World View of Korean Culture:
The Importance of Cultural Understanding in the Teaching of Korean As a Foreign Language

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I. Introduction

A vision of national homogeneity, usually expressed in the term tan’il minjok, has been an important element in twentieth-century Korean national identity discourse. The concept of tan’il minjok incorporates both a cultural idea of a common language and common customs and a biological idea of racial purity, usually expressed in terms of “pure bloodlines.” Implicit in such modern assertions of ethnic and cultural purity is the assumption that the pre-modern inhabitants of the Korean Peninsula had a strong sense of themselves as constituting a distinct racial collectivity. However, this “pride in Koreanness” has sometimes prevented Koreans from understanding other cultures and languages. It also has tended to create a negative atmosphere in the teaching of Korean as a Foreign Language.

In order to overcome this limitation, the new discipline “Korean as a Foreign Language” has pursued various approaches, and the results should not be underestimated. One of many outcomes is the conclusion that “Education in Korean Culture” is a necessary component in “Education in Korean as a Foreign Language,” and that both subjects should be taught in parallel. Therefore, in this article, I shall focus my remarks primarily on the general understanding of culture as well as a semantic understanding of the Korean language, because I believe that the Korean language is closely related to the philosophical and psychological behavior of the Korean people. Furthermore, I believe that this approach will reveal the contents of the cultural education which should be taught in parallel with language education.

II. Languages, Epistemology and Ontology


3) This topic was actively discussed when I presented this article at the Forum Koreana of Academia Koreana, “Teaching and Learning Korean as a Foreign Language: Gateway to the Globalization of Korean Culture,” at Keimyung University, December 14, 2002, Taegu. This paper has since been revised in several points. I would like to thank the presenters and discussants, who gave me extensive input in terms of “linguistics.”

I am particularly indebted to Dr. Ross King, whose generous commentary helped shape the direction of my essay during its various stages of revision. As the title indicates, however, my paper is more speculative, looking at Korean thought patterns from a philosophical view point.