

## **Exploring Culture through Literature Written in Unfamiliar Languages**

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“Oh, that looks like Chinese or Japanese writing,” was the first comment we heard as children browsed the picture books about Korea at their tables. We had integrated a few picture books written in Korean into our study of Korean culture because we felt it was important for children to see the language even though none of them could read it. We believed that language is an essential aspect of cultural identity and so wanted children to be able to see the language as part of exploring culture. We also felt that books written in Hangul, the native alphabet of the Korean language, would help the kids see the culture as “real.” We expected confusion about this unfamiliar language; what we did not expect was that the children would respond with such excitement and interest to these books.

Our study of Korea was part of a school-wide inquiry to explore how to engage in thoughtful cross-cultural studies with kids. So often, studies of other cultures remain surface level with a focus on food, fashion, folklore, festivals, and famous people while ignoring the central values and ways of living and thinking within a culture. Children gain facts about a cultural group or country, but little in-depth understanding of that culture. The result is often a tourist-level curriculum and the development of stereotypes, not intercultural understanding.

We were particularly interested in the ways children’s literature about and from other cultures support students in developing understandings of those cultures. We gathered all kinds of books about Korea, many of which came from Kathy Short’s extensive international collection at the University of Arizona. Some books were family memories of Korea written by Korean Americans, others were books written by Korean authors. The majority of the books were in English and were published in the U.S.

We knew that language needed to be part of our exploration of cultural identity because the way people view and interpret their world is reflected in their language (Banks, 2001). We purchased only a few books in Korean, because we did not expect these books to play a major role in our inquiries, given that none of us, teachers or children, could read or speak the language. We thought that children would find the books intriguing, but did not expect the level of interest that children evidenced, nor that they would return to study these books over and over. The children’s responses challenged our assumptions and led us to inquire into the ways in which literature written in an unfamiliar language can be integrated into a cross-cultural study. Our explorations of the possibilities for engaging children meaningfully in books written in languages they do not understand led us to new insights about the role that these books can play in any study of a cultural group.

### Integrating Hangeul Literature into Browsing

The first way we used literature in Hangeul was to integrate a few picture books into the Korean text set that we used as an initial experience to interest the kids in Korean culture. We introduced students to the text set by asking them to browse the books. We wanted to see what they noticed. We hoped they would browse to gain initial insights and impressions about the culture and later use these books for more in-depth explorations of the culture. As we expected, they commented on the similarities and distinctions that they noticed between their own culture and the cultures represented in the books. What we didn't expect was how significant the few books written in Hangeul would be for the children. The value of this literature as a part of the collection went beyond awareness of the language as an aspect of Korean culture. They continuously referred to these books as we webbed their impressions and questions about Korean culture. Over several weeks of using these books for browsing and initial discussions about Korean culture, the books written in Hangeul were clearly the most popular with children. They spent a great deal of time looking carefully at the details of the illustrations. For the children, these books were "real" and they saw them as more authentic representations of Korean culture. Also, we realized that the majority of books about Korea written in English were traditional literature or historical fiction, while the Hangeul picture books portrayed contemporary culture, which was of greater interest to the children. We immediately purchased a larger set of Hangeul picture books and borrowed others from a Korean graduate student who graciously shared her collection.

The children's interest in the written language in these books was immediately evident and continued over time. As the students browsed the first time, Demetri took out a small slip of paper from a fortune cookie that she had in her pocket and compared the Chinese on the slip to the writing in the books. Kelvin, a kindergarten student who moved to Tucson from China, thought that the writing might be Chinese. One student commented that even though she couldn't read the words, she could tell what was happening from the pictures. We had the sense that, while the children could make some sense of the books through the illustrations, their interest lay in the text itself and that they were intrigued with Hangeul and so we decided to spend some time exploring the language.

### Investigating Written Language

Even though we told the children that these books were from and about Korea, many commented that the books were written in Chinese. We thought that this might be because their experience with written Korean was limited and that they associated the Hangeul symbols with the Chinese characters with which they were more familiar. Several children who had investigated Japanese culture in their classroom wondered if the language was Japanese. We knew that it was important to develop an awareness of the distinctions between Korea, Japan, and China and thought we could begin to build this understanding by determining the differences between the three written languages. Kathy gathered collections of Japanese and Chinese literature to add to our Korean books. We labeled the books according to the language and asked the children to study the text carefully

and see what they noticed about the similarities and differences between the languages.

