

Preface

Because the grammar, morphology, syntax, phonetics, social-linguistic aspects, script, and vocabulary of Korean are all vastly different from those of any Indo-European language, Korean is a particularly difficult language for Westerners to acquire. The number of foreigners who have ever successfully learned the language is quite small. For every one who does so, there are scores of others who live in the country for years or even decades without even gaining a foothold in it. Indeed, unless one has already learned Japanese or Chinese, the energy, effort, and time commitment required to gain a command of the language is a perhaps hundred times greater than that required in order to learn a European language. Systematic regularity of study and constant repetition and review, indispensable in the study of any language, are particularly necessary here. Thus, it is our own personal experience that one method alone will not suffice. In order to gain the perspective of different grammatical explanations, have access to abundant exercises, and to avoid the boredom of constantly repeating the same materials, anyone who seriously desires to master the language should have recourse to a number of different methods and approaches. While there are a considerable number of Korean textbooks on the market, the fact is that the majority of these only present a “basic introduction” to the language in an entirely unsystematic fashion, and as a consequence they are simply not very good. Among those methods that can be recommended are Wilfried Hermann’s *Lehrbuch der modernen koreanischen Sprache*, Bag In-sug’s *El Coreano Basico*, Francis Y.T. Park’s *Speaking Korean*, Fred Luckoff’s *An Introductory Course in Korean*, and the Myongdo Language Institute’s *Korean* series. If all that our book does is add to this small number of pedagogically sound reference works available to the serious learner, then our efforts will have been repaid.

However, it is our intention to produce a work that is methodologically different from any other work currently available. To our knowledge, all other Korean language textbooks focus, first and foremost if not exclusively, on imparting a practical and functional command of colloquial modern spoken Korean. This is an absolute necessity for all learners, and the half-dozen methods listed above all meet this need, but while some of these books contain abundant cultural material, it is presented only as a background context for the modern spoken language, i.e., as a means to an end, and even after mastering their contents, the learner is ill-equipped to begin reading Korean texts.

In our view, learning about Korean culture should be a goal in itself, and mastering the language is the means to this end. Korea’s fascinating and ancient culture is barely known outside the borders of the country, and indeed is barely visible within them underneath the newest layer of modern materialistic prosperity. Nonetheless, vast amounts of cultural material of the highest caliber—from folkloric, mythological, and religious thought through literary,

poetic, and philosophic traditions dating back for over a thousand years of well attested historical and chronological writings—lie waiting like a hitherto unexplored gold-mine for the student of almost any comparative academic discipline who perseveres through the difficult task of mastering the written as well as the spoken language. Finally, as the language is difficult because it is different, it is also our conviction that meeting the challenges of mastering it constitutes an intellectual challenge that is also inherently rewarding because of the unparalleled mental training that it provides in organizing one's thought process along different logical lines.

Our work is a collaborative one between a native linguist and a foreign one, the former providing the grammatical expertise and the latter the methodological experience needed for explaining it. Although our work is intended for those with scholarly inclinations, we have consciously tried to avoid using exclusive linguistic terminology that would limit our work to being accessible only to professional academics. The dialogues in our book are set in the context of visits to cultural sites. These alternate with textual materials taken from traditional Korean folktales, biographies of famous personages, and retellings of events from major historical chronicles. It is our hope that this will provide a preliminary sourcebook of materials that can be repeatedly reviewed with increasing interest and understanding by any serious learner of the language.