

Value and utility of North Korean studies in Romania

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In a short period of time, Korean studies in Eastern Europe have created a great demand for education and have accumulated various research achievements. At this point, more strategic attitudes and efforts are required to find a long-term and stable growth engine of this domain. Just teaching Korean language and literature well will inevitably face the limits of the development of Korean studies, and without background knowledge of the Korean region, that is, an overall understanding of history and culture, it can be regarded as a superficial education. In this regard, it seems necessary to provide education on North Korean studies that can be said to be a part of Korean studies as a whole, to build more diverse educational contents. For example, educational contents related to North Korea will contribute to the diversity of Korean studies and will also create new demand for Korean studies education in Romania.

Key-words: *Korean studies in Romania, North Korean studies, new demand for Korean studies education, strategic attitudes of educators*

1. Introduction

It is clear that Chinese and Japanese studies have a long history² and a strong academic standing in Romania. Compared to these, only 20 years have passed since the seeds of Korean studies were sown in Romania. However, in a short period of time, Korean studies have made remarkable progress. This development can be attributed to the synergy effect of various factors such as the efforts of many Korean studies educators and the Korean government, and the dissemination of various high-quality Korean cultural contents called *Hallyu* 'Korean wave'. Now is

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² For example, the department of Chinese language and literature was established in 1968 and the department of Japanese language and literature in 1978 at the University of Bucharest.

the time to strengthen not only Korean language education but also Korean studies as a more comprehensive concept.

The field of Korean studies, apart from focusing on the Korean language and literature, requires a broader perspective that links various fields such as history and culture. It is clear that language education is not just for the purpose of acquiring language skills, but should be connected with education about Korean culture, covering emotions, spiritual values, and long traditions. This educational direction can be seen to contribute to the increase of synergy for proper Korean language education. Therefore, it is inevitable to hit the limit just by being good in Korean. In other words, without background knowledge of the Korean region, that is, an understanding of the history, culture, society, etc., the mere study of Korean language can be regarded as superficial education.

Hardware changes are important to improve the quality of Korean studies education, but above all, it is considered a more desirable method to make software changes and then provide appropriate hardware for them. To this aim, it can be an effective way to prepare a diverse range of educational contents. For example, for those learning Korean abroad, language education must inevitably coincide with Korean history education. In order for the students to more effectively acquire Korean speaking ability, it is essential to understand the interrelationship between the language, culture, and history of the Korean people. This 'trinity education' will greatly contribute to the development of Korean studies in Romania. From among these fields of study, history education requires a more professional and systematic teaching method and a broader perspective of educators. It is not an exaggeration to say that the status of language itself is determined by the flow of history, so the change in language can be understood as a historical process.

It can be said that the history of North Korea is also a part of the history of the Korean people. Unfortunately, it is true that Korean modern history education failed to overcome the confrontational perception of North Korea while being bound by the traps of Cold War ideology. The history of North Korea, as we perceive it from a capitalist point of view, is still very limited and negative. It is believed that only the attitude of educators with both progressive and conservative perspectives can overcome this problem and further mature the educational foundation and capacity for North Korean history. The perception of history can be different depending on what perspective one takes, and the cause and interpretation of that perception can also be different. A more objective view of

history freed from the shackles of ideology should be implanted in foreign learners. In other words, it is necessary to approach the history of North Korea by making students understand the specific circumstances of each historical period, rather than adopting an unconditional negative approach.³ This educational direction will free foreign Korean history learners from the trap of prejudice, allowing them to access the history of North Korea more easily, and to naturally accept it as an integral part of the history of the Korean people.

Now, the reunification of the Korean Peninsula should be viewed as a possibility rather than as a matter of justification.⁴ Education on North Korean history is essential to effectively deal with various visible and invisible social problems that may arise in the process of social integration between North and South Korea after unification. In particular, the role of non-Korean experts who understand North Korean history and culture is very important. In other words, with their help, it is possible to broaden the framework of discussion on various issues involved in the process of unification of the two Koreas and to further enhance the transparency of the unification process. In particular, Romanian learners who, directly or indirectly the communist period in their mother country, will be able to give considerable help to the process of inter-Korean social integration.