We suggested that the children choose books from two of the languages and place them side by side so that they could compare them more easily. At one table, Michael told Kathy that the Japanese books were backwards. Kathy pointed out that it depends on whose perspective we are looking from—the Japanese would say that our books open backwards. The realization that what is the “norm” depends on whose perspective is used to view an action or object was a new insight for the kids and one that was often referenced throughout our cross-cultural study. We did not want to fall into the trap of viewing our own culture as the norm against which other cultures are judged as deficient or “weird” in some way.

When the students gathered at the Story Floor, we created a chart of what they had noticed:

Chinese has symbols and there are some small symbols between the big ones.

Japanese symbols have more lines in them.

More detail and strokes in Japanese and Chinese.

Japanese moves top to bottom instead of left to right.

Korean and Chinese are the same as English—left to right.

Some Chinese characters have house shapes.

Korean symbols seem more complicated.

Japanese has more variability.

There are some similarities between Korean and Japanese symbols.

Japanese is all mushed together.

There are more words in Chinese than Korean.

Japanese has small symbols next to large ones.

We simplified this engagement for our kindergarteners by having them compare only two languages. Because Kelvin was familiar with Chinese, we asked them to compare Chinese with Korean. Their comments included talk about Korean having more words on a page than Chinese and Chinese having more lines in the symbols.

The kids were often not sure how to verbalize their observations and did not have the terminology to label the differences but they were looking closely and clearly recognized that the three languages were distinct, but shared some characteristics. To further our investigation of Korean written language we explored its structure and organization and practiced writing in Hangul.

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Hangul is a relatively new written language with an interesting and well-documented history. Not surprisingly, Kathy had a book, *The King's Secret* (Farley, 2001), about the history of Hangul and King Sejong, the man responsible for its creation. She told the story of how this enlightened ruler developed a phonetic system of writing to replace the complicated Chinese characters that the Koreans had been using. He felt Koreans should have a written language that matched their spoken language in order to make reading and writing accessible for all Korean people. The kids were fascinated with this story and with the idea that someone would create an alphabet.

We invited Yoo-kyung Sung, a Korean graduate student from the University of Arizona, to introduce Hangul to the children. She showed them, using magnetic symbols, how each shape represents a sound and how to position the symbols to form a word. Then Yoo-kyung gave each student a chart of Korean symbols and their sounds to use as they explored writing Hangul. Because of the way Hangul was created, the sound/symbol relationships are systematic and easy to learn. Many of the children were most interested in writing their names using the Korean symbols. Some attempted to translate by trading one Korean symbol for one English letter. They struggled with the idea that the Korean symbols represented sounds found in Korean spoken language and that our English spelling patterns wouldn't apply to Korean writing. For instance, Ashleigh struggled until she realized that she only needed one Korean symbol to show the sound of "eigh" in her name.

Some students tried to apply what they knew about the sounds that the symbols represented in decoding the words from the books. They were confused because they could sound out the Korean words but didn't know what they meant. They were expecting English to emerge from the Korean text. It was interesting to see how this engagement allowed the kids to explore Korean but also to develop deeper understandings about English and the connections between written symbols and sounds within a language.

Kids continued to explore Hangul through comparing several sets of books that we found in both their original Korean text and in English. Kane/Miller is a publishing company that obtains the rights to books that originate in other languages and cultures and translates them, retaining the original illustrations, for U.S. distribution. We purchased the English translations (Bae, 2007; Kwon, 2007; [Lee, 2003](#); Lee, 2007) and Yoo-kyung helped us find the original Korean version. Kids spent hours comparing the books, reading the English and then closely examining the Hangul text to see if they could recognize words.

Understanding Contemporary Life

The Korean text set was intended as a vehicle to a deeper and more complex understanding of Korean culture. As we began to pull individual books to read and discuss at the Story Floor, it became clear that the Korean books that were available in English depicted historical Korea and traditional stories, both of which showed Koreans in traditional dress and in village settings from long ago. The only books we found that depicted contemporary life in Korea were written in Hangul. We had to find ways to support students in deriving meaning from the Korean language books or their understanding of Korean culture would be outdated and inaccurate.

Furthermore, we wanted children to realize that cultures have a past and a present. We wanted them to understand that the way people live changes over time. We knew that children often assume that other cultures are the same today as in the past, unlike the U.S. We wanted to challenge this ethnocentric perspective. It made sense to introduce this concept close to home. We used two books set in Arizona, one in the early 1900's and the other more recently, to ask the children to think about whether the stories took place in their past or present and how they knew this. We then asked them to sort the Korean texts according to historical and contemporary settings. We hoped that this experience would frame their thinking as they continued to explore the texts in search of information about life in Korea.

