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## The Korea Moment in the Undergraduate Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Pedagogies and Analytical Approaches

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While Korea's growing global visibility presents an opportunity to reconsider its place in undergraduate teaching, it has often remained underrepresented within broader curricular structures. Addressing this gap, this special issue brings together interdisciplinary contributions that demonstrate how Korea can be meaningfully integrated into a wide range of courses, highlighting analytical themes and pedagogical strategies that cut across disciplinary boundaries. Collectively, the essays emphasize the use of authentic Korean sources to reshape classroom practices and encourage students to engage critically with locally grounded perspectives. In doing so, they link pedagogy and knowledge production, repositioning Korea not as a supplementary case but as a productive analytical lens for examining broader processes of regional and global interaction. Korea thus emerges not only as a subject of study but also as a site through which renewed methodological and pedagogical questions can be explored. By offering adaptable teaching strategies and accessible resources for exploring deeper, contextualized understandings of Korea, this collection contributes to ongoing debates about how Asia is taught while fostering students' critical thinking, cross-cultural engagement, and broader global perspectives.

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### **Introduction: Why Korea?**

The Korean Peninsula has had long-standing political and cultural connections as a “middle power” between mainland China and the Japanese archipelago and even more broadly between Russia and maritime trade routes, making it a critical “flashpoint” where major powers have intersected and collided. Over the past several decades, Korea has become an increasingly visible presence in global politics, economy, and media. Yet, despite its prominence in headlines and global popular culture as well as considerable growth in opportunities and support for academic study at major research universities, Korea still often occupies a secondary position in undergraduate Asian Studies courses and programs, and even more so in the broader curricula of colleges and universities in North America.

After the Second World War, China and then Japan emerged as fields of study in the US academy. Compared to these more established area studies, Korea was a relative newcomer, bringing with it renewed perspectives and pedagogical possibilities. Driven by successful global products like K-pop, K-dramas, and even consumer market brands like Samsung phones and LG appliances, growing student interest in Korean politics, economy, history, and culture has created new opportunities for teaching Korea with curricular innovation. Equally important, Korean studies navigates a cultural touchpoint of global security issues by remaining the only Cold War divided nation in the world and by maintaining its unique, post-colonial presence. We may consider training our future generations to become global change-makers by leaning into this Korea moment. In this context, rather than positioning Korea in competition with other areas, its growing global visibility invites educators to reconsider how teaching Korea can contribute to broader conversations in Asian Studies and across the undergraduate curriculum.

This special issue, geared toward non-Korea specialist undergraduate educators, seeks to invigorate our undergraduate curriculum with Korean topics that may be added as ancillary components into a variety of disciplinary courses or adopted into East Asian studies programs. The topics and methods illustrated here stretch across a wide array of class formats and disciplines and provide basic contexts for doing so. This issue offers accessible resources and high-impact pedagogical practices for instructors and students who wish to explore Korea in their classrooms.

The manuscripts collected here will also help shift knowledge production about Korea, pushing it from the margins of many disciplines by tackling innovative methods and engaging with Korean topics through authentic Korean sources. They should be treated as entry points to engage our students in more challenging conversations about our cross-cultural interactions. We hope the pedagogical projects in this issue

may produce high-impact learning in ways that may enhance our students' global citizenship.

### **Origins and Evolution of the “Featuring Korea” Special Issue**

The origins of this special issue date back to February 8–9, 2019, when Michael Sprunger (Hendrix College) and Zach Smith (University of Central Arkansas) organized workshops on “Centering Korea in the Curriculum” for undergraduate and secondary educators. Held at Hendrix College and University of Central Arkansas, these two-day workshops provided an important venue for sharing, learning, and developing thematic perspectives and pedagogical approaches to teaching Korea across disciplines. Building on this momentum, in May 2019 Sprunger initiated plans for a special issue of *ASIANetwork Exchange* in collaboration with its editors.

