Strategies for Learning About Korea: Making a Little Learning Go A Long Way
Linda Lewis, Chair
James Huffman, Stephen Smith, Jennifer Oldstone-Moore
Wittenberg University

Introduction

Linda Lewis, Chair
Wittenberg University

Two years ago when I was asked to organize a panel on teaching about Korea for the ASIANetwork conference, I had a difficult time finding participants. Korean studies is a small field, and I am one of only a handful of Korea specialists teaching at small liberal arts institutions. This time around, having exhausted the pool of ASIANetwork Koreanists, I decided to enlist the help of my colleagues at Wittenberg as panelists. The aim of these papers is to suggest ways in which non-Korea specialists can add content on Korea to the undergraduate Asian studies curriculum.

Wittenberg has a strong East Asian studies program (we offer almost 50 different courses) and a commitment to teaching about Japan, China, AND Korea. As the university’s sole Koreanist, I regularly teach one course exclusively about Korea (Introduction to Korean Society) and include Korean material equally in two other courses (Women and the Family in East Asia and East Asian Legal Systems) that are pan-East Asian in focus. In addition, I am the “Korean content police” at Wittenberg, trying to make sure that Korea is represented in our core courses and co-curricular events, and in as many disciplinary courses as possible, and acting as a resource on Korea for my colleagues.

When I teach about Korea, I begin by asking my students why they think it is important to learn about such a small and apparently obscure place. Most draw a blank, but with some prodding, the class eventually produces a rather long list of reasons: Korea is a good example of a Confucian state, the bridge between China and Japan, and the last outpost of the Cold War. South Korea is an economic “miracle,” while the North is part of the new “Axis of Evil”; together, the two Koreas form a fascinating social science laboratory, in which to compare socialism vs. capitalism, and communism vs. democracy. Americans fought a war in Korea and today 30,000 U.S. soldiers remain on the Korean peninsula. Koreans comprise one of our fastest growing immigrant communities. Examples from Korea can successfully be used to illustrate any number of topics of current scholarly interest: post-colonial studies, the “global assembly line” and exploitation of female labor (including the sex trades), civil society and the development of democracy, the Asian diaspora, and “McDonaldization” and the growth of the global marketplace, to name but a few.

If teaching about Korea is to expand, however, it will have to come about through the efforts of non-Korea specialists to add Korean content to their courses; realistically, most small liberal arts institutions are not going to hire full-time Korea specialists - at least not in the foreseeable future. As a Koreanist, I have mixed feelings about the necessity of this approach. Obviously, to enable and empower our colleagues to teach in our territory means that we ourselves lose our monopoly on how the story of Korea is told. My carpetbagging colleagues notice different things in the Korea material, find new implications, and draw comparisons I would not make. Their fresh insights can challenge the established orthodoxies of Korean studies scholarship and provide a critique of the field, in ways that are both invigorating and distressing at the same time.

Ultimately, however, I do believe that encouraging others to teach about Korea can prove rewarding for both faculty and students alike. I have learned things about Korea from my colleagues at Wittenberg. And, after all, “border crossing” is just new jargon for what those of us who stretch ourselves thin teaching at small undergraduate schools have always done: teach outside our narrow areas of disciplinary and regional expertise, in the process making new connections and thinking about the world in different ways.

Choosing and Using Texts on Korea:
Frustrations of a Non-Specialist
James L. Huffman
Wittenberg University

In the fall of 1974, I traveled to Korea with a group of Fulbright grantees and was taken aback by the number of scholars there who passionately urged American students of Japan to give Korea its due in our classes on East Asian history. From that time until 1990, when Linda Lewis, a Korean anthropologist, joined the Wittenberg faculty, I felt guilt but
added very little concrete material on Korea to my classes. Time, I always told myself, was too scarce. At Lewis's urging, however, I have worked hard across the last decade to give the Korean peninsula its due. My sense of inadequacy has not diminished much though, partly because I still am much more poorly informed about Korea than about China and Japan, partly because I have to struggle seriously to find good readings to supplement my lectures. It is this latter problem that I will address here.

