Introduction to the Special Issue on Korea

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Introduction to the Special Issue on Korea

Daniel J. Paracka

Korea, situated between the powerful neighbors of China and Japan, is too often overlooked and is poorly understood by the majority of Americans. This is true despite the fact that the United States fought a major war in Korea and for more than half a century has had a continuous military presence there. Today, there are over 38,000 U.S. troops stationed in Korea. It can also be said that the Cold War started in Korea and continues to this day. The connections between Korea and the United States are many and significant. For example, there are more than 1 million Korean-American citizens living in the United States today and Korean company brands have become household names throughout the United States. Recognizing the importance of Korea, Kennesaw State University (KSU) designated the 2009-2010 academic year as the Year of Korea.

The Year of Korea lecture series advances the University’s globally-focused curriculum, expands participants’ cultural knowledge and intercultural skills, prepares students to enter the global society as responsible citizens, and results in new courses, new education abroad programs, and new global partners. It “brings the country” to the campus. Students, faculty, staff, and community members learn about, share their knowledge of, and conduct research related to the country of study. They showcase their native culture, meet and interact across cultures, and reconnect with cultures with which they are familiar. The programs and events are widely publicized. This year, we are particularly grateful to the Korea Daily, Atlanta Chosun Ilbo, and Global Atlanta newspapers for their extensive coverage.

An important goal of the Year of Korea was to establish partnerships that would allow our faculty and students to continue to benefit beyond the year. During the Year of Korea, KSU signed exchange agreements with Hanyang University and Soongsil University. Subsequently in the fall of 2010, we hosted two Hanyang University students in our Communication Department and we also hosted a study abroad program organized by education professor Jye-hyon Kim from Seoul Women’s University. In the spring of 2011, the Visual Arts Department will host Professor Boo Yun Lee to organize a ceramics exhibit and conduct workshops for KSU faculty and students. In addition, two KSU faculty returned to Korea following the Year of Korea program. These include Dr. Ginny
Zhan who delivered guest lectures at Hanyang University on the topics of “Maintaining Mental Health among College Students” and “Asian American Parenting Styles” and Professor Jeanette Wachtman who delivered three lectures and attended an International Arts Conference. Wachtman’s lectures included a presentation for students at the undergraduate level on “Art Education in an American Elementary and High School,” for graduate students on “A Holistic Strategy for Teaching Multicultural Units,” and for Art Therapy graduate students on “Creative Connecting through Symbols.” She also taught a class of six graders from low-income families in Korea on Picasso and Cubism.

The Year of Korea helps our campus community develop a greater appreciation for and understanding of Korea’s rich history and importance in the modern world. During the fall semester, most of the lectures addressed historical topics, introducing our audiences to some of the deeply ingrained cultural values and norms of Korean society including Confucian and Buddhist influences. In the spring semester, the series addressed more contemporary issues such as Korea’s role as a place of innovation developing cutting edge technologies, the Korean Wave pop culture that is famous throughout Asia and beyond, the role of Korean Americans in building transnational bridges between the United States and Korea, the likelihood of reunification of the Korean peninsula and the current state of affairs in North Korea, and many other topics. The ability to fully appreciate and understand another culture is greatly aided when such understanding is based upon a very interdisciplinary perspective that takes into account a broad diversity of perspectives representing the many different sectors and segments of society. The year of Korea lecture series attempts to do just this.

The Lecture Series

Many talks in the lecture series and at our conference themed “Korea in Global Context” focused on the period following Korea’s partition. Indeed, the issue of partition continues to weigh very heavily on the consciousness of all Koreans and was frequently brought up in discussions with colleagues in Korea when our faculty seminar group visited South Korea in March of 2010. In 1945, an ethnically and culturally homogenous nation was suddenly divided by an arbitrary boundary line and then subjected to two radically different and adversarial political economies for successive decades on end (Cumings, 2005). At the outset of the competition between the North and South Korean economies, from that of a centrally-planned economy to that of a market-
oriented economy, the outcomes were far from preordained. By a number of indicators, Kim Il Sung’s North Korea outperformed South Korea, not only in the years immediately following partition, but perhaps also into the 1970s (Eberstadt, 2010). However, by the 1990s, the North Korean famine had killed 600,000 to 1 million people, roughly 3 to 5% of the population. This led many of the North’s citizens to expand their participation in the informal economy which in turn led to severe government crackdowns on what are deemed economic crimes. Under these changing circumstances, there is also evidence of increasing inequality and corruption. Despite increasing public dissatisfaction with the North Korean government, tight government controls prevent effective communication or collective action among dissenters. Private defiance of the government primarily takes more passive “everyday forms of resistance,” such as listening to foreign media (Haggard & Noland, 2007).

One of the talks in the lecture series by KSU professor Guichun Zong dealt with how the Korean War is presented in American and Chinese history textbooks. Her comparative analysis of content looked at four areas: the causes of the War, American involvement in the War, Chinese involvement in the War, and the consequences of the War. As previous studies have demonstrated, she found that the history textbooks inevitably selected and reflected certain ideologies and perspectives dominant in each country while omitting others. Overall, she found that coverage in most American textbooks was much more brief and limited in coverage and that the Chinese coverage tended to emphasize more the human toll of the war.

