

## Korea in the Curriculum: Exemplar and Exception

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### Introduction

For several years I have been teaching survey courses on East Asia. I have found that including Korea in the curriculum of these introductory courses adds layers of complexity and richness to the course, though it also presents some pedagogical challenges. My strategy for incorporating Korea in the East Asian civilization course has been to use primary sources in a comparative context organized by theme. In this manner, the Korean sources advance the general theme of “traditions and transformations.” It provides vivid examples of both the appropriation and transformation of sinic culture in Korea, and the memorable aspects of East Asian civilization unique to Korea, thus giving a more complete and coherent view of East Asian history and civilization. Using sources advances other goals I have set for the course: to present East Asian civilization in a memorable way, to pique student interest in the complexities and possibilities of East Asian culture, to feel an emotional affinity with the peoples of East Asia, to understand current East Asian concerns and events, and finally to better hone the students’ analytical skills.

The themes that emerge from the clusters of sources that I use reflect my training as a Confucian specialist. Tracing the vicissitudes of Confucian inspired ideals and political structures gives students a tool for approaching often difficult materials. Korea’s distinctiveness lies in the overt appropriation of Confucianism and elite Chinese culture, especially manifest in the Choson dynasty, the “model Confucian state;” this overlays a native culture that is in many ways at odds with Confucian ideals. By the time we reach Korean material in the course, we have already considered documents from China and Japan, noting the distinctive Japanese thought that sometime rejects and sometimes appropriates Chinese learning. Korea provides a different expression from the combination of similar elements, creating a particular, unique manifestation of East Asian civilization.

The following are suggestions for clusters of sources that can be used to draw out important aspects of Korean civilization, as well as reinforce and/or challenge materials covered in Japan and China. Each source is taught individually, contextualized in a wider narrative. I like to begin with a source that I find compelling and rich in possible themes, and then to find corresponding sources that make particularly striking comparisons for later lectures. Throughout the semester I remind students of connections between current material and that already covered.

### Samples of Source Clusters

#### Comparison No. 1: Premodern Ideas of Beginnings and Identity

*Korean Sources: “Story of Tangun”*

(Lee, *Sources I*, pp. 4-6).

*“King Chinghung’s Monument”* (Lee I, 39).<sup>2</sup>

These sources show, respectively, the distinctive myth of origin of the Korean people, and Korean appropriation of Chinese political ideals and language early in its history. These sources can be compared to Chinese myths of culture heroes, oracle bone inscriptions, and the *Metal Bound Box* from the *Shu Jing*. For Japanese sources I’ve used myths from the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, and the *Seventeen Point Constitution* of Prince Shotoku. Questions for class discussion include: How do people of these civilizations identify themselves? Where do they come from? What is their relationship to outsiders? Whence their customs? What are common themes—overt and subtle—in the ideal governmental structures espoused by each?

#### Comparison No. 2: Premodern Attitudes toward Chinese Culture and Civilization

*Korean Sources: Invention of the Korean Alphabet* (Lee, pp. 515-20)

These readings consist of several short sources tracing the debate over using the Korean phonetic script *hangul* for writing Korean rather than Chinese characters. These sources show the way in which arguments were formulated to support continued adoption of Chinese civilization, and perhaps more importantly, the rationale of arguments that advocated innovation away from the Chinese model. Japanese sources that cover similar issues include Kitabatake Chikafusa, *Records of the Legitimate Succession of the Divine Sovereigns* and Motoori Norinaga, *On the Emperor and Japan*. Chinese attitudes toward things non-Chinese can be examined in Han Yu, *Memorial on the Bone of the Buddha*.

Questions for class discussion: How is Chinese culture viewed? What makes us distinctive? How do we assess outsiders and their influence? What makes apologists defensive or uncomfortable in their arguments?

#### Comparison No. 3: Responses to Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century

*Korean Sources: Yi Hangno, “Sinify the Western Barbarian,”* (Lee II, 158). *“Royal Condemnation of Catholicism,”* (Lee II, 150).

