

Future Visions

Opportunities and Challenges of Korean Studies in North America

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재단법인 플라톤 아카데미
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Overview

On November 1–2, 2018, the Korea Program at Stanford University hosted a two-day conference titled *Future Visions: Challenges and Possibilities of Korean Studies in North America*. The conference brought together leading scholars of Korean studies in North America with panels focused on literature, social science, language education, history, library studies, and the Korean Wave.

The Foundation Academia Platonica, a private institute based in Seoul, Korea, dedicated to support the development of research in the humanities, was a co-sponsor for this event.

Each session started with a panel presentation on the state of the field. Lively discussion followed, covering questions such as, but not limited to: “What are the research trends in each field?” “What kinds of directions can we expect in the near future?” “What are some of the disciplinary or other challenges in each field?” “How does each field interact with related fields?” “What are some of the limitations and possibilities around graduate student training?” “How can faculty cultivate supportive and critical scholarly communities with their graduate students?” And, “How are junior faculty encouraged, and what institutional structures may offer them better support?”

This conference was unique in hosting nonconventional panels. The attendees lauded the inclusion of panels on language education and library studies. The two fields, while essential to the development of junior scholars and to the expansion of research frontiers, had been underrepresented in scholarly conferences focused on Korean studies. Respective panelists and attending scholars seized upon the rare opportunity to exchange ideas. A panel on the Korean Wave gave attendees an opportunity to contemplate the relationship between Korea as it is popularly imagined and Korea as it is studied.

The discussions culminated in the call for Korean studies to develop a shared, interdisciplinary narrative in order to assert its relevance to a broader audience. Scholars across disciplines exuded confidence in the value of Korean studies and its relevance to their respective disci-

plines. However, lively debate took place on the best strategy to develop this new narrative, as the individual challenges of each discipline suggested different approaches. In the most general sense, the humanities scholars hoped to ascertain how to best learn about Korea; the social scientists sought to reframe Korean studies from “what can we learn about Korea” to “what can we learn from Korea.”

The Current State of Korean Studies

Korean studies programs established at the inception of the field emphasized training in the humanities. Over time, these programs have expanded their areas of focus. Furthermore, younger programs have been established that prioritize social science, policy studies, and transnational studies, among many other variants.

Such diversification of Korean studies programs was reflected in the workshop. On one hand, scholars professed ready knowledge of the opportunities and challenges of their respective academic disciplines. This was a positive reflection of the broadening of the Korean studies. However, on the other hand, scholars were less certain of the trajectory of Korean studies as a whole. The ensuing discussions highlighted that Korean studies is in a transitional period. Koreanists face a shared challenge of establishing relevance within their respective disciplines, but the very necessity to make disciplinary breakthroughs tends to result in a pull away from Korean studies.

Panelists relied on two metrics to measure the health of Korean studies in their respective disciplines: the number of tenured faculty and the number of articles published.

First, the number of tenured faculty in Korean studies has been increasing. Most concerning was the imbalance of premodern Korea scholars and modern Korea scholars. Too many programs lack faculty who are expert in premodern Korea, and the resulting graduate student scholarship on modern Korea has suffered, sometimes to the point of making irresponsible claims about Korea's past. Scholars also showed concern with the hiring of pop culture specialists in lieu of traditional academics for positions in modern Korean studies.

Second, the number of articles published was divided between disciplinary journals and area studies journals. The number of the former has been grim. Social sciences has fared somewhat better than humanities, but publishing in top disciplinary journals has been difficult across disciplines, with the exception of management science. The number of area studies journals publications has been consistent, and marginally increasing.

The shifts in priority brought about by the 2008 financial crisis, which caused students to favor STEM fields because of the better job prospects and higher-education institutions to focus on those fields, created a crisis in the humanities and social sciences that has likewise challenged Korean studies, especially in terms of faculty hires. That said, no participants suggested the impact to Korean studies was in any way disproportionate.