Over time, the project evolved as contributors' availability shifted, and we assumed the role of co-guest editors in the summer of 2023. We organized a series of virtual meetings to revitalize the project and refine the Call for Proposals, building on Michael Sprunger's original vision of “centering” Korea in the undergraduate curriculum and its emphasis on high-impact pedagogical practices. The revised Call for Proposals, circulated in December 2023, retained the original framing of “centering” Korea. However, after reviewing the contributions, we ultimately adopted the title “Featuring Korea in the Undergraduate Curriculum,” which more accurately reflects the diverse, integrative, relational, and context-specific pedagogical approaches represented in this volume.

In 2025, Taku Suzuki (Director of International Studies, Denison University) stepped in as the journal's new Editor-in-Chief. He brings fresh insight into global Asian issues with his expertise in diasporic and transnational migration studies. We are grateful for his guidance and support during this period of transition, and we also wish to acknowledge the contributions of former editors Ron Green and Susan Bergeron. We further thank the contributors and anonymous reviewers whose collaboration and commitment helped bring this special issue to fruition.

*ASIANetwork Exchange* is a leader in the field of Asian pedagogical studies with a robust collection of manuscripts for Sinologists, South Asianists and Asia generalists alike. Among its strengths has been its ability to span the Indo-Pacific region to highlight connections and exchanges along the peripheries of a Sinitic universe. However, any attempt to cover the whole eastern hemisphere inevitably overlooks certain regions. This special issue attempts to tackle one such void by dedicating an entire issue to Korea.

### **Article Summaries: Pedagogical Strategies and Interdisciplinary Connections**

This collection brings together seven contributors who offer innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching Korea across a wide range of topics and disciplines. Across the contributions, we identify three thematic clusters that reflect both historical scope and pedagogical application in the undergraduate curriculum. The first cluster centers on the topics and historical issues related to the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945). It brings together approaches that engage questions of anticolonial movement, local actors' agency and voices, war, and historical memory, which are applicable to courses such as modern history, ethnography, political science, and international relations. The second cluster focuses on teaching North Korea and the dynamics of peace and conflict on the Korean Peninsula in the post-1945 era. It offers pedagogical strategies relevant to political science, international relations, peace and conflict studies, and media studies. The third cluster turns to the contemporary period, highlighting teaching techniques which can be usefully integrated into cultural studies, language and composition, ethnomusicology, and survey-level Korean history. Reflecting the temporal breadth of Korean studies, these clusters illustrate how Korea can be integrated into a broad spectrum of disciplinary contexts while fostering meaningful interdisciplinary connections.

In the first cluster, Deborah Solomon's and Jooyoun Lee's work highlight their pedagogical attention to local actors' voices as a means to teach the experience of war and colonialism from Korean perspectives. The March First Independence Movement of 1919 to end Japanese colonial rule is a watershed moment in Korean history. Still, the penetrating effects that Woodrow Wilson's famous 14-point speech of 1918 had on colonies around the world is relatively unknown. Deborah Solomon conducts a deep dive into a variety of primary sources from this period to demonstrate a spirit of internationalist agency, being careful not to reinforce Eurocentric or colonialist diffusionism. By drawing on Wilsonian rhetoric in teaching the March First Movement, Solomon situates Korea within the global debate of self-determination and underscores how Korean actors engaged in emerging international norms. Her pedagogical strategy presents both pro and anticolonial writings that branch off of "Wilsonian" ideology as an effective way to bring Korea into conversation with other global anticolonial movements, especially applicable in a modern world history or a global politics class.

While Solomon situates Korean colonial history in a global and transnational context where ideas for international peace were put into action in the Japanese colony and among the Korean diaspora, Jooyoun Lee sheds light on the testimonies of Korean comfort women to reexamine the narrative of World War II and their implications for international security. The first strategy, which she terms "juxtaposed national and

testimonial narratives,” engages students through readings, written assignments, class discussions, and curated video clips to explore and compare competing national narratives of World War II across the United States, Japan, China, and Korea. Central to this approach are the survivor-centered accounts of Korean comfort women whose voices are often overlooked in conventional war narratives. The second strategy frames the comfort women issue as an ongoing challenge in security and reconciliation rather than a settled historical matter. Drawing on various readings, a reconciliation-oriented discussion framework, and in-class activities, Lee encourages students to analyze the issue across multiple levels, including historical memory, nationalism and nation-building, state-society relations across borders, and postwar diplomatic relations. She stresses that a bottom-up approach to war and security enables students to develop analytical skills as well as a deeper and broader understanding of global processes and their multifaceted implications.