The first thing to be said is that some of the frustrations in Korean book selection derive from the state of the field itself. Since Korean studies is not as extensively developed in the Western world as Japanese and Chinese studies, the number of works available is much smaller. A quick check through the OhioLink network of materials available in my state's academic libraries shows more than 5,000 on Chinese history, 4,258 on Japanese history, and 779 on Korea. At a more popular level, Yahoo! Books lists 287 works for sale on "Chinese history," 196 on "Japanese history," and a mere seventy-four on "Korean history," with only eighteen of the Korea works actually available for purchasers. Though publications on Korea have increased significantly in recent decades, numbers remain a problem.

So does quality. In the early years of my teaching, even surveys on Korea were in short supply for those of us who could not read Korean, as one had to rely on brief and uneven surveys such as William Henthorn's History of Korea and David Rees' Short History of Modern Korea or on a few idiosyncratic works of Korean historians like The History of Korea by Woo-keun Han, which tended to be thin in their treatment of the modern era and inconsistent in their assessments of what kinds of things should be included in the narrative. Important topics such as Yi dynasty factionalism and South Korea's democratic movement in the 1960s were slighted, or ignored completely, in many of these works. Fortunately, that situation has improved significantly in the last decade, with the appearance of detailed, well-written, sophisticated works in English by a number of noted scholars. Among the best of these are the two-volume Sources of Korean Tradition, published by Columbia University between 1997 and 2000, Peter Lee's two-volume anthology of Korean literature, and the rich, accessible Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History, published in 1997 by Bruce Cumings of the University of Chicago.

At the same time, Korea's treatment in the standard surveys of East Asian history—the works used most in undergraduate survey courses—remains problematic, ranging from texts that completely ignore it through those that give it short (even insulting) shrift, to the few who treat it seriously. The best of the surveys in its treatment of Korea continues to be the old Reischauer-Fairbank-Craig volumes, which see Korea as a shadowy reflection of the East Asian giants but nonetheless give it serious coverage. East Asia: The Great Tradition, for example, devotes nearly fifty pages to premodern Korea, while East Asia: The Modern Transformation gives it about twenty. At the other end are two of the most used surveys today: Rhoads Murphey's East Asia: A New History, which treats Korea both tersely and in the language of stereotypes, lumping it together with Vietnam, and Conrad Schirokauer's Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilizations, which (in keeping with its name) gives no coverage to premodern Korea and less than two pages to its recent past. It is clear that the survey writers on whom so many undergraduate teachers rely neither know much about Korea nor think it worthy of study in its own right.

The overall situation for teachers seeking basic materials on Korea is thus mixed. General histories are no longer as scarce or as idiosyncratic as they once were, even if they remain fewer in number than works on China and Japan. Primary source materials also are easier to find today. At the same time, faculty members desiring to have students read text-style narratives in East Asian survey classes continue to have a hard time, particularly if they want to assign a readable, accessible survey such as Schirokauer's. For that reason, they might be advised to save the factual materials for lectures, or for library reserve reading, and to assign students some of the supplemental novels and ethnographic works that are coming out in increasing numbers.

Before describing specific works that I have found useful, a word is needed about the general employment of such books in class. Historians are fond of noting that "context is everything," that unless the reader understands the social, political, and historical setting, a novel or ethnography can be relatively useless (or even misleading) as a tool for understanding a country. This axiom applies with particular force to some of the supplemental works on Korea, partly because the student is likely to know so little about the Korean milieu in which the book is set, and partly because the professor typically has less time to provide context for a work on Korea than on Japan or China. Despite this problem, I have found that many paperbacks on Korea are the best way of helping students both to understand and to connect with that culture. I would thus like to discuss four works that I have used with mixed degrees of success: focussing on both their usefulness and their drawbacks as aids to student learning.