Although the necessity of history education for foreigners learning Korean has been frequently emphasized, it is true that education on the history of North Korea, which is a part of the Korean people, has been hesitant. In order to properly understand the other Korea, that is North Korea, from a balanced perspective, it would be the best way to learn its history. In addition, objective understanding of North Korean history is expected to contribute to the trinity education mentioned above. In this article, I would like to introduce concrete methods and examples of

³ When studying a specific historical period or subject, it is necessary to approach it after understanding the specific situation of the time as well as the current point of view. In other words, it is necessary to understand and evaluate the structural conditions that forced the thoughts, wills, and actions of historical figures in the context of the time. This is the historical situational approach (Lee 2005, 27).

⁴ Professor Song Jong-hwan of the Department of North Korean Studies at Myongji University spoke about the possibility of unification of the Korean Peninsula in four main categories. 1. Global trend of liberal democracy and market economy system at the global level 2. Problems of the North Korean system (third-generation inheritance, confrontation between pro-Kim and opposing forces in the military, economic difficulties) 3. Deepening power gap between North and South Korea, inflow of external information 4. Isolation from the international community due to the development of weapons of mass destruction such as nuclear and missile development (2011, 37-41).

education related to North Korea studies for Korean language learners in Romania by collecting the lecture results so far. Through this, it can be said that the main purpose of this article is to find an educational method that can instil a correct perspective on the issues of modern history of North and South Korea, rather than simply an interest-oriented gossip education. This is because North Korean studies can now be regarded as a part of our Korean studies. In addition, this article is considered to naturally give an opportunity to think about the value and necessity of North Korean studies.

2. The Necessity of North Korean Studies in Romania

Now is the time to start researching Korean studies as a more comprehensive concept. The direction that Korean studies educators should aim for in the future is to try various approaches so that research on Korea itself can be actively conducted.

Korean studies in Romania should develop in the future within the concept and meaning of 'area studies'.⁵ In other words, it is believed that Korean studies can be continuously developed and produce academic results only when planned as part of area studies. The basis of area studies research is to professionally analyze and integrate the politics, economy, society, culture, language, and history of a specific region or country. It can be understood as a so-called blending discipline based on the freedom to conduct research from a variety of angles and perspectives. In that sense, Korean studies in Romania can be considered to be in an incipient stage. Therefore, it is somewhat regrettable that the majors of most Korean studies educators at European universities, including Romania, are focused only on language and literature. This problem is also connected to the fact that there are not enough educators in Romanian universities that operate the department of Korean language and literature. Although circumstances may differ from university to university, the departments of Korean language and literature in Romania have been overshadowed by other departments of Oriental languages and literatures, so there are considerable difficulties in hiring Korean studies-

⁵ Area studies can be said to be an interdisciplinary study field that conducts objective and scientific analysis on topics related to regions and spaces. Area studies were born in the United States in the 1950s. Although area studies researchers have different academic backgrounds, they have a common research direction: regional analysis (Kim 2014, 88).

related educators. In the case of Babeş-Bolyai University, (financial) support from institutions related to Korean studies support programs such as KF (Korean Foundation) and AKS (Academy of Korean Studies) is absolutely required for department operation. Korean studies in universities in Western Europe with a long history in the humanities and social sciences are showing relatively high growth potential. On the other hand, the situation of Korean studies in Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, is not satisfactory. Therefore, it will be difficult to efficiently manage departments without direct assistance from various institutions in Korea. For the fundamental development of the department, it is necessary to consider the qualitative growth of the department by opening a variety of courses in addition to the currently operated courses. Of course, for this to happen, an adequate budget is absolutely necessary. Currently, the only way to obtain such a budget is through AKS or KF. In other words, for the qualitative development of Korean studies, financial and material support from the above institutions should be continuously provided for some time in the future. A more strategic attitude will be needed to receive support from the above institutions for the time being.

