

## Korean Studies: A Few Personal Ruminations

After having devoted close to fifty years to the study of Korean history, it is a pleasure to present at the opening of the 27th AKSE Conference a few personal thoughts on my experiences with what has come to be called “Korean Studies.” When I started out to do historical research in Korea in the 1960s, the term “Korean Studies” had not yet been coined. Instead, at Seoul National University *kuksa*, “national history,” was taught and practiced, and I was frequently reminded that I, as a foreigner, was unlikely to understand what the issues of Korean history were. Indeed, the unlocking of the Korean past seemed to possess its own norms and usages reserved to Korean minds, despite the country’s ongoing struggle to gain a recognized place in the world. On the other hand, Korea was still practically unknown in the West and did not figure in university curricula in Western Europe and only in a select few in the United States. In short, the study of Korean history was a closely guarded academic territory in Korea, while in the West, Korea was a negligible entity that was hardly regarded as an integral part of East Asia.

The last fifty years have seen remarkable developments, however, in many directions. “Korean studies” have indeed become a multifaceted field of teaching and research as the proliferation of teaching programs and the growing list of publications testify. But have Korean studies become a new discipline? One might think so on the basis of the wide use of the catch-all term, “Korean Studies”, in institutional appellations, professorial titles, teaching curricula, etc. In reality, however, the situation is quite different. Though “Korean Studies” is a plural concept, the field has been broken down along disciplinary lines. The student who concentrates on literature does not necessarily have knowledge of religion(s) or economics, and the one who pursues political science is most likely little concerned with philosophy or folklore. Given the complexity of Korean civilization this is not surprising. Similar trends are also discernable in studies on

China or Japan. Clearly, no one person could possibly acquire an all-embracing knowledge of Korean history and culture. Specialization therefore seems unavoidable. Nevertheless, such diversification has its disadvantages. In earlier AKSE conferences, when the number of participants was small and the range of presentations limited, we used to arrange the program in such a way that all participants had the opportunity to listen to *all* the papers and discussions in an effort to circulate specialized knowledge as widely as possible. This is, regrettably, no longer possible today. What can be done? Should literature students, for instance, be prevented from listening to their colleagues in their own field and instead be told to attend sessions outside their discipline? Although this would be quite educational, it would presumably hardly be welcomed.

The point I am driving at is simple: I am pleading for more interdisciplinarity in Korean studies. Interdisciplinarity is often misunderstood as meaning “encyclopedic knowledge,” in the manner of a Renaissance polymath who boldly merged philosophy, religion, and science into one body of knowledge. No, this is not what I mean. Rather, I understand the term “interdisciplinarity” as an attempt to interconnect several disciplines for the purpose of solving particular problems. This goes far beyond the simple borrowing of some vocabulary of another discipline—as has lately become quite fashionable. Rather, this means integrating some of the theory and methodology of another field of study into one’s own research. In other words, interdisciplinarity in this sense means crossing disciplinary boundaries and acquiring innovative theoretical and methodological knowledge that helps to see one’s specialized research from a new and perhaps unexpectedly fruitful perspective.

Just one striking recent example comes to my mind: think of the Ebola crisis in Western Africa. The virus spread until the medical personnel combating the epidemic acquired some

knowledge, provided by ethnographers, of local burial rites—the real source of the multiplication of the Ebola virus.

The situation in Korean studies is luckily not as precarious, but our scholarly curiosity should be such that we give serious thought to how we can make use of the concept of interdisciplinarity in our own research. Social science research often does reach beyond disciplinary confines, but the humanities, in particular history, still are weak in this respect.

As a social historian, I have over the years been preoccupied with finding a key to a more in-depth understanding of the workings of Korean society. Of course, there exists already a copious literature with “social history” or “*sahoesa yŏn’gu*” in their titles. Yet, these works usually do not go beyond describing certain features of society such as family composition, marriage ties, biographies, etc.—studies that are usually limited to one particular historical period. For its scope and detail a still amazing work is Kim Tu-hŏn’s *Han’guk kajok chedo yŏn’gu* of 1969. Later works were to follow, but the majority of them are merely descriptive, lack a historical perspective across dynastic boundaries, and, above all, do not show how social reality is intertwined with the political, economic, intellectual, and religious life of the country. Clearly, a single-subject approach, in my case history, is inadequate to explore, analyze, and explain the driving forces behind the historical process over time.

