

Eurasia Foundation International Lectures, Fall 2021 Semester
The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology” Lecture Series (7)
Title: Korean Language and Korean Culture

For the 7th Eurasia Foundation International Lecture in the 110th academic year of the Chinese Culture University, we invited Professor Kim, Sunhyo (金善孝) from the Department of Korean Language and Literature of the University to give a lecture entitled “Korean Language and Korean Culture.” *Hallyu* has become popular among young people in Taiwan, and more and more people learn Korean because they are fond of *Hallyu*. In this lecture, Professor Kim introduced the history and linguistic characteristics of Korean in simple terms. Professor Kim pointed out that for her, “Japanese” is the easiest foreign language to learn. What causes such a result? From the perspective of Korean grammatical structure, both Japanese and Korean adopt SOV structures, and both of them are also phonograms, which are different from Chinese ideograms. So if students in the Department of Japanese Language and Literature want to learn Korean, it is easy to get started. Likewise, if students of the Department of Korean Language and Literature want to learn Japanese, it would be easier for them.

History of Korean

It is inferred that the influx of Chinese characters was in 108 AD, and Korean used Chinese to communicate for a long period of time. Through “*Hunmin Jeongeum* (訓民正音),” Sejong the Great, the King of the Joseon Dynasty, promulgated hangul (the Korean characters), which he created with scholars. Before that, Koreans used Chinese characters to write. Although the use of Chinese characters is no longer visible in modern Korean, Hangul is used instead. These Korean scripts were created by Sejong the Great and the scholars of *Jiphyeonjeon* (集賢殿, The Hall of Worthies).

Korean Script

In his speech, Professor Kim explained that the script used in modern Korean, called Hangul (Korean script), was created in 1443 and officially promulgated for use in 1446. At present, Korean scripts are composed of “consonants + vowels.” There are 17 basic character sounds and 11 vowels, totaling 28 (24 in modern use).

Korean Culture and Korean Language

(1) The correlation between Korean and age

Professor Kim pointed out that Korean language has a deep integration with Korean culture and Koreans use different language expressions to different audiences. For example, when greeting to different audience like elders/peers/juniors, other languages generally use the same expression. Korean has strict standards that they have to use different greeting expression to different audience. Therefore, when Koreans meet for the first time, they often ask: “How old are you?” This is a relatively personal question. If you are not familiar with Korean culture, you may have some misunderstandings. Hence, while learning a language, we must also pay attention to the importance of culture and etiquette.

(2) Korean dining etiquette

Professor Kim analyzes the habits of Koreans from the etiquette of food culture. For example, the following four habits are highly valued by Koreans in table manners.

A: The elder moves the spoon first. B: The spoon and chopsticks are placed on the right side. C: Use the spoon and chopsticks at different times. D: No sound is made when eating. In addition to the above four habits, do not sneeze while eating, and do not pick up the bowl to eat. Koreans have a strong hierarchical interpersonal relationship when they drink with different people. Different countries might have different etiquettes in food culture; hence, when you learn a language it is better to learn the etiquettes of this culture in order to integrate into the local culture.

(3) Korean food and kimchi culture

Professor Kim pointed out that bibimbap is not commonly eaten in ordinary households, but the bibimbap in restaurants is viewed as a healthy meal. South Korea's "*Han Jeongsik*" (韓定食) features a healthy orientation as the mainstream, advocating a variety of vegetables and dishes. It is special that Koreans will drink seaweed soup on their birthdays. Therefore, foreigners get confused, when a Korean asks them, "Did you drink seaweed soup?" Yet, if foreigners understand Korean culture, they would understand why seaweed soup is linked with birthdays.

There are various types of kimchi depending on the region. Its original name is *Chimchae* (沈菜). Because of lacking food in winter in the old days in Korea, cabbage is made into kimchi, which is for eating with rice. As times goes, there are special kimchi all over Korea. Professor Kim also pointed out that the average Korean family have two refrigerators, one for ingredients and one for kimchi. Since LG Electronics began to sell the Kimchi refrigerator in 1984, it has been the standard equipment for Korean households until now.

Student Questions

After Professor Kim's lecture, the students raised questions about Chinese characters. In the 15th century, Korean also used Chinese characters. Both Korea and Japan used Chinese characters at that time, and Japan still uses Chinese characters now. Why South Korea don't use Chinese characters anymore? Whether not using Chinese characters bring any native impact to life? In response to this question, Professor Kim said: Although Chinese characters are not used now, when I open the dictionary to look it up, almost all characters have Chinese characters. In the 21st century, some people think that it might be good to use Chinese characters again. Professor Kim personally also thinks that it would be good to use Chinese characters in Korean, because it will help to link with the learning of Chinese and Japanese.

(Web link: <https://eurasia.pccu.edu.tw/index.php>)

(Written by: Chin-Tang Huang, Associate Professor, Department of Japanese Language and Literature)