It is important to present visible achievements such as excellent academic research achievements, how many local students get high grades in TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean), or how many students go to study in Korea. However, the most important thing is that the feedback from the beneficiary universities, that is, autonomous efforts, should be made appropriately. In other words, it is important to show to institutions in Korea that there is a lot of interest in Korean studies-related departments at the university level and that there is a will to develop the departments in the future. Under these conditions, it is necessary to think about how to more strategically solidify the position of the department of Korean studies within the university. Currently, not only private universities but also national universities will be unable to achieve their original mission of education and enhance the competitiveness of universities without solving their own financial problems. It should be recognized that generating revenue is also essential for promoting the development of the universities. Therefore, in order to solidify the position of the departments of Korean studies in the universities, it is necessary to instil the fact that the departments of Korean studies are generating considerable profits and are helping the university's insufficient finances. For example, it is true that Babeş-Bolyai University conducts an entrance examination for freshmen every

July, earning considerable profits from the admission fee.⁶ If a considerable number of students apply for the departments of Korean language and literature in the admissions process, the universities will recognize the profits from these departments and give weight to the importance of Korean studies. One question that may arise at this point is how to effectively increase the number of applicants for the departments related to Korean studies.

There are ways to directly benefit students, such as expanding scholarship programs, but broadening and expanding the range of Korean studies courses can also arouse a lot of interest from prospective university students. In fact, many students studying Korean at Babeş-Bolyai University are interested in more specific and systematic North Korea-related courses.⁷ For students from Romania, who directly or indirectly experienced the communist system in the past, North Korea itself is a very interesting study topic. News related to North Korea has become an interesting topic in the Romanian society as well. Giving these students an objective perspective on the issues of contemporary history of North and South Korea rather than simply focusing on interest will enrich Korean studies in Romania. This method is expected to have a positive effect not only on the qualitative development of departments but also on the expansion of department size. This is because, along with those who want to major in Korean, people who want to study North Korea more academically can also be absorbed into the departments of Korean language and literature. This will greatly contribute to the increase of the admission fee, which is directly related to the financial problems of the universities mentioned above.

Every year when new students are admitted, it is not difficult to find some excellent ones. Most of the current students want to go to graduate school after graduation to deepen their knowledge in Korean studies. In order to follow this trend, it is required to open a master's program related to Korean studies at the Faculty of Letters of Babeş-Bolyai University, which operates Korean language and literature as a major. Considering the current situation, it would be difficult to establish an independent master's program for the department of Korean language and literature itself, but if a graduate program is established jointly with the

⁶ In the case of Faculty of Letters at Babeş-Bolyai University, the admission fee/ the entrance examination fee is about 210 lei (about 50 dollars).

⁷ In the summer of 2021, more than 30% of the topics of graduation thesis presented by students of the Korean language and literature department at Babeş-Bolyai University were related to North Korea. Most of these theses dealt with the North Korean defector issue, and a number of them are related to the North Korean political system.

departments of Chinese and Japanese languages and literatures belonging to the department of Asian languages and literatures, there will be no difficulties. Of course, the will of the university officials and of the head professor of the department of Asian languages and literatures are very important. It is clear that the establishment of a graduate program will greatly contribute to the continued development of the department and to the expansion of the demand for Korean studies. The opening of graduate programs at Babeş-Bolyai University will be a great driving force for the qualitative and quantitative growth of Korean studies in Romania. The key to opening a graduate program may be found in the lecture/teaching method of the course or in the diversification of the course. In fact, it is impossible to open a graduate program with courses that lack freshness due to mannerisms. Opening various courses related to North Korean studies will help a lot not only in opening a graduate program but also in the effective operation of graduate program. For third-year students of the department of Korean language and literature at Babeş-Bolyai University, the 'North Korean Society and Culture' course was launched in 2011 by assistant professor Dong Hun Kwak to introduce the history of North Koreans, their guiding ideology, and their culture. This course focuses on understanding a series of historical flows such as why communism had to enter North Korea, how it developed, and why Kim Il-sung had to introduce North Korean-style communism as the Juche idea. Romanian students show a lot of interest in this course, and their attitude to participate in the class is also very serious. This fact proves the need to open/start a new North Korean studies course.