In the second cluster, Eunbin Chung and Inyeop Lee each propose alternative approaches to understanding North Korea through comparative and contextual analysis. Eunbin Chung reframes our analytical framework on North Korea by shifting our sources of knowledge away from Western sites to Korea and their Asian neighbors in an attempt to distance the learner from a Cold War binary and to enable a “more inclusive, regionally grounded approach” to North Korea. To prepare students for International Relations simulation, Chung begins with a class exercise of reading about a North Korean missile incident from South Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and North Korean news sources. Reading these sources alongside each other compels the reader to notice myriad and sometimes contradictory reports that are grounded in local historical memory. Rather than reinforcing the monotonal reports on North Korea in Western media, she conducts inter-textual discourse analysis that permits news events to be interpreted and critiqued. Students may consider the logic, local history, and geopolitics behind each state’s position. Chung also shows Korean films, and has students read local speeches and summit and policy reports before they are tasked with engaging in negotiations. A major outcome is that students understand North Korean interests as logical and may develop a contextualized understanding of a formerly “dehumanized or caricatured” North Korea. Such activities present important possibilities for critical thinking and analytical engagement.

While Chung compares regional media discussions on North Korea, Inyeop Lee situates North Korea within broader historical and comparative developmental patterns in his Comparative East Asian Politics course. Lee’s primary teaching strategy encourages students to compare North Korea’s historical and political development with other East Asian cases, including China, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, and South Korea. He carefully

designs focused discussion questions and lectures to promote comparative analysis and critical reflection across four stages: regime formation, political integration, resource expansion, and conflict resolution. He draws a theoretical framework for each stage and demonstrates how these conceptual tools help students demystify the exceptionalist view of North Korea by identifying both similarities to and differences from the other East Asian cases. For example, students gain a deeper understanding of North Korea as a “product of specific historical forces – colonialism, national division, the Korean War, and Cold War confrontations,” rather than viewing it statically as “an extreme outlier or inherent evil” state. Lee observes that the selective images of North Korea circulating in North American public discourse perpetuate negative perceptions of the country, suggesting the importance of cultivating more comprehensive understandings of its historical and political dynamics to open possibilities for improving U.S.-North Korea relations.

The third cluster focuses on three themes of K-pop culture, traditional music, and general Korean history through student-centered, participatory approaches to learning. Marcy Tanter notices an important paradox of American education: while many US families have members that served in the Korean War, American schools teach next to nothing on Korea. Tanter uses her college composition classes to build a bridge between the US and Korea. Meanwhile, she shares her reticence as a “white professor” who may be teaching about Asia to Asian students. She addresses this politics of representation in two ways: by treating Korean authorities as priority sites of knowledge and by prompting student self-reflection. Introducing Korean culture topics has the added incentive of drawing in American students already exposed to the massively popular Korean wave (*hallyu*). She suggests utilizing translated material in a “respectful way” in order to expose students to matters beyond boilerplate topics (like the Korean War and North Korea) for deeper cross-cultural understanding. Non-Korea specialists may integrate such Korean lessons to enrich their world or cross-cultural content and ultimately help their students become more “engaged global citizens.”

Similar to the ways Marcy Tanter uses K-pop videos and K-drama episodes to teach her English composition class, Sunhong Kim uses *samul nori* and *p’ungmul* to teach her world music classes for majors and non-majors. Kim explores how the form and function of Korean percussion traditions, particularly *samul nori* and *p’ungmul*, can be taught in any Anglophonic college classroom. Drawing on her teaching practice, she demonstrates how *p’ungmul*, a community-based performance tradition rooted in collective participation and interaction, serves as a foundation for developing bodily awareness, coordination, and expressive percussion techniques. Emphasizing “participatory performance,” Kim highlights the reciprocal relationship between performers and audiences as a key

pedagogical principle. These skills are then applied to *samul nori*, a Korean drumming genre performed with four percussion instruments, whose concise and structured rhythmic patterns lend themselves well to ensemble performance. Students learn to understand Korean rhythms through listening, vocalizing rhythmic patterns, and bodily alignment, rather than relying primarily on Western musical notation. Kim argues that hands-on, practice-based pedagogy enables students to engage in Korean percussion as a lived cultural experience, offering an effective approach to integrating Korean music into world music and Asian Studies curricula.