Jeong Trenka, in her talk at KSU, emphasized that since the end of the Korean War, South Korea has sent away more of its citizens to be adopted than any other country in the world. She noted that if we count not just the 200,000 children who have been sent to foreign countries, but also their parents, grandparents, and siblings, we can roughly estimate that 1 million South Koreans are directly affected by the international adoption program. Yet these people are rarely acknowledged in Korean society, as they have been rendered socially dead. Meanwhile, the Korean government has yet to fully address the factors that have caused this program to flourish even in a time of economic prosperity, 57 years after the end of the Korean War (Trenka, 2009). According to Nadia Kim, America’s post-World War II expansion into Asia introduced racial inequalities and ideologies that shaped future immigrants’ understandings of both their own group and of the white-over-black U.S. order. Not only do Korean immigrants
engage in American “race” hierarchies within the borders of the United States but these same negative stereotypes are also experienced in Korea. Looking at racialization from a global and transnational perspective, Kim’s analysis reveals that U.S. racial ideologies, attitudes, and identities have shaped South Koreans’ navigation of domestic racial hierarchies as Korean Americans and beyond (Kim, 2008).

Sharing yet another very interesting aspect of South Korea’s dynamic cultural change, Seungkyung Kim discussed the relationship between the women’s movement and the government over the two women-friendly administrations in South Korea (1997-2007). This was a period marked by the flourishing of civil society activism and participatory democracy. As the Korean government transformed from a military dictatorship to a participatory democracy, the women’s movement became increasingly involved in policy making and formulating legal changes. By the end of 2007, the Korean government had established or rewritten numerous far-reaching laws in order to rectify gender inequality. However, many feminist activists and scholars are asking whether the very success of Korean gender policy resulted in the institutionalization and demobilization of the women’s movement.

Co-coordinator of the Year of Korea series and KSU Associate Professor of Communication Dr. Heeman Kim talked about how in recent years the Korean entertainment industry has eagerly and successfully promoted its popular cultural products known as the Korean Wave. As of 2009, the Korean entertainment industry has emerged as an innovator in popular culture in Southeast Asia, including Japan, China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand. Its TV shows, Internet games, hairstyles, cosmetics, and films have set fashionable trends in those countries. In general, as marketers and media producers are instrumental in creating and manipulating culture, they frequently construct hybrid cultural imagery that combines influences such as Japanese karaoke and anime, Chinese kung-fu, Korean kimchi, and U.S. Disney. These cultural modes are obviously created by members of a culture and aided by the entertainment industry. The Korean entertainment industry has purposely produced imagery blending Korean cultural values with indigenous cultural artifacts to overcome cultural barriers in promoting their products on an international scale.

As part of the Year of Korea, KSU was fortunate to host two major concerts by the Korean Association of Zither Musicians (KAZM) and the Korean Traditional Music Orchestra of Hanyang University. Both groups conducted
residencies interacting with our arts and performance students and faculty providing detailed explanations introducing their unique genres and instruments to the KSU community. KAZM included 22 professional musicians and teachers from major universities in South Korea, and the 29-member Hanyang orchestra displayed a wide variety of Korean traditions, ranging from traditional wind ensembles to sword dancing for KSU audiences. Heesun Kim, one of the leading musicians of the KAZM group talked about the resurgence of traditional music and its influence on the contemporary musical soundscape of South Korea. With the recent awareness of Korean culture in the so-called global village, the Korean government recently announced six categories to represent the “Korean national brand” dubbed “Han Style,” which is to be the cultural symbol of Korea. These six categories are han’gül (Korean alphabet), hansik (Korean food), hanbok (traditional Korean clothing), hanok (traditional Korean houses), hanji (traditional Korean paper), as well as Han’guk ümak (Korean music). Designated by the nation and agreed upon by the Korean people, traditional music is now considered a symbol of cultural identity for Korea.

Similarly, Keith Howard, in his talk, emphasized how Korea has worked to preserve its cultural heritage by appointing different styles of performance arts and crafts as “Intangible Cultural Properties” alongside the tangible heritage – historic buildings, national parks, and even the Chindo dog (a kind of spitz with a curly tail). As he noted, today, while Korea oozes modernity, with urban cities full of high-rise apartments and a population of web-savvy netizens, “Intangible Cultural Properties” provide icons for national identity, from ancient court rituals and shamanism to mask dances and folksongs. These same icons are promoted throughout the world, in concert tours and exhibitions, in advertising campaigns and at international sport festivals, and three Korean performance genres have been nominated as UNESCO “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.”

Another important element of South Korea’s modern re-examination of its identity is achieved through its creative and exciting film industry. Jinsoo An, from Hongik University, discussed how recent Korean films render the nation’s thorny history of colonialism. He interrogated problems of representation concerning colonialism in South Korean cinema, especially how the repressed history of colonialism comes to surface through stories of specter and apparition in recent works such as the horror film Epitaph. This film rehearses the historical
issues through topics such as inter-ethnic romance, historical amnesia, and reconciliation.