Challenges and Opportunities

Establishing the Disciplinary Relevance of the Korean Experience

The biggest challenge (or opportunity) haunting the entire conference was the relevance of Korean studies. Scholars expressed their ambition and their need to make contributions to their respective disciplines. Koreanists exchanged ideas on how to convince others in the discipline that their work matters as much as that of others. Some saw how many contemporary Korean phenomena—e.g., changing ideas of national identity—would be interesting to other disciplines. Others proposed using Korea as an antithesis to modify existing theoretical frameworks. Most notably—despite the appearance of the question in every session, sometimes taking different forms—no conclusive answer was given to this perennial dilemma of relevancy.

The tension between theoretical sophistication and depth of knowledge

Junior scholars faced the frustrating challenge of needing to convince colleagues in discipline and area studies of their own scholarly merit. Discussants agreed that two qualities required for scholars in Korean studies to make contributions in their respective disciplines—*theoretical sophistication and empirical profundity*—were to some degree competing goals. Regardless, senior scholars expressed dismay that even when job vacancies opened, faculty members had difficulty filling the posts due to the dearth of Korean studies scholars capable in both realms. Junior scholars expressed some exasperation at the circularity of the notion that inferior graduate training was failing to produce scholars who possess both theoretical sophistication and empirical profundity, since the lack of faculty members was what made adequate training difficult in the first place.

A possible antidote to Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism

Many scholars expressed that the most important contributions Korean studies academics can make to their respective disciplines are ones that challenge Eurocentrism and Sinocen-

trism. On Eurocentrism, the attendees admitted that scholarly communities were predisposed to regarding Koreanists as strong on empiricism but weak on theory. This was perceived as a byproduct of the assumption in U.S. academia that those who do not focus on Europe are area studies specialists, while those who study Europe are theorists.

As a field, social science takes the Western experience as normative, with empirical observations about Europe being transformed into putative universalisms. In the face of such hegemony, social scientists suggested that Korean studies offered an opportunity to challenge the perception of the European experience as dogma. One scholar noted that often Korean foreign policy decisions and popular perceptions of international relations conform neither to the realism nor liberalism schools of thought—for example, given the recent positive developments in inter-Korean relations, South Koreans have rated Kim Jong-un over Shinzō Abe in polls.

Scholars noted that academic inertia—e.g., the tendency of leading social science journals to not readily accept Korean data—has put a brake on the eagerness of Korean studies scholars to offer a small but meaningful challenge to mainstream theories. Although the trend is probably not deliberate, a systemic and salient discrediting of Korean sources has been taking place. Social scientists using Korea as a case study have been pressed to defend the validity and robustness of their data.

Humanities scholars decried Sinocentrism—the equating of China with East Asia. This misconception reveals a lack of regional expertise, and what makes this trend worse is that there are some Sinologists who have actively made use of the misconception in order to advance the nationalization of premodern East Asia. The scholars warned against the dominance of nationalism over scholarship. Their research on the interaction between literary Sinitic and vernacular Korean, for example, challenged the notion of China as the sum total of premodern East Asia. Literary scholars and historians alike reported the importance of denationalizing Sinocentric narratives on East Asia.

Identifying potential research topics that address relevancy

The question of relevance loomed over the panelists as they discussed future research directions. Social scientists showed great excitement for the unique position of South Korea as a quasi-experiment in compressed modernity—i.e., its rapid transformation over only about fifty years. Some ideas included: neoliberalism in Korean economy, national security, Candlelight Revolution, the intersection of race and ethnic studies and nationalism, family and demography, religion, social problems, Korean diaspora, migrant marriages, multiethnic children, and gender and sexuality, among others.

The humanities scholars discussed potential research topics in terms of institutionalized solitude. For the most part, Korean studies scholars in the humanities have found themselves to be lone warriors in their respective departments. While the necessity for individual scholars to cover multiple themes, methods, and periods was undoubtedly a strain, it could also be seen as an opportunity.