The first, Peace Under Heaven by Ch'ae Man-Sik is a novel, backed up by a historical essay by Harvard University historian Carter J. Eckert, which presents the life of a corrupt yangban (landed gentry) family during the 1930s, when Korea was under Japan's colonial control. It is, in Eckert's words, "at once grotesque, funny, sad, and universally appealing." On the positive side, the book does a superb job of showing the complexity of the class that had dominated Korean life for centuries. The protagonist, Master Yun, is no paragon of virtue. A greedy, lecherous man who treats both women and servants as chattel, he uses Confucianism not for moral understanding but as a source of proof texts to undergird his own power; his "succinct guiding principle," notes Eckert, is: "let everyone else go to hell." Any idea that all Koreans nobly resisted the Japanese invaders vanishes quickly in this tale. The work appeals to students...
with its bawdy, earthy, highly human prose. And it raises a number of universal issues: the role of class, the complex reactions of colonial peoples to their overlords, gender relationships in traditional East Asia, the ease with which elites can be corrupted by money and power.

At the same time, the problem of context renders Peace Under Heaven problematic for many students. While they may like it and engage in lively discussions about its ideas, most do not emerge from those discussions knowing colonial Korea very well. The story focuses so heavily on Master Yun’s personal decadence that students come away knowing a man better than a country. The issues that dominate most historical narratives—Japanese control of the country, Korean nationalism, Confucian ideals—remain far behind the scenes in this work. While a professor can highlight those issues, the students are hard put to understand them; almost never do they discover them on their own. Michael Robinson of Indiana University says that the novel “captures the issues that dominated life in the Japanese colony.” He is right—for the person who knows what those issues were before beginning to read it. For the relatively uninformed student, however, he is wrong. This work illustrates with special force the problems of context in supplementary readings on Korea. Students without considerable contextual knowledge will find in Peace Under Heaven a captivating human story but limited insight into the era in which Master Yun lived.

More useful in terms of context is The Grass Roof, a memoir of life in a traditional Korean village early in the twentieth century. Blending memory and fiction, the educator Younghill Kang describes a yangban family that is as idealistic and healthy as Master Yun’s family is dysfunctional. His account is almost lyrical, and it gives students an appealing, provocative look at the values that undergirded elite Korea society in the heyday of traditional government, just before the Japanese took control. If Ch’ae’s novel shows the dark reality beneath the Confucian ideal, this work shows how that ideal functioned in the best of families. In it, one comes to understand the interplay of Confucianism, Buddhism, and naturalism; one sees the deep appreciation the rural elite had for education and for nature; one comes to understand the role of class and gender within an affluent family. The depiction of the responsibility family members felt for each other and for serving society is particularly powerful. The memoir illustrates, in readable prose and concrete detail, many of the major features of standard historical narratives. And it does it in such a humane way that students love it. Context is not the problem that it is in Peace Under Heaven.

The primary difficulty presented by Grass Roof is that which teachers find in most works of its type: the problem of representation. It is easy, reading this work, for students to conclude that most all Korean families were loving, hierarchical, committed to study and to a thoroughly Confucian ethical system. The complexity of society gets little attention. One would hardly dream, reading this, that the Japanese already were insinuating themselves in Korea society, or that the Yi dynasty was corrupt and ineffective, or that commoner classes (and most yangban) strayed far from the norm. The danger in this work thus lies in the pull toward essentialism. Students (and teachers) reading it, all too easily are led to conclude that society did indeed fit the elite narratives, that the complex reality illustrated by Master Yun was exceptional rather than typical. It thus becomes the teacher’s task, when assigning Grass Roof, to complement the story with the complexity that really characterized Korean life then.

One of the most interesting books available on Korea today is Laurel Kendall’s Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman, a 127-page narrative of a woman (“Yongsu’s Mother”) who makes her living late in the 1970s as a shaman. As far removed as one could imagine from Kang’s idealistic village or Master Yun’s hypocritical surroundings, her world is complex, economically difficult, full of prejudice, trouble, and human failings. Concrete and realistic, it presents a stunning picture of everyday life in urban Korea of recent times. On the most apparent level, it is most useful in explaining the role of shamanism in contemporary Korea: the way a person becomes a shaman, the nature of shamanistic practices, how and when people turn to shamans, the importance of women in that profession. But Life and Hard Times tells us much more about modern Korean life than that. It is especially rich in depicting gender and economic relationships, as well as the impact of the Korean War and the American-Communist struggle on the lives of real people. It also shows the strength and earthiness of poor women. The fact that a video is available to supplement it makes the ethnography even more useful.