Lastly, Frank Rausch uses films in his history class on modern Korea to demonstrate engaging teaching methods that help students understand the broader aspects of Korea including its social norms, political and civic culture, and lived experiences. Rausch examines how Korean history can be taught more effectively in the college classroom through movies paired with structured discussion questions and in-class activities. He introduces key periods of Korean history (1392 to present) and integrates cinema into helping students engage with historical experience, societal values, and cultural norms. For the Joseon dynasty, clips from *Chunhyang* and *The Throne* are used to prompt discussion of Confucian ethics, family relationships, social hierarchy, and political authority. The Japanese colonial period is explored through multiple clips of *Sweet Dream*, with activities that encourage students to analyze colonial modernity, gender norms, and cultural change, and social anxiety under imperial rule. To examine the post-division era, Rausch compares South and North Korean movies, *The Marines Who Never Returned* and *The Flower Girl*, to highlight not only competing ideological narratives but also shared themes such as the “same theme of powerful men representing a strong government that can protect women.” Overall, he emphasizes that integrating film clips with guided discussions and interactive activities deepens students’ historical understanding by connecting political developments to the lived experiences and values of people across different periods of Korean history.

### **Linking Pedagogy to Knowledge Production: Korea, Asia, and Beyond**

Taken together, this special issue is more than simply a collection of case studies about Korea from different disciplines. While the contributors come from different academic fields including history, English, political science, international relations, musicology, and languages and cultures, their articles share analytical themes and pedagogical strategies that cut across disciplinary boundaries, demonstrating the productive value of interdisciplinary connections. Across these essays, Korea emerges not only as a subject of study but also as a site through which renewed methodological and pedagogical questions can be explored.

In fact, one of the most significant contributions of this collection lies in the contributors' sustained engagement with course materials produced in and within Korea. These sources include the Declaration of Independence (Solomon 2026), comfort women testimonies (J. Lee 2026), films produced in Korea (Rausch 2026), academic sources written by Korean scholars (I. Lee 2026), Korean newspapers and films (Chung 2026), K-pop lyrics written by Korean musicians and K-dramas (Tanter 2026), and performance tradition of *samul nori* and *p'ungmul* (Kim 2026). These pedagogical strategies are not merely teaching techniques but active sites of knowledge production through which deeper, contextualized understandings of Korea emerge. They enable multiple historical and contemporary dimensions of Korea to be understood and interpreted within broader regional and global frameworks. What comes to be known is heavily dependent on "whose views are incorporated into the process of knowledge production" (Lee 2024, 57). As the contributions collectively demonstrate, incorporating such locally produced materials encourages students to move beyond passive consumption of filtered knowledge and instead develop critical skills to interpret historical events, political dynamics, cultural meanings, and lived experiences emerging from within Korea, while situating them in broader global contexts.

In doing so, these essays intervene in curricular practices as well as in broader intellectual and pedagogical debates about how Asia is taught, where Korea has often been overshadowed and non-indigenous sources are typically prioritized. Rather than treating Korea as either an isolated object of study or as a mere supplemental case, this collection demonstrates how focused attention to Korea deepens students' understanding not only of Korea itself, but also of its entanglements with Asia and the wider world. The adaptable pedagogical strategies presented here thus contribute to ongoing dialogues within Asian Studies on regional representation and transnational connections, while also extending to broader conversations about interdisciplinary teaching and curriculum design. Ultimately, by underscoring the relationship between pedagogical intervention and knowledge production, this collection highlights how Korea serves as a productive analytical lens for examining wider regional and global processes and transformations.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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