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**The Study of Korea in the United States\***

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As a teen-ager before World War II, I attended an engineering college, and spent most of my time on mathematics and chemistry. However, because my mother had written education manuals on Asian religions, I signed up for an elective course on Asian history. The textbook contained, as I recall, about three or four pages on Korea. This was the first time I had ever heard of the place, and I paid little attention to it.

Toward the end of World War II, having been called into military service from my work as a motor trucking operations analyst, I volunteered for military government duty to get away from assignment to an arsenal in the middle of the United States — hardly the place for a young man to be in the middle of a war. I was trained for the occupation of Japan, but diverted, along with a boatload of others like me, to the occupation of Korea.

None of us knew anything about Korea, the place we were supposed to govern. A few of us searched the ship’s library and found a brief entry on Korea in Terry’s Japanese Empire, 1905 edition. We copied the map and text onto a mimeograph stencil and ran it off. That was our briefing material when we landed at Songdo in October.

I spent a year in Korea, discovering with each passing day the depths of my own ignorance. A good part of my life since then has been spent trying to learn what I should have known when I arrived. My experience, of course, is not unique. A number of the Koreanists in the United States today began their studies for similar reasons. More recently, the Peace Corps experience has stimulated a new group of people interested in Korea, of whom Bruce Cumings is one prominent example. I’m sure that many people have had a similar experience themselves, or know people who have.

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The problem is that most of the 250 million people of the United States have no such stimulus to learn about Korea, and know nothing about the country. It is strange that, important as Korea is to the United States, American ignorance of it is so massive. Moreover, as public opinion surveys have demonstrated, the general public’s attitude toward Korea has been generally adverse, although this view is gradually changing.

Such being the case, given the large influence of public opinion on American policy through Congress and otherwise, the conduct of effective diplomacy with Korea is adversely affected. People who don’t know about Korea’s history, situation, and problems are naturally impatient with any Korean action that impinges on their own interests, such as import restrictions or competition for market share, and are likely to make demands on American negotiators which, in the light of full information, could be seen as impractical or unreasonable.

It is of very great importance, therefore, that the level of American public awareness about Korea be improved. The two countries are, and will remain, necessary to each other for both security and economic reasons. To this pragmatic argument must be added the intellectual pleasures of studying Koreas fascinating history and culture.

How does one explain this ignorance? In the first place, Korea is not the only country outside American public consciousness. There are over 160 countries in the world, and most Americans never heard of most of them. Some of my wife’s elementary school pupils had never heard of neighboring Canada or Mexico until she told them. Because the United States is so large and self-contained, so protected by oceans and so well-endowed, its people tend to dwell in an American world of their own—far more than the changing situation warrants. As one small evidence of this, it has been pointed out that only two countries in the world today do not use the metric system of mea-surement—Burma and the United States. The average American simply sees no need to learn about foreigners, rather leaving the foreigners to learn about him or her.

The first problem, then, is not to convince Americans to learn about Korea, but to convince them to learn about any place other than the ancestral homelands in Europe and Africa. — In California, New York, and a few other states, a growing ethnic Asian population is changing this-perspective, but not yet in the country generally. — Unhappily, Federal budget cuts over recent years have drastically reduced support for language and area study programs, which were once strongly fostered under the Defense Education Act. A Presidential commission appointed by Jimmy Carter pointed to the problem [page 43] and recommended more support, but its report has been ignored.

The second reason for ignorance of Korea lies in its history. As long ago as 1845, an American congressman introduced a resolution calling on the government to open relations with both Japan and Korea, and efforts were made in the 1870s to do so. It was not until Japan successfully emulated Commodore Perry and forced the Kanghwa Treaty of 1876 that Korea was willing to open to the West. After the Treaty of Chemulpo gained American access to Korea in 1882, the early arrivals were dismayed at what they saw, and the United States officially lost interest. Even some American missionaries became persuaded that a Japanese protectorate would be beneficial to Korea. This view changed when the nature of the Japanese “trusteeship” became clear; but by then Japan had officially erased Korea from the world. Only the missionaries and their home parishes maintained some awareness of Korea, except for the trauma surrounding the independence movement of March 1, 1919. The missionaries and their supporters tended to view Koreans as poor souls in need of saving and sustenance, rather than as a nation to be restored Moreover, highly critical newspaper descriptions of Korea during the Russo-Japanese War (especially from George Kennan, the present states- man’s uncle) reinforced adverse American perceptions, and acceptance of Japanese domination.

