

**Teaching About Korea:  
Strategies, Struggles, and Success Stories  
Panel Presentation**

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***KOREAN STUDIES  
FOR NON-HERITAGE LEARNERS:  
PREACHING TO THE UNCONVERTED***

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While at many institutions the impetus for introducing Korean studies into the curriculum comes from heritage learners and is met by a non-Korea specialist who retools a bit, to add some sections or units to East Asian studies courses, my own experiences teaching about Korea are quite different. As a Koreanist working at a small liberal arts college with no Asian-American students, I could provide the “supply”—but there is no “demand”. When I have the opportunity to offer a course on Korean society to Korean-American students, I organize my syllabus and materials to play off of (and often, against) the knowledge students bring to the class. With a self-selective interest in the topic, these students are already motivated to learn and have clear ideas about what they hope to gain from the course. In the case of non-heritage learners, however, my approach is quite different.

At Wittenberg University I teach about Korea in two ways. In comparative East Asian Studies courses, the sections on Korea are combined with material about China and Japan. For example, in “Women and the Family in East Asia,” perhaps twenty-five percent of the course content focuses on Korea. In addition, every two years I offer a Korea-specific course, “Introduction to Contemporary Korean Society,” for which there is no natural context or clientele. It is this class that I will discuss in this paper.

A starting point for me is the question: who are the students who enroll in this course, and why have they chosen this particular elective? While a few may be East Asian studies majors with an interest in the region, most Wittenberg students who sign up for Sociology 243 do so because it fulfills the university’s “Non-Western Cultures” requirement; that is, “students should gain an understanding of the diversity of non-Western cultures through a study of the history, institutions, or traditions of one or more of these cultures.” The fact that the “culture” is Korea is more or less incidental for most of my students, and so my own primary goal for the course becomes the larger institutional (and anthropological) one, of teaching about cultural difference. I do not make

my students pretend they are interested in Korea, per se. We begin with the explicit assumption that they are not, and thus an important subtext of the course is convincing them they should be knowledgeable about East Asia. There are several ways I try to do this throughout the semester.

**Beginning With The Basics: Why Learn About Korea?**

I spend time at the start discussing this question, eliciting from the students what (little) they already may know about the Korean peninsula and suggesting connections with their own concerns. Reasons for studying about Korea include:

- \* the global economy (students probably own products made by Korean conglomerates);
- \* the growing importance of Korean-Americans as a minority in the U.S. (Koreans are a good example for diaspora/transnational studies);
- \* last outpost of the Cold War (many students do not realize that 37,000 U.S. troops are stationed there);
- \* feminist issues (Korea provides material for discussions of the global assembly line, the international sex trade, patriarchy)

Usually I can find something that piques the interest of every student. Starting from “ground zero” also makes the course less intimidating for students who are anxious because at the outset they know nothing about Korea.

**Looking Good in the Bookstore: Would You Want to Read This Text?**

Although normally I would choose books for a course based on issues of comprehensive coverage of the material, in this case I select texts I feel will appeal to students, particularly in terms of the ease with which students can relate them to their own experiences. For example:

\**The Comfort Women*, by George Hicks (Sydney: Allen and Unwin Pty, Ltd, 1995). While there are many good scholarly texts dealing with modern Korea, I have students read this when we talk about the Japanese Colonial period. Most of them have no idea Japan was even a colonial power, and few are aware of the comfort women issue. They are shocked and horrified by this book, and their emotional response provokes good discussions about human rights, colonialism, and patriarchy. In the process, of course, students also do learn a few things about Korean history. We consider whether this is basically a human rights issue

(in which case it is linked to other colonial period abuses, such as forced labor) or whether it is about women's rights (and therefore is tied to current concerns over the international sex trade and prostitution around U.S. Army bases in Korea). As the comfort women case is not yet resolved, it appears occasionally in the media and students can talk about what should be done. I also find I can successfully carry issues raised in this section throughout the rest of the course. For instance, we later read Katherine Moon's work on camptowns and view the video "Camp Arirang.

\**Getting Married in Korea*, by Laurel Kendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Although this book gives students more information on Korean weddings than they usually wish to know, they are happy to talk about American dating practices, what they look for in a spouse, the social construction of marriage, and the expense of weddings in the U.S. Most sections of this book can be introduced through comparisons with American culture, and lead naturally to discussions on gender and modernity, as well as other topics such as reciprocity, social class, and consumption. If need be, most aspects of Korean social organization could be considered through the lens of this text.

\**Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*, by Nancy Abelmann and John Lie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). Ethnographies of Korean-American communities are available, but this book provides most of the same information, and more—it situates the Korean diasporic experience in the context of an event (the L.A. riots of 1992) that students vividly remember. Students are used to viewing issues of race, class, culture and community in the U.S. in black and white terms, so this book offers new perspectives on familiar problems, while at the same time teaching students about the construction of Korean cultural identity outside the R.O.K.

### **Making Connections: Materials That Link Korea to Other Places and Larger Issues**

I work hard to expand the topics we cover as far as possible beyond the Korean peninsula, introducing materials in class that allow students to make global connections. For example, when we read about the contributions of Korean female factory workers to Korea's "economic miracle," I bring in newspaper articles about Nike factories in Vietnam. Not only do we talk about runaway shops, off-shore sourcing, and free export zones, but students are able to link the Korean situation to the recent movement on college campuses concerning college logo apparel and overseas sweatshops, enhancing their understanding of the complexity of dependent development and the global economy. When we discuss Christianity in Korea and the role of the church in the democracy movement, I draw comparisons between Korean *minjung* theology and "liberation theology" in other parts of the world. Many other topics, such as social class and family organization, can naturally begin with a consideration of what they know (or think they know) about their own culture.

### **Headline News: Making Sense of Korea in the Media**

I expect students to use their growing understanding of Korean culture and society to interpret current events and to deconstruct media accounts about Korea and/or Koreans. Part of the way I test students in the course is to ask them to write essays explaining news articles and editorials. Many of these I simply find, clip, and keep from newspapers, but I also use the Internet to dig up good materials. Both the *Korea Times* and the *Korea Herald*, English-language newspapers published in Seoul, are available on-line, and social commentary and editorials from these sources (on topics such as rising wedding costs, funeral and burial reform, and overseas adoption of orphans) make students apply what they know, to render cultural patterns and behavior intelligible. I have asked students to interpret accounts of Clinton's visit to Seoul, the North Korean famine, and the opening of a Korean cultural center in Los Angeles. Students are surprised (as am I, sometimes) at how often Korea appears in the news.

### **The "Unconverted" and Cross-Cultural Understanding: A Final Thought**

It is always a treat for me as a Korea specialist to teach students who have an interest in learning about Korean culture and society for its own sake. Yet in the long run, it may do more for Korean studies, and for the larger goal of international understanding, to preach to the unconverted. As college professors we are, after all, preparing our students (whether they like it or not) for life in a transnational world. And the joy of anthropology is that it is self-reflexive, that is, as we learn about the "other," we also learn about ourselves.

The lessons my students take away from Sociology 243 may be primarily about the nature and diversity of culture; but who knows, they may accidentally remember a few things about Korea as well.

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