Despite all of these strengths, I have found that the Kendall work should be used in class only with special caution and preparation, primarily because it plays too much, and too easily, into student prejudices about the Other. Yongsu’s Mother is earthy and profane; her family has treated her cruelly; she practices divination and performs shamanistic kuts. And students typically react to her instinctively as “superstitious,” “backward,” or “ignorant.” A book of this sort about someone in the United States, where students understand from personal experience the complexity and diversity of urban society, would work fine. When they read an account of this sort about a country many of them already regard as less developed, they instinctively give in to Orientalist impulses, to seeing Koreans essentially as superstitious and primitive. This tendency is not a wholly negative thing; it presents opportunities for a teacher, to help students learn, and to help them evaluate the similarities between practices that we often call “religious” in our own tradition and “superstitious” in others, to push them to a greater understanding of just how diverse a place like Korea is. But to do this with Life and Hard Times, the teacher must be prepared to spend a great deal of time, time that may not exist in the rushed schedule of a survey.

One of the most usable supplementary works, for me, has been Richard Kim’s Lost Names, which details his own childhood in northern Korea under the Japanese occupation. Refusing to say whether the work is fundamentally true or fictitious (“There is neither pure ‘nonfiction’ autobi-
ography or memoir, nor pure 'fiction' fiction’), he tells the gripping story of a boy growing up in a Christian family, attending a school run by Japanese, admiring a father who refuses to be cowed by the colonial masters, and experiencing the joy of final liberation. More than any of the other works here, it combines the personal and the political, thus lending itself easily to engagement with the classroom narrative. One sees both the Japanese overlords and the Korean subjects as complex; there are good ones and bad ones, collaborators and resistors. Indeed, it would be a wonderful complement to Peace Under Heaven, if one had the luxury of assigning two books on the colonial era. And Lost Names raises powerful moral and political issues, sure to spark vigorous classroom discussion—as in the protagonist’s assertion near the end:

“We’ve been too preoccupied with our survival, our individual survivals, to be exact, to even think of such an eventuality as our liberation and independence. . . . Survival, son, that’s what my generation has accomplished, if that can be called an accomplishment.”

The problems are fewer than in the other works. The novel raises some issues of fairness and representation: whether the treatment is balanced, whether it is fair to the era. That problem, however, typifies even works of history, not just those of fiction, and Kim can be credited with working diligently to present a whole picture, painting figures of depth and ambiguity on both sides. The other problem is that the negative picture of the Japanese can, arguably, be accused of lending itself to the Japan bashing to which some students are prone. This problem, however, is minor, given the many ways in which Lost Names facilitates greater student understanding of twentieth century Japan.

Taken as a group, these works tell us much about the difficulties and joys inherent in selecting readings for Korean sections of courses. They illustrate the fact that historical narratives of Korea’s past are scarce, forcing history teachers to rely heavily on novels and ethnographies. A developing exception to this generalization is the appearance recently of several works on the 1980 Kwangju Uprising,11 but even the most important historical events and topics of the Korean past—the March First Movement, Kim Daejong’s trials and political triumphs, the colonial period generally— have not been treated adequately yet in works accessible to students. They also give evidence to the difficulty of using supplemental works in a field in which readers lack adequate context. Even the best stories can produce the opposite of what their writers intend when read without an understanding of the setting; they may present teaching opportunities, but they also can lead to miscomprehension. These works highlight too the inadequacy the non-specialist professor feels when selecting readings for the Korean section of a survey. With a limited number of works from which to choose, a proneness to timidity about not knowing the field well, and a worry that student ignorance may render otherwise solid books problematic, the teacher is tempted to opt out, to avoid Korean books in favor of time-tested works on China and Japan. The growing realization that all of East Asia matters, however, makes that option unacceptable. It pushes the teacher to proceed, timid or not, finding satisfaction in the knowledge that those demands by Korean scholars in 1974 are now, a quarter of a century later, beginning to be taken seriously.

