

Introduction to Korean Society and Culture

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Course Description:

Having achieved modernization and economic development in a remarkably short span of time, Korea demonstrates many unique features within socio-cultural processes and issues that are common to newly industrialized countries (NICs). This course introduces students to issues in the contemporary Korean society and culture and is based on common questions that many foreign students have about Korea but cannot ask to their Korean friends or find answers to in media, largely because the issues in focus are strongly influenced by stereotypes, may be considered “embarrassing” to Koreans, politically controversial, or hard to approach without sufficient academic knowledge. These include the notion of ethnic homogeneity and the problem of racism, the “educational fever” and preoccupation with appearance, the reasons for Korea’s record of some of the world’s fastest growing rates of late marriage, divorce, and suicides, the merits and demerits of Korean educational system as well as the South Koreans’ attitude to North Korea and the US. The course adopts the historical, sociological, and cultural studies’ approaches to help students find their own answers through lectures, reading materials, team discussions, and research projects. The course will enrich students with knowledge of Korean society and culture history through a perspective that highlights both similarities and differences of the Korean case from transformations in other East Asian countries and modern societies in general.

Materials/Text:

The reading material comprises book chapters and recent journal articles written by representative Korean and foreign historians and sociologists to ensure balance between the outsider and insider perspectives. All reading materials will be provided to students in the electronic form.

Illustrative reading list:

Selected chapters from Yeona Kim ed., *Routledge Handbook of Korean Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

Selected chapters from Michael Breen, *The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004).

Selected Chapters from Hee-Yeon Cho, Lawrence Surendra, and Hyo-Je Cho ed., *Contemporary South Korean Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

Selected chapters from Kyong-dung Kim ed., *Social Change in Korea* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2008).

Young-Kyun Yang, “Education and Family in Korean Society,” *Review of Korean Studies* 14-1 (2011): 57–87.

Sang Un Park, “The Myth and Ritual of Dieting in Korean Society,” *Korea Journal* 47-2 (2007): 42–71.

Requirements:

Attendance and participation: Students can miss no more than three classes without a proper reason. Absences with proper reasons will be excused only with supporting documentation such as a doctor's note. Class 7 will be substituted with a field trip (to Gangnam), which will take place on one of the Fridays or weekends during the course. Active participation in class discussions and Q&A sessions is strongly encouraged and, together with attendance, comprises 20% of the final grade.

Reading: Before each class, students are required to read approximately 20 pages of assigned reading materials.

Research project: During the course, students carry out their own research projects on topics of their choice related to one of the themes covered in the course. For the mid-term evaluation, students present intermediate results of their research in teams. The final paper, approximately five pages in length, follows the format of a research paper where students present findings of their research projects.

Quiz: There is one quiz in class 13. Quiz questions ask factual information and definitions of terms covered in the assigned reading material and lectures.

Schedule:

Class No.	Date	Topic and main question
1	July 11	Introduction to the course. Compressed modernity: What is unique about modern Korean society?
2	July 12	Traditional vs. modern: Are there non-invented traditions in contemporary Korea? Visit to Dankook University Museum
3	July 13	Homogeneity and multiculturalism: Are Koreans really a homogeneous ethnicity? Is there racism in Korea?
4	July 17	Family: Why does Korea record growth rates of late marriages, divorces, and suicides that are some of the highest in the world?
5	July 18	Education: Do Koreans have the "educational fever" and why?
6	July 19	Youth aspirations and employment: Is the Korean work ethics the reason why many non-Korean members of K-pop bands leave?
7	July 20	Korean Wave: Field trip to Gangnam
8	July 24	Mid-term evaluation: student presentations
9	July 25	Consumer culture: Is plastic surgery a choice or a must to Koreans?
10	July 26	Political culture: Why did so many Koreans hold candle vigils to demand the impeachment of President Park?
11	July 27	Korea's Other: Do Koreans worship the US? Do they hate Japan? How do they feel about North Korea and China?
12	July 31	Religious life: Why are there so many Christians in Korea? How has shamanism survived in the modern Korean society?
13	Aug 1	Quiz, Course wrap-up, Q&A
14	Aug 2	Final reports due
15	Aug 3	Completion Ceremony

Assignments:

- Team project on the topic of students' choice (mid-term)
- Report (5 pages) summarizing the student's findings on the topic (final)

See the "Requirements" part above for details.

Evaluation:

Attendance and participation 20%, Team project 20%, Quiz 30%, Final report 30%