The challenge was reinterpreted as an occasion for “border crossing.” Encapsulated in their research interests with prefixes such as “inter-,” “intra-,” and “trans-,” literary scholars and historians have often challenged traditional linguistic, regional, national, disciplinary, and periodic boundaries. In many aspects, they were pioneers in transnational and interdisciplinary studies before its arrival in their respective disciplines. Historians suggested that deep knowledge of Korea, potentially attained through such lenses, could bring an understanding of divided or militarized societies, protest movements and anti-state/capital repression, post-colonial urbanization, and marginalization.

With no conference sessions focusing on policy studies, the role of North Korea as a research topic was only briefly discussed. Approaching North Korea as a subject of historical inquiry, however, challenged the narrative of North Korea as exceptional, isolated, and ideologically manipulated. It was cautiously but optimistically implied that such approach grounded in

history could prepare the world to better understand North Korea, given the current thawing of U.S.-North Korea and inter-Korean relations.

The Korean Wave was also seen as a potential research topic. Literary scholars perceived the Korean Wave as an opportunity for new media analysis. One participant noted that with modern literary scholars already examining forms of media such as film, photography, folk songs, and graphic fiction, using the lyrics and the scripts that constitute the Korean Wave as a source was not a great departure. Participants agreed, however that a pedagogical inclusion of the Korean Wave was a more natural progression than its inclusion in research directions. Moreover, the concluding panel on the Korean Wave hinted that the scholars' perceptions of the Korean Wave as a research topic were possibly at odds with the market-driven, industry-oriented outlook of the practitioners in the Korean Wave industry.

Do Sources and Methods Add to the Challenge?

Scholars discussed whether or not the challenges and opportunities of Korean studies were partially due to the availability of sources and the disciplinary trends in methods. The inclusion of a panel on library services and collection development made for an especially robust discussion.

How Korea was evaluated as a site for source materials varied by discipline. The literary scholars and the historians did not find Korea particularly challenging. If anything, especially for premodernists, the difficulty arose from the language training required to understand sources. Depending on their specialty, Koreanists not only need to possess command of Korean and *hanmun*, but potentially other languages, including Japanese, Chinese, and Russian. Past the initial language hurdle, the participants felt that Korea as a site did not pose particular challenges. There is a wealth of digitized Korean sources that greatly increase research accessibility. One scholar provocatively observed that, in essence, studying North Korea was not that different—indeed, the United States and South Korea pose many of the challenges

that scholars run into while doing archival research on North Korea. These challenges can be circumvented through creative approaches in finding sources, for example, by accessing the appropriate Japanese, Eastern European, and personal archives.

The social scientists' views on sources in Korea varied and have to be broken down further by discipline. Sociologists and anthropologists found Korea to be an appealing site for collecting data on compressed modernity. Anthropologists working on Korea, primarily conducting ethnographies, found Korea appealing particularly for the possibilities of long-distance and longitudinal ethnography. However, sociologists faced difficulty convincing others in the field that Korea could offer abundant meaningful data. While academics in management science were able to glean much from the breadth of publicly available information on Korean corporate entities, economists found their work more difficult as the risk-averse Korean government rarely releases in-depth data. Regardless, social science disciplines benefited from South Korea providing a well-connected quasi-experimental environment in compressed modernity.

The inclusion of the panel on library services and collection development made for a robust discussion on the opportunities and challenges coming from sources and datasets both available and unavailable to the Korean studies. Panelists alerted scholars to the cooperative collection development efforts of Korean studies libraries in North America, but also told a cautionary tale of how a single library's staff shortage impacted not only that specific university, but affected the entire North American collection as well.

There was some discussion on the discrepancy between how scholars in the humanities and those in social sciences use library services and collections. Social scientists, who can and sometimes need to create their own datasets, may tend to physically visit libraries less often, resulting in some imbalance in use, and possibly making humanities scholars' needs seem more salient. Nonetheless, the Korean studies libraries sought to develop a balanced collection for their users.