Opening and strengthening courses related to North Korean studies can increase the presence of the department that operates Korean language and literature in local universities and various supporting institutions in Korea, and, at the same time, create new demands for education. Additionally, it can give a lot of strength to the establishment of graduate schools related to Korean studies.

3. Contents of education related to North Korean studies

3.1. The question of what communism is

Since the history of science is a history of continuous progress, all scientific research results of the past are judged and evaluated by the advanced science of

the present. However, the history of philosophy can be said to be a history of isolation from each other rather than a history of continuous progress. Therefore, as in science, it cannot be said that modern philosophy is more advanced than ancient philosophy. It is true, for example, that the philosophy of Platon or Aristotel cannot be said to be inferior to that of Jean-Paul Sartre or Bertrand Russell (Jung 1994, 3-4). For this philosophical example, it cannot be said that communism⁸ is completely defeated by current capitalism, nor can it be said that it is ideologically inferior to capitalism. In other words, it is difficult to accept the fall of several communist regimes as a perfect victory for capitalism.

In an article by Min Kyung-bae, a prominent scholar in North Korean studies, we can find out what Deng Xiaoping (1992), a pioneer in China's reform and in the process of opening up, said about the new 'Chinese style communism'. Deng stated that:

capitalism has a history of several hundred years longer. We must selectively accept advanced technology, useful knowledge and capitalist experience. But we should never fear or import the capitalist system. We will not imitate the corruption and immorality of the capitalists. (Deng 1992, quoted in Min 2002, 44)

Deng was also of the opinion that the guiding ideology, namely communism, would be converted into a Chinese-style one. As such, it is clear that communism is still alive and well. In Arnold J. Toynbee's⁹ (2016) cyclical view of history, that is, from the stages of 'appearance', 'development', 'decline', and 'collapse', the present communism may be not in the process of decline or collapse, but in the stage of development. It can also be seen that furthermore, he argued that all civilizations come out of 'response to challenges'. If the communist ideology is regarded as a civilization in this way, the new Chinese-style communism introduced by Deng

⁸ One theoretical system constituting Marxism, the 'materialistic conception of history', can be seen as falling within the scope of modern philosophy, and it can be regarded as a view of history that applies dialectical materialism to the historical development of human history.

⁹ The great historian Toynbee, in the introduction to his book *A Study of History* (2016, 19-74), explained the process of appearance, development, decline, and collapse of civilization by introducing the principle of 'response to challenges' as an opportunity for the emergence of civilization, referring to the civilizations that have existed in human history. It is somewhat unreasonable to understand communism in terms of Toynbee's view of civilization, but it is not impossible, as he mentioned civilization by the proletariat.

Xiaoping can be understood as the response of Chinese communism to the serious challenge of capitalism.

I often explain to students that communism is still alive, and unless the history of mankind comes to an end, the ideology of communism will not disappear even though it may be supplemented and modified to suit each reality. When facing the history of North Korea, which has communism as its guiding ideology, what is absolutely necessary is an accurate understanding and a neutral thinking about communism. First, I have informed the students about the historical background of the emergence of communism and about the development and succession relationship between the guiding ideologies of communist countries. Based on this, I have tried to explain how communism was established in North Korea through discussions with my students. Since Romania was also a communist country in the past, the method of comparing and analyzing its process of communization with that of North Korea is also quite effective. There are many ways to study a communist country, but among them, the analysis of the process of communization provides the students with an opportunity to actively participate in the discussion. I have introduced some previous studies that analyzed the process of communization in various communist countries and identified the types of establishment of communist governments together with the students. No historical phenomenon can be explained by a single theoretical framework or methodology. Of course, generalizing about certain phenomena can be considered a risky attempt, but analyzing it using a special paradigm or comparative model would be a very appropriate way to learn the history of North Korean communization. Learning about the process of North Korean communization is obviously the first step in understanding North Korean communism, and it can also be seen that it provides students with an opportunity to examine the internal contradictions of the North Korean community at that time.

