

Korean innovations in thought and technology also provide interesting perspectives for students of East Asian civilization. Korean enthusiasm for Neo-Confucian thought was profound, and easily the most famous and original controversy was the “Four-Seven” debate on the relative natures of *i* and *ki*

(*li* and *qi* in Chinese) that raged through much of the sixteenth century. As noted earlier, Korean Sōn Buddhism marked an important transition between Chinese and Japanese versions; it developed in outlying areas as the religion of the Silla gentry, but came into its own in Koryō (918–1392) times. Other fifteenth- and sixteenth-century innovations include the development of a Korean script, now known as *han’gŭl*, as well as the invention of a sophisticated movable metallic type (a significant advance over woodblock printing from China), refined timepieces, and even highly accurate rain gauges.⁷

NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

How do we resolve an “independent history” of Korea with the reality of powerful borrowing from China? Although Chōson Korea was a model Confucian state, it was in no danger of being absorbed—food, clothes, social structure, economic development, and a wide array of institutional patterns separated Korea from its sister on the continent. It was, to be sure, a nation characterized by its relationship to China, but that is not to say that it was merely its offshoot.

A number of aspects of Chōson history and society gave rise to a slowly-growing sense of national identity, many of which were drawn upon by writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they tried to create a distinct sense of Korean nationhood. Although it was slow to take root, an important change took place with the debate that followed the development of an indigenous Korean script in the fifteenth century. King Sejong’s preface to the *Hunmin chōngŭm* (Correct Sounds to Instruct the People) makes the point that even though Korea was deeply influenced by Chinese civilization, there remained distinct differences, noting that although the Chinese influence on Korea was important, the peninsula needed a script to reflect its own distinct culture—“With these twenty-eight letters, infinite turns and changes may be explained; they are simple and yet contain all the essence; they are refined and yet easily communicable.”⁸

Opposition to the alphabet, however, is instructive in the way that it portrays the relationship between the two countries:

Ever since the founding of the [Chōson] dynasty, our court has pursued the possibility of respecting the

senior state with utmost sincerity and has consistently tried to follow the Chinese system of government. . . . This Korean script is nothing more than a novelty. It is harmful to learning and useless to government. No matter how one looks at it, one cannot find any good in it.⁹

Although widespread use of the script would not take root until the twentieth century, students can use the references made to China and Japan in these sources to better understand Korea's perception of itself in relation to its East Asian neighbors.

The school of "Practical Learning" (*sirhak*) that developed in late Chōson is an excellent example of this growing theme. Responding to the aftermath of the Japanese and Manchu invasions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *sirhak* scholars sought to remedy social ills with concrete solutions. Although they wrote in classical Chinese and were imbued with the Neo-Confucian teachings of their early education, they vehemently criticized abuses that had formed over the centuries—most pointedly directing their criticisms at the *yangban* aristocracy and arguing for land and currency reforms, as well as pointing out abuses found in the examination system:

Why do we use civil service examinations to identify potential civil servants anyway? These days those examinations test candidates on their ability to write according to the currently accepted essay format. . . . People study the essay format from childhood and finally pass the examination when they are old and gray. Then in just one day they promptly forget all they have learned. By then they are way past the prime of their life, and they are no use to the state. . . . The examination system thus selects men who are useless, and it does so on the basis of worthless writing.¹⁰

With the Practical Learning scholars, there came a growing awareness of Korea as a separate entity from China. This resulted in a burst of writing about Korea, geographical studies, and increasingly, work in the vernacular that would provide an intellectual model for later reformers, who sought to advance a distinctly Korean national identity in the face of outside influences during the last 150 years. Here again, there is a wide

array of possible comparisons with reformist thinkers in Japan and China during this same tumultuous period in East Asian history—comparisons which can lead students to a deeper and more comparative understanding of the roots of contemporary East Asian history and culture.

The lesson for students and teachers who wish to make Korea (or other neglected academic areas) part of the curriculum lies in seeing reasons for integration of themes, rather than in searching for specialists who will "revive" one area at the expense of another. Korea is a wonderfully uncultivated area for future coursework and research, and is capable of being integrated into a broad East Asian Studies program. ■

BIBLIOGRAPHY

TEXTBOOKS

Cummings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun*. New York: Norton, 1997.

A very thorough and readable modern history of Korea from the nineteenth century onward by one of the United States's leading Korea specialists. Later chapters include a great deal of information on both North and South Korea, giving a balanced account of the divided peninsula in recent times.

Eckert, Carter and others, *Korea, Old and New: A History*. Seoul: Published for the Korea Institute, Harvard University, by Ilchokak Publishers, 1990.

A solid and sophisticated history that is also the most recent of those surveys giving relatively even treatment to Korea's premodern and modern history.

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Lee, Ki-baik. *A New History of Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

A thorough text with a fine bibliography that will be useful to those wishing to incorporate Korea into their curricula. This text works particularly well with Peter Lee's *Sourcebook*, because of its attention to traditional source materials and Korea's premodern history.

ANTHOLOGIES

Lee, Peter. *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, 2 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 1996.

Covering Korean civilization from earliest times to the mid-twentieth century, these materials provide perhaps the best source-based introduction to Korea that can be found for teachers aiming to add Korean content to their courses. See also the newly published paperback condensations of the above works, *Sources of Korean Tradition*, 2 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 1997, which make fine additions to existing East Asian Studies courses. Another useful book will be the forthcoming *Sources of East Asian Tradition* from Columbia University Press, which will integrate Chinese, Japanese, and Korean materials in one sourcebook.

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Pihl, Marshall. *Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993.

A collection of contemporary Korean writing from recent years that gives students a timely perspective on current issues.

———. *Listening to Korea: A Korean Anthology*. New York: Praeger, 1973.

Essays and stories by writers dealing with Korean issues in the mid-twentieth century, and an important source for modern Korean literary themes.

NOTES

1. An earlier draft of this paper was given to the Asian Students Association at Bowdoin College in April, 1997. I would also like to thank the forty students who (in two sections) took History 398, Korean Civilization, at Colby College in the spring of 1997. Their critical comments on the materials we studied and ideas for future book orders and course offerings have been absolutely invaluable. Particular credit goes to three students—Hyun Jung, Rosa Chang, and Yunhee Hong—who inspired me through their independent studies in previous years to begin my own research on Korea.
2. John King Fairbank, *Chinabound: A Fifty Year Memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); Edwin Reischauer, *My Life Between Japan and America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986). The memoirs of these two scholars give a clear picture of the creation of an entire field of study, with influence beyond academia and into government and even the private sector.
3. William DeBary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Ryusaku Tsunoda, *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958); Peter Lee, *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 1996).
4. See note above.
5. Such materials can be used with great results with students who have completed a segment on early China, and are exploring cultural borrowing in Japan. The contrast Korea provides is illuminating, especially when students see that such borrowing in Korea was sustained for many centuries. Dozens of good examples abound in Lee's *Sourcebook*.
6. Lee, *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization II*, 158–59.
7. See Lee, *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization I*, 536–45.
8. *Ibid.* 519–20.
9. *Ibid.* Italics mine.
10. Lee, *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization II*, 28.