Unfortunately, the ability of libraries supporting Korean studies to develop their collections has been significantly hindered by the prioritization of increasingly expensive e-journal subscriptions over the purchase of monographs. The newly prevalent funding practice of first paying e-journal subscriptions and using the remaining funds to acquire monographs has particularly affected the growth and maintenance of Korean collections, since the disciplines most closely connected to Korean studies—history, anthropology, literature—still value monographs over e-journals. There is another issue specific to Korean collections: although they have rapidly transitioned to online publication, the permanency of such collections is dubious. Korean databases have merged, split, or changed structure without notifying the subscribed libraries, causing a great conundrum for librarians and users who desire consistent access to the journals, data, and other sources.

Participants raised two hot-button issues for library services: digital humanities and open-access initiatives. While much digitized data seems to be accessible, humanities scholars reported that it is often unavailable for computational text analysis. Librarians responded that they are ready to mediate the relationship between the scholars and the vendors. Nonetheless, vendors have been greatly reluctant to allow the text mining necessary for computational text analysis. In the meantime, librarians suggested workarounds, such as hiring research assistants to manually obtain and clean the data and then to deposit such data in the university repositories, or structuring the research around digitized materials that are clearly friendlier to text mining.

Librarians proposed open-access initiatives as a possible solution to both of the library's conundrums. They argued that the open-access initiatives had the potential to remedy the incongruence between academic libraries' *raison d'être* to assist scholarly research and the prohibitive costs impeding their ability to make the end products available.

The Need to Increase Communication among Koreanists

Discussants also sought a better cross-disciplinary understanding of each other's work and practices. The willingness to learn about the other revealed the necessity for more frequent interdisciplinary conversations. Scholars often prefaced their questions with admissions of their unfamiliarity with another's field. The discussions productively addressed some misconceptions, and attendees benefited from hearing each discipline's perspective on relevance as a shared conundrum for all practitioners of Korean studies. Whether they could consistently engage each other to identify a common solution to the problem, however, remains to be seen.

Graduate Students: Challenges Facing the Next Generation of Scholars

Korean Language Training

The inclusion of the panel on the Korean Wave attested to the importance of Korean popular culture in fueling interest in Korea, and scholars agreed that there is no shortage of such interest. Indeed, the Korean Wave somewhat mitigated the crisis in humanities as it has manifested in Korean studies. Language educators volunteered statistics: Korean courses were the only language programs to demonstrate an increase in enrollment in the current environment of reduced interest in foreign language acquisition.

In a complete reversal from the past, elementary Korean classes have seen a greater enrollment of non-heritage students than heritage students. Although there was no shortage of students studying in first-year Korean classes, the number dwindled to only a handful in intermediate and advanced Korean language classes. Korean language educators have also been incorporating pedagogical innovations, such as service learning (community work in Korean) and content-based language education. Especially for public universities and smaller programs, the high interest in Korean culture further allowed creation of sizable content-based lecture courses that somewhat compensated, on an institutional basis, for the lack of advanced small-enrollment colloquia on Korea.

Cultivating Potential Doctoral Students

The limited number of programs offering advanced instruction in Korean revealed a structural incompetence in transforming students' interests into scholarly endeavors. At the university level, there is no language instruction beyond the first 500 hours of language acquisition, despite Korean requiring around 2,200 hours for an English speaker to reach mastery.

Despite the surge of non-heritage students in first-year Korean language courses, the number of non-heritage Korean graduate students has been decreasing. This lack of diversity—ironic considering the dominance of white male scholars in the inception of Korean studies—was a

source of concern. Scholars repeatedly pointed out that the current state of North American Korean language education was essentially incapable of training potential graduate students. Scholars suggested that master's programs provided excellent opportunities for non-heritage students to learn the language, to visit the country and conduct archival research, immerse in language, and to develop into excellent doctoral students. More importantly, the overall cost for the university was lowered, as the duration of enrollment in PhD courses would consequently be shortened as a result of master's programs providing adequate training for students who are working on topics involving Korean studies and planning to continue on to pursue doctoral degrees.

Training Graduate Students

Participants shared many ideas for improving or expanding graduate student training. Literary scholars questioned the possibility of teaching Korean studies in English or other languages. They found great hope in the potential of broadening access to Korean literature, made possible by the translation of canonical works into English. Infrequently, but notably during the colonial period, authors themselves had written in other languages, which has enabled students from adjacent fields to gain insights from reading such works. However, the accessibility was limited as translation of literary criticisms is few and far between. Scholars suggested courses bound by chronology rather than nation-states, as possible ways to teach how fellow East Asianists can talk to each other.