How do we grasp the complexities of this process and what role did the *social* play in it? I supplemented my historical inquiry with social anthropology, a discipline that has long concentrated on unravelling the way in which diverse entities such as kinship/family was related to political organization, legal procedures, religious cults, and the like. Although at first focused on “primitive” societies, social anthropological theory and methodology have long since been fruitfully applied to the study of complex societies in both East and West. Indeed, social

anthropology is by definition an interdisciplinary enterprise that delivers the sophisticated analytical instruments with which the interrelationship/interaction of a multitude of sub-structures such as kinship, political organization, economic relationships, religious beliefs, among others, can be merged into a comprehensive appreciation of the context of social existence.

My first attempt to combine historical research with insights borrowed from social anthropology was my work on the transformational impact Neo-Confucianism had on Korean society during the transition from late Koryŏ to early Chosŏn. Although I was able to describe and explain this momentous transfer of knowledge by tracing the legislative process, which propelled the transformation, I failed to explain why and for what purpose the Koryŏ elite had sought to revamp their native social system in conformity with a foreign (that is, Chinese) social paradigm. An integrated explanation required a wider historical perspective and a focus on the “social use of kinship.” On the premise that the *descent group* was the basic constituent element of Korean kinship, an exploration of its structure, socio-political function, and gradual transformation from early Silla across dynastic boundaries to the late nineteenth-century Chosŏn produced amazing insights, among them an answer to why Neo-Confucianism was adopted. Indeed, the focus on the descent group through time and space led to the conclusion that it was the persistence of the native kinship ideology that determined the flow of Korean history and led to the rigidification of Korean society in late Chosŏn—and not Neo-Confucianism, as is generally assumed! The details of this new research you will be able to find in my new book the publication of which unfortunately misses this conference by just a few weeks.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martina Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).

These brief remarks are not to advertise my own research, but to emphasize how rewarding an interdisciplinary approach can prove to be for reaching new understandings that allow us to re-interpret so-called historical facts we all have taken more or less for granted.

Interdisciplinarity, however, is still not sufficient by itself. Particularly in the case of Korea, crossing disciplinary boundaries should be coupled with crossing geographic boundaries. Indeed, the flow of ideas, books, and materials of every kind across Korean borders (in both directions) constituted at all times a crucial aspect in the country's social and cultural formation. While the impact of such a transfer of knowledge from China to Korea was especially multi-faceted and consequential, can you imagine a serious history of Confucianism that would exclude a consideration of the contributions Korean thinkers made to Confucian thought? In short, the idea of the transfer of knowledge with its emphasis on reciprocal exchanges and adaptations renders the old, but still often heard notion of one-sided borrowing obsolete. I would like to refer to a fascinating recent publication entitled *Space and Location in the Circulation of Knowledge (1400-1800): Korea and Beyond* that is based on a collection of papers presented at a conference on this very topic held here at the Ruhr-University, Bochum, in 2011.<sup>2</sup> This book brilliantly illustrates the manifold exchanges that took place between Korea and its neighbors in the arts, military science, technology, and religion. Indeed, the transfer of knowledge should become a central subject of East Asian history.

To end, I would like therefore to plead for more interaction with China and Japan specialists. Korean Studies are still too insular and do not reach out sufficiently to neighboring areas of study and, above all, to a wider audience. Would it not be possible to organize in a future AKSE conference a border-crossing discussion panel that would bridge disciplinary as

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<sup>2</sup> Marion Eggert, Felix Siegmund, Dennis Wuerthner, eds. *Space and Location in the Circulation of Knowledge (1400-1800): Korea and Beyond*. Research on Korea, vol. 1. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2014.

well as geographic boundaries? I hope that future conference organizers will be receptive to such an idea.

Thank you!

Martina Deuchler, AKSE Conference Bochum, July 10, 2015