3.2. Historical perceptions of the Korean War

The Korean War is one of the historical aspects of Korea that Romanian students are very interested in. In simple terms, it can be said that this is a historical event that is not far in time, and it is the first confrontation between the capitalist bloc and the communist bloc, which seems to be an interesting topic for the Romanian students. In addition, this increased interest can also be attributed to the fact that Romania, a historical communist country, was an enemy of our past and a comrade

of North Korea, which gave completely different views and evaluations of the Korean War.

As a large number of documents related to the Korean War have been released from the communist bloc in the past, discussing the responsibility for the war will no longer be meaningful. Rather than emphasizing the responsibility for the outbreak of the Korean War, it would be of considerable value if the students approached it through a communist perspective rather than a capitalist perspective. If the Korean War is viewed through the perspective of Romania, which shared the same ideology with North Korea, new evaluations and views can be presented. If the nature of the Korean War that was commonly described so far and the aspects of the war observed by the Romanian communist authorities are comparatively studied, it can induce more interest in students and provide them with an opportunity to learn the basic methods of comparative analysis. I have encouraged students to actively use *Scânteia*¹⁰, the official newspaper of the Romanian Communist Party, to find out the position and views of the Romanian authorities of the time. Because it is the primary source of data representing the official position of the Communist Party in the past and is a kind of representative government document, I think that there will be no small amount of research value related to the Korean War. However, it should be noted that a large part of the material published in *Scânteia* was for propaganda, so it should be clearly pointed out to the students that there are many problems with its credibility. Therefore, it is clear that students should not accept the published content as it is, but should develop correct interpretation ability by comparing it with related previous studies.

When using official gazettes such as party organ as educational materials, it is necessary to remind students of 'esoteric communication', a typical characteristic of communist mass media presented by Donald S. Zagoria (1964). Yeom Hong-cheol (1987, 293) explained the characteristics of Zagoria's esoteric communication as follows: if some unusual reporting behaviour, such as 'arguments in a controversial tone', 'different views of leaders on a certain fact or policy', 'omission or reduction of reports', 'distortion of content', 'selective reporting' or 'unique comments', etc. are detected in the organs of communist parties, these intentions should be carefully observed and analyzed. Because the policies and positions of communist states or leaders are presented in the organs of parties in indirect ways,

¹⁰ On August 15, 1931, the first issue of *Scânteia* was published, and thereafter it was published illegally until October 8, 1940. It was legally published in daily newspaper format from September 1944 to December 1989 (Giurescu *et al.* 2003, 418).

I have recommended students to approach the papers from the communist bloc with the Zagoria analysis method in mind at all times. The training to analyze the official communist gazette of the past, which published reports in the way of esoteric communication and Aesop's Fables, is expected to help students in the future to analyze and study North Korean official gazette.

3.3. Understanding the Juche Idea, the guiding ideology of North Korea

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the basic premise of North Korean studies, especially history education, begins with an understanding of the Juche Idea. Therefore, it is an important part that students who study North Korean history must be familiar with. Examining how the Juche Idea was organized, how it materialized in each social field, how the entire North Korean society has been controlled by it, and how each person's life has been regulated by it is a shortcut to understanding the entire North Korea.

Before understanding the nature of the Juche Idea, students must understand the domestic and international circumstances surrounding Kim Il-sung during the mid 50s to mid 60s. If students fully understand why Kim Il-sung had to introduce the Juche Idea, which is North Korean own ruling ideology, to the North Korean political arena, they will be able to naturally understand the domestic and international situation in North Korea at that time, that is, the historical background. Internal factors such as 'the failure of the Korean War', 'the rise of anti-Kim Il-sung political power in North Korea', 'reduction of Soviet support to North Korea', 'lack of funds for post-war recovery' and external factors such as 'Stalin's death', 'Khrushchev's de-Stalinization movement', 'movements of non-aligned countries', 'anti-Sovietization movement in Eastern Europe', 'Sino-Soviet split', 'passive attitude of China and the Soviet Union toward the Vietnam War' should be understood as the most important keys to understanding Juche Idea.