Historians also addressed the necessity to customize their communication skills for the audiences whose expertise were in different time periods, locations, and themes. They expressed a contradiction inherent in their teaching: the dual necessity to train students to delve deep into the empirical sources of their own specialty, yet also to go beyond the chronological and regional boundaries of their empirical sources. Disciplinary training sometimes conflicted

with the need to take an interdisciplinary approach as scholars strategized in addressing their target audience.

In a similar vein, social scientists spoke of juggling three identities at graduate school and beyond. They had to decide on their thematic (theoretical) orientation, methodological approach, and case specialty. They engaged in code switching, depending on their audience, but most often emphasized their methodological training. Scholars suggested a potential work-around: both writing monographs targeting Koreanists and publishing articles targeting colleagues in their disciplines.

Securing Jobs for Graduate Students

Senior scholars noted that the life of an academic has never been easy. There never was a time when jobs were guaranteed. However, the tightening of the academic job market posed great ethical dilemmas for faculty members with graduate students. Successful graduate students, these scholars suggested, have faculty advisors who take a hands-on approach, sacrificing their own personal time and some degree of professional output.

It was noted that job postings seeking a scholar of East Asia often go to scholars of Chinese and Japanese studies. On the rare occasion that a job is posted for Koreanists, those with deep training in Korea are preferred. Here, faculty roles as mentors and as employers are conflicted with one another. One scholar, confident that Koreanists are the ones who have been trained to study East Asia in its totality, urged others to reframe the dilemma.

On a tangential note, in recognition of the rather prevalent demand for junior faculty to teach Korean language alongside content courses, language educators discussed training graduate students in content fields as teaching assistants for language courses. Although somewhat a stretch of their expertise, teaching assistantships in such capacities allowed graduate students to hone their communication skills for audiences with an interest, but not expertise, in Korea.

Funding

Scholars expressed great appreciation for the Korea Foundation's continued support of Korean studies. At the same time, they hoped to see more funding for Korean language acquisition in order to strengthen the foundation of Korean studies. Scholars emphasized the necessity for a long-term investment in opportunities for students to learn advanced Korean, including *hanja*, and to experience language immersion in Korea for two to three years.

Humanities scholars voiced dismay at the scarcity of *hanja* education opportunities for non-heritage learners. While reading *hanja* is a must for any scholar conducting research on pre-1980s South Korea and pre-Korean War North Korea, scarce attention has been given to teaching it. Well-funded language immersion opportunities that are available for Chinese studies and Japanese studies have attracted junior scholars with a desire to learn literary Sinitic. This has, at least anecdotally, resulted in the eventual loss of potential scholars to Chinese studies or Japanese studies. The dependence of junior scholars in Korean studies on Chinese studies or on Japanese studies itself was perceived as an opportunity for growth, but it was also a source of concern.

Highlighted was the lack of funding for the Inter-University Center for Korean Language Studies at Sungkyunkwan University (SKKU). Although a sister program to Inter-University Program for Chinese Languages Studies at Tsinghua University and to the Inter-University Consortium on Japanese Language Studies at Yokohama, funding for the Inter-University Center at SKKU was paltry in comparison to those of its sister programs.

The emphasis on training people touched on a concern for the glut of interest and funding for projects translating Korean works into other languages. While producing good translations was hailed as a critical step to making Korean studies more accessible to greater numbers of students, there was concern that the number of projects indicated a problem of quantity over quality, with the potential of warping the depth and breadth of scholarship. Scholars sought more judicious investments, ones that were based on persons, not products.

Although there has been no weakening in interest for the Korean Wave, scholars pointed out that the resulting complacency in obtaining funding was potentially problematic. Despite the real, fervent interest in the Korean Wave, there is not adequate funding going toward the systematic development of Korean studies, especially Korean language acquisition.