Since Korea’s liberation in 1945, it has been mostly Korea’s crises — war, riots, coups d’etat, torture — that have reached the American public through the media. Most Americans who have been to Korea have been in military service, often seeing the country only over the rim of a foxhole or through the shantytowns at the gates of military posts. Although the famous M\*A\*S\*H television series was not really unkind to Korea, and was certainly excellent entertainment, it did portrary the country in terms of its war-torn and poverty-stricken state only five years after liberation — hardly an image calculated to stimulate respect for Korean culture. Yet this is almost the only case of sustained media attention to Korea.

The third reason for American ignorance is the dominance of China and Japan in the perception of East Asia. China has had a romantic attraction for the West for centuries — it fascinated Voltaire. Japan, strangely, had even more cultural impact after World War II than before. Many Americans, if they think about Korea at all, look on it as “just like China” or “just like Japan.” Koreans have expressed regret to me that they have no Edwin Reischauer or John Fairbank to dramatize their nation in the United States; actually the list of famous expositors of China and Japan to the West is a long and distinguished one. As yet, no one of similar stature has appeared to speak for [page 44] Korea. China and Japan have both expended large sums for sophisticated public relations campaigns in the United States and elsewhere, supporting educational and cultural institutions and programs. Korea has only recently started to do so, and in very modest dimensions.

What is needed is not, of course, to try to lift Korea to the same level of American consciousness as China or Japan; but Korea does deserve a place in American understanding that is more commensurate with its importance. If this is the proper objective, how is it to be achieved?

One approach is to let Korean economic success speak for itseif. Probably the appearance of Korean Hyundai automobiles on the streets of American towns — given the American love affair with the automobile — did much to stimulate awareness and respect for Korea. Yet Hyundai has never associated Korea with its product in advertising. Daewoo sells its competitive product in the United States under an established American trademark (Pontiac). Korean products in many retail lines are becoming generally accepted for quality at reasonable price. However, ownership of a Samsung or Lucky-Gold Star toaster is hardly a gateway to an understanding of Korean culture.

A second approach, which has been tried on a small scale, has been public relations programs funded by or for the Korean government, directly or indirectly. The biggest example, of course, was the 1988 Olympics. At the other end of the scale, Korea sponsors two excellent illustrated quarterly magazines, Korean Culture and Koreana, as well as scholarly publications such as Korea and World Affairs, the valuable monthly Korea Journal, and the weekly Korean News review, among others. Recently KBS filmed a counterpart to the British TV production, The Forgotten War. And so on. In addition, cultural exchanges, visitor programs, encouragement of tourism, and promotion of scholarly conferences on Korean affairs are all ways of encouraging attention to Korea. The Korean government supports most of this activity, but there is some private and foundation support, such as Chi Kap Chongs Korean War Allies Association.

No such programs, however, can ever have as much impact as the inclusion of material on Korea in school curricula at all levels from primary to col-lege. The study of Korea in the United States therefore is, or ought to be, concerned both with the training of experts on Korean affairs and also with the diffusion of the experts’ products as broadly as possible in the American edu-cational process.

Apart from the American missionaries’ long-time concern with Korea, and a modest number of books about Korea beginning in the mid-nineteenth [page 45] century, the modern study of Korea in the United States began, according to Mr. Hong Sah Myung of the Korea Research Foundation, at the Defense Language Institute of World War II fame. It was the Institute’s Korean language program, organized by Fred Lukeoff under the direction of Dr. Henry Lee Smith, that provided training for the first three American Foreign Service officers in 1947 and 1948, together with a course on Korean history taught by the late George McCune and his wife, Evelyn, at the University of California/Berkeley. Harvard University, with the support of the Carnegie Foundation, established a Korea Institute in 1952, headed first by Professor Suh Doo Soo, later by Edward Wagner. Professor Suh also began Korean studies at the University of Washington, soon joined by Dr. Lukeoff. Eventually three other centers of Korean studies emerged at the University of California/Berkeley (Dr. Robert Scalapino and others), Columbia University (Dr. Gari Ledyard), and the University of Hawaii (Dr. Suh Dae Sook). These and other institutions initially received Federal government support, as well as private individual and corporate contributions, but such support diminished in the post-Vietnam era. All have graduated Ph.D.’s in Korea studies. Until recently, however, few of these graduates were able to find careers in which they could use this specialty, either in academe or elsewhere, for lack of demand. Dr. David McCann, for example, was until the last couple of years associate director of development (i.e., fundraising) at Cornell University, since there was no support for his teaching of Korean literature despite his eminent qualifications.