Many of our students were surprised to learn that children in Korea not only had televisions, video games, and cell phones, but that many of the sophisticated electronics that we have in the United States were developed and manufactured in Korea—and available there long before here. Upon reflection, this misconception makes sense given the resources that teachers have available to them. If children's experience with Korean culture comes exclusively through historical and traditional literature, they would assume that Korea today looks

like Korea in the past. We found it interesting that the U.S. publishers sense a market for historical and traditional books about other cultures, but fail to translate books about contemporary society. We found this trend also true with chapter books, finding only historical fiction about Korea available in English. We used the books on contemporary life in Korea in several ways. They were integrated into our text sets so that kids continuously interacted with them, often primarily focusing on the illustrations, as sources of information about contemporary life for their own inquiries. We also chose several of the books and asked Yoo-kyung to provide an English translation for those books so that we could use them for read-aloud and response engagements with the younger children. For example, one Hangul book told the story of an older sister who has to take her bratty younger brother on the subway to visit her grandmother. We knew that the children would have many connections to this book from their own lives, but that there would also be some interesting cultural differences. One that the kids noted right away was that the two children were allowed to go by themselves on the subway. We read the book aloud in English and then read it a second time and invited children to respond through a graffiti board where they could sketch their connections and thoughts about the book through visual images and words. The kindergarten children sat on the floor around a large sheet of paper and sketched and then later dictated comments to add to their visual responses.



#### Exploring Cultural Differences and Anomalies

The books in Hangul raised interesting cultural differences and anomalies for children. One book in particular became an exploration of cultural and age differences for children and teachers. Kathy shared a book that she found particularly puzzling with the teachers and children. The book, written in Korean, was about a boy who is looking for his mother. He waits at a train stop. The illustrations indicate the passing of time. Each time a train stops, the boy talks to the conductor and the train moves on. The boy waits, and waits, and waits, but no mother appears. In the end, it looks like the boy is still waiting, as a snowstorm

swirls around him. No one has arrived to pick him up. Teachers were outraged. How could this small boy be left alone at the end of the story?

We needed to comprehend the print so that we could better understand the story. We thought about having Yoo-kyung translate for us, but Kathy found the book in English at a bookstore in Australia, titled *Waiting for Mummy* (Lee, 2004). In this version, an illustration had been added to the final page showing the boy walking hand in hand with his mother through the snow—the happy ending that we craved. This book led us into an interesting discussion as we explored differences in cultural values and why this book would be seen as a seminal piece of literature within Korean culture while we found it troubling as American adults.

We wondered how the children would respond to the story, so I read and showed the English version while Kathy showed the Korean version. Then we asked them what they thought about the story. There were clear differences in the responses based on age level. The fourth and fifth graders responded similarly to the adults with an immediate concern about the child being left without his mother. In fact, as I finished reading the book aloud, one fourth grader audibly gasped, saying “He never found his mother?” and the rest of the class looked visibly concerned. The kindergarteners were not as concerned about the ending; they seemed to have a young child’s faith in mothers and knew she would come eventually. They were more concerned about the ways that the conductors treated the boy and how he was separated from his mother:

How come they won’t let him inside?  
Why do the conductors talk so mean to him?  
Why is his nose red?  
He still didn’t find his mom.  
There are some houses that have Korean writing.  
I wonder if his mommy is on one of the trains.  
The guy told him to stay and wait – he didn’t want him to get hurt.  
When he went outside to play, he went to a different city and got

lost.

When reading the book aloud to the fourth graders, Sheshna noticed something that all of us as adults had missed—the mother and child are in the Korean version on the final page but their image is very small in the middle of a double-paged spread of a snowstorm. What was interesting is that the editors of the Australian version lifted that small image of the mother and child and put it by itself on the final page of the English version to make it obvious to readers that the mother had come. Clearly, they shared our cultural values and needed to be sure that children would realize that there was a happy ending.



The difference in the emphasis that each book made on the mother returning made us wonder what this said about Korean culture. The children had some ideas about why the mother's return was less conspicuous in the Korean version:

- Korean books like to leave people guessing.
- It breaks people's hearts—they don't need happy endings.
- Yoo-kyung told us that Koreans don't often say I love you, they aren't as expressive.
- Australians need happy endings.
- The book made us think and focus on problem solving.
- Koreans like puzzles and the book left us puzzled.
- They want you to look at the visual images more closely to figure it out.