Relationship to Chinese Studies and Japanese Studies

Much attention was given to the position of Korean studies in respect to Chinese studies and Japanese studies. The most concrete concern was the adjudication of tenure-track Korean studies faculty by scholars in Chinese and Japanese studies. More workload was placed on junior faculty in Korean studies compared to their peers, as they had to learn outside of their region of focus to converse intelligently with Sinologists and Japanologists.

Sinocentrism, in combination with a surge of nationalism from the People's Republic of China, equated the Sinitic with the modern Chinese state. For example, Sinologists routinely expect that Koreanists who are scholars of literary Sinitic should be able to speak modern Chinese, something unreasonable in the eyes of participants. Multiple burdens like this placed on Koreanists can result in the failure of junior faculty to finish their first books. Some scholars, if somewhat frivolously, questioned the possibility of expanding or freezing the probationary period in recognition of the extraordinary demands placed on tenure-track faculty.

At the same time, discussants acknowledged that the interest of Sinologists and Japanologists benefited the growth of Korean studies. Doctoral students will often find their committees staffed by Sinologists and Japanologists, in addition to Koreanists. Chinese and Japanese studies provided analytical frameworks at a time when such critical sources were yet unavailable to Korean studies. Scholars argued that Koreanists should balance their aversion to Sinocentrism and Japanocentrism with appreciation of the contributions of Chinese and Japanese studies to Korean studies.

Korean studies scholars expressed dismay at the loss of graduate students to Chinese studies and Japanese studies. Humanities scholars and social scientists alike saw students opt out of Korean studies in hopes of better job prospects. While the senior scholars could not blame graduate students for such calculus, nonetheless, the rational decisions of individual scholars has created a vicious cycle in the field: These decisions to exit the field collectively implied that Korea was not an interesting case study for respective disciplines.

Korean Studies in North America / Korean Studies in Korea

Scholars also discussed the position of Korean studies in North America to Korean studies in Korea. Each field had a different positionality. The field of modern Korean literature in North America grew distinct from its counterpart in Korea, although the gap has been shrinking. Modern literature scholars in Korea have perceived scholars in North America as equals. The fields of premodern literature, linguistics, and history in North America have had a more contentious relationship with their Korean counterparts. Historians on the panel expressed concern about the marginalization of the work of Korean historians in Anglo-American scholarship.

Anthropologists perceived Korean anthropology as still seeking to look at indigenes as the Other, and as such Korean anthropology has found it difficult to find intersections with its North American counterpart that studies the human experience in Korea. Sociologists also perceived that Korean sociologists use Korean data to see if theories established in North America remain valid, instead of posing alternative frameworks. The political scientists also noted that critical thinking is not rewarded in Korean scholarship.

Regardless of their different positions, the scholars emphasized the necessity for a partnership with colleagues in Korea to support a critical scholarly community. The hyperspecialized scholars in Korea, in turn, have communities of scholars; although the reason not to pursue doctoral degrees in Korea for a future career in North America was clear, the interactions between North American Koreanists and their colleagues in Korea provided a valuable experience. The scholars also proposed a gathering of Koreanists across the Atlantic Ocean, engaging with scholarship not only from North America and Korea, but also globally.

Conclusion

Future Visions: Challenges and Possibilities of Korean Studies in North America provided the participants with an opportunity to reexamine the status of the field across disciplines and to envision the future of the Korean studies in North America. The conference ended with a burst of high energy as the general audience filled the conference room for the concluding panel discussion on the Korean Wave. Attendees witnessed that the future of Korean studies lies in the transformation of such widespread and intense interest in the Korean pop culture to a lasting academic interest in Korean studies. The participants acknowledged that it was essential for Korean studies to capitalize on the rising popularity of Korean Wave and the ever-growing attention on North Korea so as to secure a lasting interest in the work of Korean studies. Participants looked forward to more of this type of gathering in the future, including ones that include policy analyst panels as well.

Stanford University
616 Encina Hall
Stanford, CA 94305

PHONE: 650-724-8271
HTTP:// aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/korea

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