*“A Confucian Defense of Catholicism”* (Lee II, 153)

There is a striking divergence in the varied responses within and between East Asian states to imperialism and European culture. Many Koreans of this time were as staunch as conservative Chinese in defending Confucian universalism and rejecting things Western; dissent also was frequently couched in Confucian terms. Sources used for Chinese responses include Feng Guifen, “On the Manufacture of Foreign Weapons,” and Chu Chengbo, “Reforming Men’s Minds Comes Before Reforming Institutions.” Students are particularly responsive to the issues of this century after they have read the Qianlong emperor’s letter to Lord Macartney as background.<sup>3</sup> Variation in Japanese responses include Aizawa Seishisai’s *Preface to New Proposals* and *National Policy*,

and Sakuma Shozan's *Reflections on My Errors*. *The Charter Oath* and *Imperial Rescript on Education* show the startling differences in Japanese response in the Meiji era compared with Korea and China of the same period; they also show the continuity of political ideals established in the sources from premodern East Asia.

Questions for discussions: What are the variety of responses to encounters with the West? How is the West evaluated vis-à-vis native civilization and culture? What are the reasons and rationale given for change, or for preserving traditional ways?

#### Comparison No. 4: Twentieth Century Developments

*Korean Sources: Chang Chiyou, "We Wail Today" (Lee II, 422), Slogans of the Korean Communist Party, (Lee II, 462-63).*

This section does not have a defining theme; rather, it provides poignant moments to help students remember and respond to significant developments in the twentieth century which are relevant to understanding contemporary East Asia. The first source illustrates Korean nationalism in response to Japanese imperialism; the second provides some (unexpected for many students) slogans from Korean Communism. Fruitful sources from China and Japan include Chen Duxiu, "The Way of Confucianism and Modern Life" and the *Draft of the Basic Plan for Establishment of Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere* from pre-war Japan.

In the modern section, I have also used longer works in addition to the shorter primary sources. In teaching Korea, Richard Kim's *Lost Names*, another text about Korea under the Japanese, has been extremely well received, even by the most jaded students.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Using Sources in the Course**

All the sources are contextualized in a broad historical narrative, a consideration of social and political structures, religious ideals and schools, literature, and economy. Individual classes include lecture and discussion; assessing sources is the basis for class discussion. In smaller courses I have required weekly written assessments and oral presentation of sources. Frankly, these have not been as successful as discussing the source in class. There is definite benefit of picking apart a source together in class, talking through wrong guesses, and demonstrating how specific source material relates to the generalizations of the lecture. I make it a point to refer back constantly to sources previously studied.

Students are alerted at the beginning of the semester that exams require a familiarity with and understanding of primary sources. Exams include a source identification section, in which students must identify sources by name, date and significance. The essay test requires reference to a specified minimum number of sources (I encourage more than the minimum) as a way of bolstering the points made by the student in the essay. Although some see this as onerous, others realize that having prepared for the source identification section, they have the foundation of an essay already in place.

Sources are also necessary knowledge for a newspaper project at the end of the semester. For this project, students find two long articles on different topics about East Asia from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the *Christian Science Monitor*. For the project, students outline the content of the article, and analyze the article by relating it to the course's themes and topics, including relevant primary sources. Thus students apply skills honed and material covered in class to contemporary events.

Using primary sources is a way to integrate Korea into an existing course on East Asia. Sources give students concrete materials with which to interpret and narrate aspects of East Asian civilization in exams and projects. Organizing patterns and themes become more meaningful with a wider basis for comparison, and the sources provide a means of connecting the histories and cultures of East Asia when similar events are told from different perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

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1. I welcome comments and questions on this paper. My contact information is joldstonemoore@wittenberg.edu.

2. Peter H. Lee's *Sourcebook of Korean Civilizations*, vols. I and II (Columbia, 1993, 1996) are my main resources for Korean sources. David R. McCann, *Early Korean Literature*, (Columbia, 2000) is a good resource. Robert André LaFleur suggests several sources in his article "Korean Civilization and East Asian Studies" in *Education About Asia* 2:2 (Fall 1997). Japanese and Chinese sources cited here are drawn from the Columbia sourcebooks with the exception of Birrell, and the letter of the Qianlong emperor to Lord Macartney, cited below.

3. Myths of Chinese culture heroes can be found in Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, (Johns Hopkins, 1993). The others are in the second edition of DeBary, *Sources of Chinese Civilization* (Columbia, 1999). The Japanese sources are widely available, including in the Columbia sources.

4. A good excerpt from this letter is found in Ssu-yu Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China's Response to the West* (Harvard, 1979).

5. Richard Kim, *Lost Names Scene from a Korean Boyhood*, (University of California, Berkeley, 1998). The article and interview in *Education About Asia* (4:2, Fall 1999) provide an excellent guide to teaching this book.