The Special Issue

In this edition of the Journal of Global Initiatives, like the lecture series and conference, the subjects presented represent a continuous process of cultural exchange both within and between historical and contemporary times.

In “Ink Painting of Orchids among the Literati in the Qing and Chosŏn Dynasties,” Herin Jung uses the genre of orchid ink painting as it traveled between China and Korea to reveal different aspects of Confucian aesthetics. Specifically, it examines the influence of Qing Dynasty artist Zheng Xie 鄭燮 on the works of Kim Chŏng-hŭi 金正喜 (1786-1856) and Cho Hŭi-ryong 趙熙龍 (1789-1866) of the late Chosŏn 朝鮮 Dynasty. Kim was most interested in Zheng Xie’s works seeing in them traditional literati morals, including an adherence to zhongyong 中庸, the Doctrine of the Mean, while Cho’s interpretation of Zheng Xie’s works emphasized artistic freedoms and worldly values. Also interested in the historical influence of Confucian values, Michael Pettid in “Working Women in Chosŏn Korea: An Exploration of Women’s Economic Activities in a Patriarchal Society” assesses the economic contributions of women in Chosŏn Korea towards supporting the well-being of their households. The author argues that economic contributions, not necessarily adherence to Confucian standards, were of the highest value to society in this period.

Transitioning from a period marked by significant Chinese influence to a period of Japanese influence, Sangjin Park in “National Language Beyond Nation-States: Vernacular Literary Language in Yi Kwang-su” also takes into account the influence of Western notions of the modern nation-state. He is particularly concerned with the influence of Chinese and Japanese language and literature on Korean nationalist literature. It focuses on the interpretive language of Yi Kwang-su (1892-1950) as he tried to negotiate, resist, and make sense of Korea’s changing national, regional, and international literary landscape. The author asserts that Yi Kwang-su’s bilingual way of writing both deconstructs and reconstructs oppressive forms of universality. Presenting a very different perspective on the effects of Japan’s colonial dominance over Korea in the early 20th century, Ailee Cho’s “The Subaltern Can Speak: Voices of Poets in Divided Korea” reveals voices of the oppressed in South Korea. She looks at Korea following its liberation from Japanese colonial rule through poems that address
the division of Korea in the graphic imagery of a severed human body. The poems express the intense pain of living with an incomplete body as the poets simultaneously find little comfort in trying to return to a time before the national division. Covering the same historical period but examining a different context, Thomas P. Dolan and Kyle Christensen in “Korean Ethnic Identity in the United States 1900-1945” trace the early migration of Koreans to the United States. The paper talks about who came and why. The first Koreans coming to America differed from Chinese and Japanese immigrant workers primarily in that they were Christians, and many of the early Koreans also came as families instead of single men. As their numbers increased, the Koreans set up communities in Hawaii and eventually California, which replicated many aspects of Korean society. When Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910 emigration slowed, and Korean nationalist organizations were established in Hawaii and the United States mainland.

Moving this issue into more modern contexts, Murat Doral and Michael Patrono in “Chaebol and Korea’s Industrial Finance” describe Korea’s modern political economy as based upon government led and export oriented family business conglomerates known as chaebols. It notes that the chaebol system was an important element of South Korea’s early industrial growth, but ultimately had to be reformed. Such transformation is evident in all aspects of Korean society today. Hyangsoon Yi in “Kazoku Cinema, Chunhyang, and Postmodern Korean Cinema” describes how Im Kwon-Taek and Park Chulsoo, two of Korea’s most revered filmmakers, have tried to help Korean society deal with rapid cultural change while remembering and honoring the past. Jiyoung Daniel in “Language Contact between Korean and English in Online Communication” predicts that the online interaction between English and Korean may eventually contribute to changes within the Korean language. Bruce Fulton in “The Munhak Tongne Phenomenon: The Publication of Literary Fiction in South Korea Today” outlines some of the profound ways in which the literary culture of South Korea has changed since the mid-1990s, particularly with respect to the publication of literary fiction. It asserts that modern literature in Korea has been a decidedly serious undertaking, guided by a conservative, overwhelmingly male literary establishment of scholars and literary critics. The new millennium has brought a watershed change to this literary culture, due in large part to the ascendance of the Munhak tongne (Literary Neighborhood) publishing house in Seoul Munhak tongne, where men and women authors are equally represented, and liberally
apply humor and imagination in their works. Fulton sees a vibrant future for Korean fiction as represented by authors such as Kim Yong-ha, Un Hui-gyong, and P'yön Hye-yöng, and whose works are provided in translation at the end of this volume.

In general, this issue follows the APA style, but in certain cases, such as pre-modern East Asian sources, the mainstream conventions in East Asian Studies were adopted. As for the romanization of Korean, we have generally used the modified McCune-Reischauer system, except in a few instances pertaining to people's names where their personal style is preferred.

References