

## Kimchi and IT

Kim Choong Soon. 2007. *Kimchi and Information Technology: Tradition and Transformation in Korea*. Seoul: Ilchokak. 422 pages. ISBN 978-89-337-0528-5.

*Samuel Gerald Collins*

If you are like me, you begin to panic around this time of year. What book am I going to use in my introductory class? If you are in history or finance departments, there is no shortage of texts. But what about anthropology, sociology or cultural studies? While there are enough excellent journals and research monographs for a graduate-level course, the best way of giving an undergraduate social and cultural introduction to Korea remains a conundrum. In the United States at least, one cannot afford to underestimate our students' general ignorance of things Korean, yet we owe it to our students to provide a more nuanced, "thick description" of Korean life than, say, some geographic and economic "fact sheet." That there are several introductory texts for Japan and China only compounds the feeling of lack.

And there are other challenges as well. The concentration of introductory-level texts in Korea's past, on the one hand, and its (economic) present, leaves the curious (and ideological) impression

---

Samuel Collins is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Towson University. His research includes cybernetics, information society, globalization and the future, both in the United States and in South Korea. He is the author of *All Tomorrow's Cultures: Anthropological Engagements with the Future*. Email: [scollins@towson.edu](mailto:scollins@towson.edu).



that Korea's rich and distinct past is completely occulted by the forces of modernization, with an introduction to Taego giving way to a discussion of current account deficits and FDI. But the (apparently) complete transformation of a *gat*-wearing *yangban* scholar into some faceless *Homo oeconomicus* feeds the Western (and the U.S.) ideologies of globalization as a culturally and socially homogenizing force whereby all of us are U.S.-style consumers at heart just waiting for McDonald's and Starbucks to open up on our street. At the same time, it would be equally

fallacious to render an essentialist portrait and ignore the social and cultural dimensions of Korea's tumultuous modernization. As Kim (111) cautions:

One should not assume, in observing the daily activities of middle-class Seoulites who wear Western-style clothes, drive their own automobiles, and live in Western-style apartment complexes, that they are just like Westerners. One has to see what they do after they come home from work. Then they take off their Western clothes, sit on the floor even though their apartments are furnished with complete sets of Western furniture, and deal with their family members in accordance with traditional Korean family and kinship rules. Contemporary Koreans are complicated beings.

It is that appreciation for complexity that animates Choong Soon Kim's *Kimchi and IT*, an introductory text balancing concise, background summations of Korean social and cultural life with a sense of the contradictions of a modernity in which past, present, and future

---

uneasily coexist in Korea's postmodern geographies.

The book is organized like a cultural anthropology textbook, with chapters on archaeology and history giving way to politics, kinship, education, identity, ecology, economics, and globalization. Each chapter summarizes contemporary research, suggesting the extent to which each of these areas is still being negotiated by varied social actors in Korean society. For example, Kim introduces some of the Joseon kinship system, e.g. the lineage (*munjung*) and genealogical records (*jokbo*). But he also points out that the modern Korean educational system builds upon a system of fictive kinship to create relations between seniors (*seonbae*) and juniors (*hubae*). Finally, he takes us to the streets of ultra-modern Seoul, where one can find the offices of lineage groups scattered between fast-food restaurants and coffee shops.

One problem with many texts offering more-or-less holistic introductions to culture is their discontinuity; that is, there is nothing to link together chapters on art, religion, social structure, or politics. In *Kimchi and IT*, the silver thread uniting all of these chapters is Choong Soon Kim himself. Just as it has been said (by May Catherine Bateson) that Margaret Mead's life might be best understood anthropologically, so I would suggest that Kim's life be best understood through the lens of Korean Studies. From rural origins, to Seoul for college, then to the United States for his Ph.D. and a long career at the University of Tennessee, Martin, followed by a felicitous return to Seoul as President of Korea Digital University, Kim's career has followed the arc of Korean history from a rural village to modernization and beyond to today's IT-intensive, globally engaged Korea. There are unfortunately few scholars alive today who have witnessed all of the social and cultural shifts in Korean society first-hand, and it is through his own, thoughtfully reflexive passages that Kim manages to knit a work of such great breadth together. He is no stranger to anthropological reflexivity, and he introduces at least three reflexive registers in this text: the first, his childhood memories in Gyeongbuk-do, the second, as an anthropological observer from the

---

United States in the 1980s, and, finally, as a public intellectual in charge of a prominent University and very much an advocate for a more humanistic (and even anthropological) education for Koreans today.

For example, the chapter on “Kinship, Marriage, and Family” recounts his own marriage, reflects on the changing elements of the Korean marriage ceremony (e.g., the gradual discounting of the *ham*), and finally, as an engaged intellectual working to ameliorate the contemporary problems of international marriage in rural Korea through cultural and language programs for international wives. It is the triangulation of these perspectives that provides a distinctly anthropological combination of objectivity and first-person subjectivity, and it is Kim’s life itself that provides the human focus to this drama of Korean modernization.

*Kimchi and IT* is an obvious choice for inclusion in our undergraduate syllabi (although one could certainly use it in graduate courses and even business training seminars). It is a powerful antidote for persistent misrepresentations and misunderstandings of Korean culture and social life. From an anthropological perspective, it implicitly critiques the oversimplifications produced in more business-oriented texts, and presents the reader with a vision of Korea that ultimately challenges understandings of both Korea *and* the West.