

The challenge of developing korean studies in Latin America

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Abstract / Resum / Resumen

The author provides a overview on the relevance, difficulties and positive factors of the studies dedicated to Korea elaborated in Latin America. The article was presented on International Forum on Korean Studies on July 14th, 2005 (International Center for Korean Studies, Institute of Korean Culture, Korea University).

L'autor elabora un estat de la cuestió sobre la rellevància, dificultats i factors a favor dels estudis dedicats a Corea elaborats a Amèrica Llatina. Article presentat en el Forum on Korean Studies el 14 de juliol de 2005 (International Center for Korean Studies, Institute of Korean Culture, Korea University).

El autor elabora un estado de la cuestión sobre la relevancia, dificultades y factores a favor de los estudios dedicados a Corea elaborados en America Latina. Artículo presentado en el Forum on Korean Studies el 14 de julio de 2005 (International Center for Korean Studies, Institute of Korean Culture, Korea University).

Key Words / Paraules clau / Palabras clave

Korean Studies, Latin America, East Asia, Cultural Exchanges, Academic Institutions, sociocultural studies.

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Introduction

On July 14th., 2005, the International Center for Korean Studies, Institute of Korean Culture, Korea University, organized the International Forum on Korean Studies. I had the possibility to introduce some ideas regarding the challenges that Latin American scholars face to develop this field of study.

The reality shows that there is a growing number of people interested in studying about Korea in Latin America. But what is better is that most of the newcomers are advanced undergraduate students or young professionals. This is a crucial factor for the future.

Assuming the reality of the distance, in terms of cultural affinity, historical experiences, political relationships or economic exchanges, the development of Korean studies in Latin America is a real challenge. We are far from each other, we do not share borders, our cultures are quite different, and, basically we do not see each other as “important” either in the field of the economy, in politics or social issues.

As a consequence, there is a necessity to create the interest from the bottom. We should try to build an initial perception about the existence of the “other”. Interaction will be difficult if the counterpart does not exist. This can sound obvious, but my feeling is that something like this is happening between Korea and Latin America. If the objective of recognizing the “other” is achieved, the process of mutual understanding will probably speed up.



The rapid flow of information around the globe facilitate the process, but there should be people behind. And human beings are the main asset in every relation. In this regard, there are two positive forces, the first composed by academic institutions and individuals studying the “other”; the second, the large number of Koreans living in Latin America.

From a broader point of view, there is a rise in the interest on East Asia in Latin America, not only in the field of economy –pushed by the growing presence of Asian companies in our continent- but also in other fields, like social sciences. As soon as this trend grows, studies will be more specific about those countries that are closer or better known. In other words, those who are more “visible” for Latin Americans. And this is the case of Korea, together with Japan and China.

Korean Studies Today

Two years ago, in October 2003, the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, organized the first Latin American Congress on Korean Studies. It was a real success, in the final session we decided to create a net of specialists on Korean studies. In 2004, the Association for Korean Studies of Argentina (AAEC) was founded. Since then, AAEC organized different activities to spread the knowledge about Korea in our country.

AAEC is still growing. Last June, we had our First Congress for Korean Studies hosted by the University of Rosario where more than forty papers were presented with the presence of around one hundred students, professionals and businessmen.

In the coming October, Mexico will host the Second Latin American Congress on Korean Studies. After the Congress, there will be a discussion about the feasibility to create the Latin American Academy for Korean Studies.

The institutional development of the ALAEC will be based on the previous existence of many individuals and institutions committed to develop Korean studies. The most important Universities in the region have their own area of East Asian studies and some specialists on Korean studies. They regularly organize courses, seminars, conferences and other academic activities. Anyway, the number is still limited.

Within the most important institutions, the Colegio de Mexico offers the oldest postgraduate program on Korean Studies in the region with a strong emphasis on language learning. The UNAM has also a long tradition in the field and relatively newer developments in the case of the University of Guadalajara. In Cuba, the Centro de Estudios de Asia y Oceania plays an important role in the subregion. Brazil has many individual scholars specialized in Korea at the Universities of Rio Grande do Sul, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and of Parana in Maringa within the most important. Peruvian Universities –like the Catholic or the San Marcos- have some developments in the field of culture, literature and economic studies. Chile has the University of Chile and of Santiago and an increasing number of professionals interested in Korea after the creation of a bilateral FTA. Colombia is also a country with a growing number of people involved in this field like in the case of the University Externado.