1. The approximate figure for China derives from the fact that OhioLink provides totals only as high as 5,000; under that number, figures are given precisely.


5. Ch’ae Man-Sik, Peace Under Heaven (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993); quotation from back cover.

6. Ibid., xii.

7. Ibid., back cover.

8. Younghill Kang, The Grass Roof (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975). Another problem with this book is that it is out of print. Rights are held by the Asia Society, which I have found willing to grant permission to reprint it, free of charge but with acknowledgment, for classroom use.


12. See, for example, Linda Lewis, Laying Claim to the Memory of May: A Look Back at the 1980 Kwangju Uprising (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), and Henry Scott-Stokes and Lee Jai Eui, eds., The Kwangju Uprising: Eyewitness Press Accounts of Korea’s Tianamen (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000).

Betwixt and Between: Korea as a Bridge Between China and Japan
Stephen R. Smith
Wittenberg University

I am a cultural anthropologist with a focus on Japan studies. Teaching at a liberal arts college, however, I find that I have been transformed from a Japan specialist into an East Asia generalist. And, as with anyone who has ever taught an Introduction to East Asia course, I struggle with the problem of how to introduce material about, and establish the importance of, Korea.

I have tried teaching all three counties at one time in a single chronological development, but it didn’t work well. Students could not keep straight which country we were talking about. I have also tried teaching China, then Korea, and finally Japan, tracing the dominant flow of influence from west to east. This format was adequate. However, the most satisfactory format for me has been one of presenting the two contrasting poles, China and Japan, then discussing Korea as the middle ground, both literally and figuratively.

Any familiarity with East Asian history provides plenty of examples of Korea as conduit between China and Japan, or simply as being caught in the middle. Admittedly, most of the flow is from the Middle Kingdom. Some religiousphilosophical ideas, such as Confucianism and Daoism, begin in China. Others, such as Buddhism, first enter China then pass through Korea to Japan. It is relatively easy to give an extensive introduction to the ideas (and impact) of Confucius, Mencius, and Ju Xi when dealing with China, then contrast the local and local development of Confucianism when dealing with Japan, and end the semester with a discussion of Confucian hypertrophy in Choson Korea. Similarly, it works well to discuss perspectives and policy on modernization when first presenting China’s reaction to colonialism, later contrasting Japan’s commitment to transformation, and inevitably discussing their impact in the Hermit Kingdom.

Likewise, the history of war and conquest offers plenty of examples where Korea is caught up because of its fate as being geographically the “Poland of the East.” Territories of earliest Korea were subject to either Chinese military attack or simply the recurrent flow of Sinicized populations, while other areas turn to Japan for support or flee to Japan. Most dramatic of all are the Mongol attempts to invade Japan, balanced by Hideyoshi’s failed conquests of China, where, in both cases, the Koreans are the greatest losers.

I have tried a number of readings to balance Korea in the teaching of introductory East Asia. The following titles have proved to be most successful for me.

BASIC TEXT

Fairbank et al. is, frankly, a bit dry. The works of Conrad Shirokauer are much more readable and filled with memorable anecdotes. However, East Asia is comprehensive in general and, more importantly for this discussion, has material on Korea in particular, which Shirokauer does not.

TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: COMPARISONS (China, Japan, Korea)


These three books create a delightful set and lend themselves to lots of comparisons. All three are autobiographies, which makes them not only more personal and therefore more attractive for students, but also opens the door for discussions about objectivity, the Rashomon Effect, and outright self-serving text. All three books date from the late “traditional” period: Qing China, Tokugawa Japan, Choson Korea. Most of the people in these books are elite (literati, samurai, courtiers and consorts) but their lives do not match the perfection that we expect from studying Confucian principles. Instead, they fall madly in love or simply fall mad; they are often dissolute and failures, rebelling against the expectations of their class or clinging to them desperately.

MODERNIZING SOCIETY: COMPARISONS (China, Japan, Korea)