I have educated students to understand the characteristics of North Korean society by explaining *cult of personality* that has acted as a mechanism to materialize the Juche Idea. In general, it is said that the political phenomenon with cult of personality is feasible when the will of the absolute ruler and the political, social and cultural conditions are in harmony (Lee 2005, 466). In other words, this political phenomenon appears due to the combination of subjective and objective elements. If a sufficient understanding of the political, social, and cultural conditions that can be considered as objective factors is achieved, students can

understand that North Korea was created by combining communism with the traditional culture of the Korean people, such as absolute monarchy, common consciousness, and Confucian customs.

Mobilization, militarization, and uniformity caused by the division of the Korean Peninsula and the Cold War have created a social soil that allows cult of personality by putting the supreme leader at the center. In North Korean history, Kim Il-sung has been regarded as the father of a family based on Confucian patriarchal principles, that is, a family called North Korea. The systematic policy with cult of personality for the Kim family has three main aspects: 'idolizing the leadership of the Kim family including Kim Il-sung', 'increasing loyalty to the Kim family' and 'mythological idolization of the Kim family' (Yu *et al.* 2006, 99). This was a very unusual political attempt that was unprecedented in the history of the communist movement, so it is a fact that students must be aware of. Such political attempts can also be found in Romania under the former Romanian leader, Ceaușescu Nicolae. In particular, I have conducted a comparative analysis of Ceaușescu and Kim Il-sung with the Romanian students, and have used to create an atmosphere to exchange opinions about the future of North Korea. This is because the future of North Korea, which can be inferred from the end of Ceaușescu, a historical experience of the past, is the most valuable among the many options we can consider.

4. Conclusion

Korean studies in Romania have been developed with a focus on Korean language education. As the demand for Korean language education is gradually increasing, the content and quality of the Korean language curriculum are becoming more systematic. In other words, Korean studies in Romania had many ups and downs in the process of growth, but now it can be said that it is on the right track to some extent. However, language education alone has a limit to the driving force for the development of Korean studies, and cannot adequately cope with the diverse learning needs. For the qualitative development of Korean studies in Romania, it is necessary to actively respond to new educational demands such as North Korean studies through diversification of educational contents.

For the effective development of Korean studies, I personally think that it should be studied and educated from the perspective of 'area studies'. This makes

Korea itself a possible topic for research and education from various perspectives. Therefore, North Korea, which is a part of the Korean Peninsula, can also be studied and researched within the framework of Korean studies. Opening and properly operating North Korean studies courses at a Romanian universities with departments related to Korean language education can create new educational demands and provide an opportunity to appeal to the officials of the universities and various support institutions in Korea. In addition, it can provide a lot of momentum for the establishment of a graduate program, which is a symbol of the ultimate development of the departments.

For education related to North Korea, more professional and systematic educators are required. The perception of North Korea can change depending on how we look at this country, which can be called another Korea. For example, the historical perception may vary depending on how we view North Korean history, and in particular, an unconditional negative perception can't be free of historical prejudice. For Romanian students who directly or indirectly experienced the communist system in the past, North Korea itself is a very interesting study topic. Giving them an objective perspective on issues in the contemporary history of North and South Korea will enrich Korean studies in Eastern Europe.

Another benefit of the development of North Korean studies is that foreigners with an understanding of North Korea will be able to contribute to some extent in the process of inter-Korean social integration after Korean unification. With their direct and indirect help, I think that it is possible to broaden the scope of discussion and further enhance transparency in resolving various problems that may arise during the integration process. The unification of North and South Korea can be viewed as a process of converting the communist system of North Korea into a capitalist system, rather than simply absorbing North Korea by South Korea. I would like to say that the case of Romanians who directly experienced this process in the past will provide valuable information and implications for the process of social integration between the two Koreas.

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