Although U.S. and most state and local governments’ financial support for Korea studies has continued at a low level, and private and foundation assistance has been hard-won, attention to Korea studies has slowly increased and spread. Part of the reason is the interest generated by returning Peace Corps veterans and by the growing ethnic Korean community, now well over a million, in the United States. Another part is the recognition by some students of business career possibilities related to Korea. The Korea Research Foundation recently listed twenty-five American colleges and universities that include Korea in their curricula. The Association for Asian Studies listed fifty-three institutions with centers for Asian or East Asian studies in 1988; these might or might not give attention to Korea. Other than the five centers mentioned, most of the twenty-five institutions have either one or two Koreanist faculty members who offer courses on Korea as a part of a broader Asian curriculum, or instructors who offer material on Korea along with, or contained in, courses on other related subjects, e.g., Asian history, sociology, politics. These twenty-five, however, make up less than one percent of the [page 46] 3,300 U.S. institutions or higher learning; and the majority of students even at the twenty-five mentioned are probably oblivious to materials on Korea. Thus, the impact on the American public — even the opinion-forming—is very small except for the dedicated few who have developed interest in Korea for their own reasons.

It is true that some attention to Korea is given by individual faculty members at other colleges. Yet a survey by the Social Science Research Council in 1987 found that only eleven responding institutions offered courses specifically on Korea that year, with an enrollment of around three hundred eighty undergraduate and 80 graduate students, out of a total nationwide of 12.4 million students.

The general ignorance of Korea has, in turn, led to a lack of demand for material on Korea. Even if an individual faculty member were minded to offer courses on Korea, there has been little available published text or reference material to support them. Gregory Henderson’s classic Korea: the Politics of the Vortex; Harvard, 1967 was the first, and for a long time virtually the only, comprehensive modern English-language discussion of Korean history and culture. In recent years, however, a small but significant number of books, monographs, and journals have been published by some of the centers of Korea studies at the Universities of California, Hawaii, and Washington, and more recently Harvard and Columbia. The first real introductory college-level text on Korea was my own, published in 1988 with the support of the U.S. Department of Education.

Even worse, the average text on Asia or East Asia makes either no refer-ence or passing reference to Korea. The majority deal only with China and Japan. Therefore the average college survey course on Asian history or civilization will simply omit Korea or give it a few minutes in a three-credit course. Moreover, as a recent Korean Ministry of Education survey found, many textbooks presented highly distorted accounts of Korea when they presented anything—often portraying Korea as a pale echo of China or Japan.

At Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., an Asian Studies Program was established in 1979 in the world-famous School of Foreign Service, the only undergraduate foreign service school in the United States, and the second oldest in the world. From the beginning of the program its Director, Professor Matthew Gardner, recognized the importance of Korea. Courses on Korea began in 1983, but the primary goal was to spread understanding of Korea as broadly as possible throughout the student body. Since the majority of students would not elect a course on Korea, and such a course could not be a required subject, the most effective method was to include [page 47] material on Korea in other related courses.

Twenty such courses are now offered at Georgetown, with three specifi-cally on Korea, and the number is growing. The Koreanist on the faculty works with collegues and generally encourages attention to Korea throughout the campus in adaition to teaching his own specialty. The result has been con-siderably increased student interest and attention to Korea. This approach may serve as a model for other institutions. At present, there is no need for additional centers of Korea studies; the five existing centers have ample capacity for turning out trained specialists.

In the broader field of public education, note should be taken of the work of private organizations such as the Asia Society, with centers in New York, Washington, Dallas, and Los Angeles, which arranges cultural events, exhibitions, conferences, and press and public information publications on Korea among other countries. The Carnegie Center for Ethics in International Affairs in New York, the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace in Washington, D.C., the Foreign Policy Association in New York, the Washington Institute for Values in Public Policy in Washington, D.C., and other groups giving significant attention to Korea have public information as well as scholarly discussion as their objective. Note should also be taken of the North American Coalition for Human Rights in Korea, which voices a critical view of Korean afrairs in its Korea Update.

All these efforts, however, seem to be insufficient to the task of raising the American public consciousness about Korea to its proper level. In the absence of public demand for them, Korea studies are unlikely to grow unless determined efforts are made to stimulate them. The laws of the market operate in the intellectual as well as the economic realm. The business response to this situation, of course, is advertising. The academic world, however, is neither comfortable with advertising nor able to do it very well.

The answer probably must be more monetary support for Korea-oriented programs, and more effort to make such programs of very high quality and attractiveness. It would be appropriate for U.S. and local governments to provide such support, but under present circumstances this is unlikely; on the contrary, their support is likely to diminish. The most likely alternative sources are the Korean Government, the Korean community in the United States, and business firms with a stake in Korean-American relations. One can only hope that such support will be forthcoming, and that with the existing small pool of capable Koreanists, the next century will see Korea getting the American understanding it deserves.