

제출양식(Proposal)

A Criticism of the Lack of Korean Presence in the Texts of Eastern Religious Studies

I recently enrolled in a religious studies course at the University of California, Riverside, that overviewed the religions and religious systems of Asia. The professor discussed issues such as the origins of each Asian religion, the impetus of religion in Asia, the formation of religion in Asian nations, and the political role each religion played in Asia countries. However, the professor did not allocate an equal amount of time and material to each nation. While the course made a recognizable attempt at overviewing the importance of religions in nearly every Asian nation, larger nations appeared to be given more priority in terms of substance taught to students. In particular, China and India were provided a disproportionate amount of emphasis in comparison to other nations. Consequently, my American peers were groomed to have a greater appreciation for the cultures and religions of larger East Asian countries. In terms of Korea and its involvement with religion, only small passages were devoted to the study of religion in Korea. I strongly believe this phenomenon is due to the Western infatuation with countries that are viewed socio economically or culturally favorably. Another possible and more probable explanation for the lack of Korean presence could be that there is not enough information distributed amongst American academics. I strongly believe the latter theory is the catalyst for this phenomenon and it is clear that there needs to be stronger emphasis on Korea and its religion in these American texts in order to raise awareness of its cultural heritage.

The first text I reviewed was *Religions of Asia, Third Edition*, by John Fenton, Et Al. Upon browsing the table of contents, it is clear that the authors neglected any emphasis on Korea. There is no specific passage or chapter dedicated to the presence of Korean shamanism and no discussion of Korean versions of Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Confucianism. However, there are chapters dedicated to specific larger countries. For example, the authors decided to publish a chapter entitled “Religions of China and Japan”. While Japan does have a history of Shintoism and China is the progenitor of Taoism and Confucianism, many of these religions are not widely practiced. Moreover, Japan has an additional chapter dedicated to examining religion in its history from the prehistoric times to the modern day. When reading the chapters overviewing the importance of Buddhism and Confucianism in state affairs, the authors neglect to mention the impact of these belief systems in Korean government. Moreover, I question the importance and relevance of including these religions while Korean Shamanism is neglected. Compared to other Eastern Asian nations, Korea is as strong culturally and historically. Korea is entitled to receive the same amount of attention academically and there is no apparent reason for deciding not to do so.

In another text entitled *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* by Willard Oxtoby and Roy Amore, there is a similar phenomenon. Chapters and certain passages will glance at the belief systems of China and Japan, but will neglect the importance of religion in Korea. However, unlike the previous text, the authors decided to include a chapter that contains contents mainly about Korea. These contents are also paired with Chinese traditions and a distinction is made between the two. While I agree with the text that a majority of Korea's religious traditions stem from China, there are a plethora of differences between the original versions and the Korean interpretations. The book could have articulated the more specific intricacies of Korean sects of Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Moreover, I strongly believe this book is biased since Korean Shamanism is briefly glanced at. The book only devotes two or three paragraphs to one of Korea's original and oldest religious traditions. Consequently, this lead to my American peers observing Korea as a "weak state" or "culturally insignificant". Therefore, it is within Korea's best interest to positively influence and educate foreigners about its religious culture in order to promote better relations with other nations.

Even in religious studies it is imperative for Korea to maintain a presence in order to project its cultural and historical importance to foreigners. By improving the academic perspectives of Korea, the Korean government may hope to improve relations with nations in the future. Since education is one of the many conduits from which foreigners draw their perceptions of Korea, it should be the impetus for improving perceptions of Korea. Thus, I suggest that the Korean government invest into a campaign or policy of spreading Korean awareness in Western academic communities. Korean studies departments at various Universities are becoming insolvent due to budgetary constraints and the inherent lack of interest in Eastern Asian studies. It is apparent at my own institution, the University of California, Riverside, that my peers lack interest in the cultures of Eastern nations. In particular, Korea has some of the least amount of interest due to the department's inability to occupy space within the campus. Similar to my campus' own predicament, Korea Studies departments are irrelevant due to their inability to attract bright minds from student bodies. It is clear that, financially, Korean Studies is not a fiscally sustainable major for any college campus, let alone their ethnic studies departments. Therefore, I would like to provide some recommendations in order to promote Korean Studies departments, engage the academic community in Korean culture, and encourage interest in Korean heritage.

By offering scholarships, subsidized exchange trips, and academic funding, American and Western institutions of higher learning might invigorate their interest in Korean culture. Undergraduate scholarships are an excellent way of encouraging students to research and learn about culture because funding is used as an incentive. Moreover, subsidizing exchange trips to Korea will foster a greater appreciation for its history, By inviting and hosting academics and undergraduates, many will become interested in the culture via their experiences abroad. In terms of funding for academic research, Korean Studies departments would greatly benefit and grow since college campuses consider research output a metric of department of success. Moreover, providing additional funding to departments for academic

purposes would dramatically increase the number of faculty and courses taught at universities, thereby increasing the amount of cultural exposure.

Another possible solution to Korea's lack of presence in American texts could be to invite academics to local Korean communities such as different sects of religion. For example, Los Angeles has an enormous Korean Christian and Buddhist populations that can serve as accessible educational tools for religious scholars. This method might also prove useful in other fields, such as ethnic politics and sociology. By integrating scholars into the Korean community, they will develop a greater appreciation for the Korean culture and that appreciation will be reflected by their writing.

In terms of the higher education sphere, Korea should also consider subsidizing textbooks for collegiate courses. Several academics are interested in publishing textbooks and alleviating the inherent cost of manufacturing those textbooks would incentivize them to provide fair and accurate portrayals of Korean culture in proportion to other nations. Many Western academics are taught the importance of China, India, and Japan because their textbooks place emphasis on those nations. Even though Korea has cultural capital that is similar to these nations, the lack of interest in Korean culture stems from the literature that is studied by scholars. By helping academics publish their work, Korean literature will be given greater coverage. As a result, Korea can expect its culture, heritage, and traditions, to be observed by a larger audience and given an equal amount of viewership in American literature.

Korean culture lacks placement in American texts and higher education materials due to the greater availability and presence of materials related to Chinese, Japanese, and Indian traditions. Therefore, it is imperative for Korea to engage academics and higher education officials through education and supplemental programming that discusses Korean culture. If Korea does not close the cultural gap that permeates in American higher education, it will be unable to establish credibility in areas such as politics, academia, and international relations. I strongly urge the Korean government to heed my observations and implement initiatives that will spark interest amongst students and faculty at American colleges.

Works Cited

- Fenton, John Y. *Religions of Asia, Third Edition*. New York: St. Martin's, 1983. Print.
Oxtoby, Willard Gurdon. *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.

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