The leading institutions in Argentina are the University of Cordoba specialized in history and society, the University of Buenos Aires, working in Korean immigration and society, the University of Rosario in international relations, the University del Salvador in religion and

culture and the University of La Plata in business, regional politics, economy and international relations. In August, 2005 the University of Buenos Aires, with the support of the Korea Foundation, will launch the Center for Korean Culture.

The relevance of Korean Studies for Latin America: A two way route

Knowledge is essential. It doesn't matter where does it come from. One of the most important challenges that researchers face when they start a research project is innovation. In other words, what original idea can be provided to the scientific system. There are more possibilities to find something original in those fields that were not explored enough yet.

In the case of international studies, Latin America has a great influence from Europe and the United States. Where can we find new fields of knowledge? In those places where we hardly did a systematic research. Which is this place? Clearly, East Asia.

Let's play a game. A Korean international observer says: *“Not many people in Latin America know that Korea had a colonial experience, that there were military dictatorships, -followed by human rights violations-, that Korea had a financial crisis, or that the country based its economic development in a strong State”*. I assume that we can all agree on that. Now, a Latin American international observer takes the same paragraph and changes the word Korea for Latin America. Who can say that is not correct?

Isn't it enough to open the eyes and perceive that there are substantial similarities between Korea and Latin America? Those events deeply affected our societies and influenced in many generations of Koreans and Latin Americans. Don't we have enough material for the work of social scientists? Those similarities are not very well known to both peoples, then, comparative studies can be a good starting point.

From cinema to sports it's possible to show the growing interest about Korea in Latin America. Kim Ki-duk's film *“Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring”* was a real success all over the region, consolidating a trend of interest on Korean films shown during special exhibitions organized in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and other capitals.

If the cinematographic tradition in Latin America is strong, you know that sports and specially soccer, is an essential part of our lives. In 2002, we all went, at least virtually, to Korea to enjoy the World Cup.

Positive factors and obstacles for the promotion of Korean studies in Latin America

There are still many difficulties to expand Korean studies in Latin America. The main negative aspects are: 1) **Lack of societal interest**: Those who are devoted to Asian studies in general, and specifically to Korean studies, are still a minority, and the material possibilities to expand their work within their institutions is limited; 2) **Difficulties in communication**: The use of Korean and Spanish on both sides is not common. In Latin America, students do not see it as a useful tool for their work; 3) **Lack of funding**: Resources destined to this kind of activity are minimal. The reality shows that some Korean institutions (e.g Korea Foundation and Korea Research Foundation) are essential for the development of Korean studies in Latin America and



4) **Low profile in economic exchanges:** The share of mutual participation in trade and investment flows is irrelevant. After the 1997 Crisis, many Korean companies closed their businesses in the region and concentrated their work in other markets.

But there are also some positive factors: 1) **No historical controversies:** The distance in this case plays a constructive role. No historical, territorial or political differences are in the bilateral agenda. The relations can be considered as one between equals, avoiding any feeling of superiority or inferiority; 2) **The role of Korean immigrants:** The last fifty years were characterized by an increasing number of Koreans migrating to Latin America to settle their families and develop their lives in the region; 3) **The Hallyu:** Still limited, the expressions of Korean art are increasing their presence in our cultural life. We did not receive TV programs like “Winter Sonata” yet, but Korean art producers can find a fertile land in Latin America the same as Hongkonese film makers or Japanese anime producers did in the past.

Final remarks

The recognition of the “other” and “visibility” are crucial concepts to face the challenge of developing Korean studies in Latin America. The first objective should be oriented to cover those shortages.

Those “hidden” similarities –the value of democracy, human rights, economic development– are a good basis for a wider understanding. Not only academic activities but thousands of other initiatives can be taken.

We should create a common agenda, at private and public level, with the support of the existing resources in academic institutions.

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Three stages of cooperation are needed to pave the way for a deeper relationship. The first one, between Korea and Latin American countries, at governmental level. The second, through a closer coordination of governmental actions with the private sector and the academic institutions, within the countries itself. The third, between Latin American academic institutions interested in Korean studies. The two first are the weakest, the third one is becoming a reality.

We are far from the desirable but patience and imagination are the essential requisites to achieve the shared goal of expanding Korean studies in Latin America.