This experience was significant for teachers and children in beginning to probe the deeper differences in cultural values between American and Korean cultures. The discussions were thoughtful and tentative, but did not focus on one culture as "right." Instead the focus was on understanding the differences in values and we found that these explorations continued after this experience with much more

thoughtful consideration of understanding Korean cultural values and not assuming they were the same as ours.

#### Assessing Children's Understandings of the Culture

Another use of these books occurred at the end of our study as a way to assess children's understandings of culture. Our kindergarteners had been given multiple opportunities throughout the course of our cross-cultural study to explore the Korean text set. They made many connections between things that they find in their own culture, and things that they saw in the books. We wanted them to move beyond "things" that are the same and different to experiences and stories that connect and distinguish cultures. They had primarily focused on responding to read-alouds with personal connections to the daily lives of children, pets, and families—the things that are important in their lives. While the older children engaged in inquiries to learn more about particular aspects of Korean culture, our focus with the younger children was on reading aloud books about everyday life in Korea and encouraging them to respond with their comments and connections.

One day, very late in the school year, we spread the text set on tables throughout the room. Lisa asked the Kindergarteners to gather with her on the Story Floor and told them there were books in English and Hangul on the tables. She explained that they had seen some of them, but that we had added others. Lisa invited them to move to a table, choose a book that they found interesting and "tell themselves a story" using the illustrations.

Lisa discovered that there is simply no way to predict how five and six year olds will respond to anything. She wasn't sure if they would engage with the books for any length of time at all. She had markers and crayons ready if needed, but instead we all enjoyed a magical time telling stories together. The children spent a few minutes negotiating which book they wanted to enjoy. Most chose one for themselves, some decided to share with a buddy. Many moved from table to table searching for just the right book. But soon they settled in, opened their books and began telling stories.

Lisa worked with a pair of boys at one table. They had chosen a historical book. The boys carefully explored each page looking for details within the illustration to guide their words. "Long ago in Korea..." began Jesse. Together they identified each character. They had a villain, the boss (you could tell he was mean by his face), and a hero, the farm worker. The boss wasn't nice because he didn't pay the farm worker enough money so he couldn't buy food for his family. At one point, they noticed a celebration. They decided it was a wedding and that the evil boss turned nice and allowed the farm worker to go to the wedding and get married. "And they lived happily every after. The End."

As Lisa glanced around the room, every kindergartener was engaged with their book in the same way, using what they knew about story in conjunction with the illustrations to "read" their book. Their stories showed us many things. We

learned very quickly they knew a great deal about how stories are structured but we also learned what they had come to understand about Korean culture by what aspects of that culture were or were not incorporated into their stories. By recording quick notes about their stories, we were able to assess their understandings in the same way that the presentations of the projects by the older students reflected their understandings.

### Final Thoughts

We were struck by the significance that the Korean language books played in our understanding of Korean culture and culture in general. The tension that existed as students attempted to make sense of books written in a language they didn't read or speak led them to look more carefully and to think more critically about the texts and the culture. We came to believe that books written in native languages are critical in text sets that support cross-cultural studies. These books are significant not only because of the importance of language to culture but also because of the role they can play in inviting children to explore deeper aspects of cultural ways of living and thinking. Without these books, children could easily have formed many misperceptions about culture, particularly about contemporary life.

In reflecting on this experience and thinking about the implications for future cross-cultural studies, we developed the following recommendations:

Locate as many books in the native language of the culture as possible. One source of these books are international students at the university, particularly education majors. Even if they don't have the books, they can access websites in that language to purchase materials and can help send interlibrary loan requests. Many libraries participate in worldwide interlibrary loan agreements and so can make requests for books in that language. You do need to know the book information in that language and so need help from a native speaker to make the request.

Books in the native language can often be purchased on web sites that are available to speakers of that language in the U.S. You don't necessarily have to get the books shipped from the country because often a group has already imported the books, thus avoiding large shipping fees. The major issue is that the sites are usually in that language, not English.

Invite speakers of the language to come to the classroom to read books in the language to children and to teach a few basic principles of the language. They can also be tremendous resources later in the study as children have specific questions that cannot be answered in available materials.

Ask native speakers to tape record themselves reading several books.

If possible, locate some books that are available in both English and the native language so that children can compare the books.

Ask a native speaker to translate several key books so that they can be used as read-alouds for response engagements.

Integrate the books into all aspects of a cross-cultural study, not as a separate experience, but as part of the text sets of books that support a range of experiences from browsing to literature discussions to small group inquiry projects.

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