

Intersecting Cultures Confucian and Jesuit Meet in Korea

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The transition from Peace Corps training in Hawaii to Seoul, Korea, in the middle of winter was dramatic. But in some respects, it was indicative of the cultural contrasts and juxtapositions that I would experience throughout my five years teaching at Sogang University.

In the winter of 1969 when I arrived at Sogang Jesuit College, it was still in its first decade. A year later, the school celebrated its first decade and became a university, in 1973, it was granted the status to award doctoral degrees. Like some of Korea's well-established and prestigious universities, notably Ewha Women's University and Yonsei University, Sogang is a missionary school. But unlike those other schools, which had long traditions and histories honored in Confucian societies, Sogang was a newcomer on the scene. In this short article, I will begin by providing a general overview of Sogang as it is at present. Then, I will dip into my recollections of student life at Sogang in the early 1970s and comment on the intersection of Korean and Jesuit cultures. If there seems to be an over-emphasis on student demonstrations, it is because that was one aspect of student life that was particularly striking. Aside from academic, pedagogical, and general intellectual issues, politics was the central topic of conversation in those days, although it was considered a forbidden subject.

As an outsider to Korea as well as to Catholicism, I was aware that the acculturation process would be complex. I was working in an institution where two very distinct cultures, Korean culture and American Jesuit culture, intersected. It is necessary to emphasize the "American" aspect here because most of the Jesuits at Sogang in the early days were Americans from the Wisconsin Province. At that time they oversaw every aspect of the institution from building and grounds to administration and fundraising. But the Jesuits were not the only bearers of foreign culture at Sogang. Over the years, there were a number of lay missionaries, Peace Corps Volunteers, and representatives of other Catholic religious orders who taught at the university. More significantly, from the students' standpoint, foreign culture and values were introduced at Sogang by the large number of Korean professors who had studied in Europe and the United States and who brought

their own unique syntheses of East and West into their classrooms. Many of these Western-trained faculty were fluent in English, German, or French. It was this overlapping of contrasting and complementary cultures that characterized the Sogang landscape. It was not simply a blending of East and West, but rather a multilayered, multifaceted, and nuanced intersection of cultures that made the Sogang experience unique.

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As has often been noted by scholars of Korean history and culture, Korea was more "Confucian" than China. One explanation for this is that when China was invaded by the barbarian Manchus, who subsequently established the foreign Qing dynasty, some Koreans saw themselves as the repository of true Chinese culture and took it upon themselves to preserve and transmit it in a pure form. Whether or not this explanation is valid, the fact remains that most Koreans adhered to Confucian principles with a degree of ideological tenacity unusual among nations that followed Confucianism, and with all of the zeal of true converts. This same sort of ideological response to foreign ideas was also evident in the Korean approach to Buddhism and Christianity. This passionate intellectual and social embrace of to principle and practice is relevant to this discussion because it was in the context of a highly paternalistic Confucian society that the Jesuits established their liberal educational tradition. Through periods of struggle and enormous compromise on both sides, the experiment was a spectacular success. In the space of three and a half decades, Sogang has become a well-established and prestigious private institution, which has added numerous graduate programs and institutes and grown exponentially in terms of its enrollments. In 1993, there were 202 faculty members instructing over 6,500 students. The university grants undergraduate degrees in a variety of subjects in six general areas: the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, economics, management, and general education. In 1993, Sogang had 1,194 graduate students, of which 865 were studying for master's degrees and 329 were working toward doctorates. Graduate work can be pursued in business, public policy, education, economic

policy, and mass communications. The university has affiliations with 14 universities in Europe, Asia, South America, Australia, and the United States; a 280,000-volume library that is fully computerized; school newspapers in Korean and English; a university press; and a campus radio station.

A common experience for all Sogang students in the early 1970s was studying English and practicing dialogues in the sophisticated lab. Television language tapes were produced in the studio in the Mass Communications Department. This interest in cutting-edge technology for language learning has continued to the present. One Sogang professor of English, with whom I am in contact, uses the Internet as a classroom teaching tool.

Demonstrations: The Student Rite of Passage

Another constant of student life at Sogang and other universities in Korea is participation in student demonstrations. This was true until the election of Kim Yongsam, whose presidency has seen fewer antigovernment demonstrations on Korean university campuses. In the days when I taught at Sogang, the air was often heavy with the smell of pepper gas. Participation in demonstrations was an unspoken rite of passage. Students felt that their honor was somewhat dependent upon exercising their unique position and privilege as students to partake in protests. For this brief period in their lives they were free of societal constraints and pressures that had accompanied them through the years of preparation for "examination hell" and would once again be a regular part of their lives once they took their position in corporate life. It was a momentary exemption for two or three years.

By the time students became seniors, their focus was wrenched back to the reality of finding a job. But while demonstrating was a ritual and a rite of passage, it was by no means a trivial pursuit. Students in Korea in the years that I was there had a legacy to live up to, as their predecessors had been credited with bringing down the regime of Syngman Rhee. On the one hand, students recognized their own power and potency, but on the other they were keenly aware of the danger that surrounded political activity. In the early 1970s a few student leaders disappeared, and many were jailed and tortured for their participation. Government spies posed as students and a culture of uncertainty and mistrust emerged. At Sogang there was a particularly uncomfortable ambivalence because President Park Chunghee's daughter attended the university, and during one particularly violent demonstration she was quickly smuggled off the campus through the back gate of the university housing in which we resided. On a number of occa-

sions universities were closed altogether to prevent student gatherings. On one of those occasions the Sogang university grounds were occupied by soldiers who set up camp on the playing field and patrolled with automatic weapons.

Once reopened, it became the responsibility of the faculty to make certain that students focused on their studies and did not become involved with politics. In the paternalistic Confucian model, professors were responsible for the moral as well as the intellectual development of their students, and they served as mentors and guides for them in all aspects of their development. This traditional mentoring role served government ends nicely in those days because professors had to accept responsibility for their students who demonstrated. This created enormous pressure for faculty who were often placed in untenable moral positions. Whether encouraged by the example of certain politically active Jesuits, by the generally liberal atmosphere of Sogang, by the severity of the national situation, or by their own consciences, Sogang professors were shaken out of their passivity in the winter of 1974 and issued a joint statement in which they encouraged the government to accept ultimate responsibility for the demonstrations, remedy the human rights situation, and promote social justice and democracy. Korea has made considerable strides since those difficult times.

Academic Expectations

Perhaps the characteristic that is most associated with Jesuit education is the emphasis on intellectual rigor and accompanying high academic expectations. Koreans also hold education in very high regard and demand diligence and perseverance in academic pursuits, but in the Korean educational system, student effort is directed toward passing the university examination. Traditionally, the expectation is that once in the university, that goal had been met and the student could enjoy a respite from rigorous academic work. At Sogang there was a distinct cultural mismatch between the expectations of entering Korean students and the expectations of the Jesuits. This disparity led to inevitable misunderstandings and required substantial adjustments to perspectives and expectations on both sides. Without research data to support this statement I must be cautious, but it seems that part of Sogang's present success as an academic institution can be attributed to this early struggle with the question of introducing high academic standards at the university level. This debate might not have been so central and the results so dramatic had it not been for the intersection of two contrasting and yet complementary academic cultures at Sogang University.
