

Dressing Up in the Korean Past

Dr. CedarBough T. Saeji, Pusan National University

CedarBough T. Saeji is a professor of Korean and East Asian Studies at Pusan National University in Busan. Her expertise is in Koreana, from contemporary K-pop (she is known as the K-Pop Professor) to traditional mask dance drama. She is a featured speaker at our April international conference, and her featured session is entitled "Dressing Up in the Korean Past: Hanbok Wearing as Play Informed by Popular Culture." Prof. Saeji will also be doing a second invited session on pedagogical methods employing pop culture in the classroom. What follows is her interview with The English Connection. — Ed.

The English Connection (TEC): Thank you, Prof. Saeji, for giving us some of your time for this interview with *The English Connection*. To begin with, your name intrigues me – CedarBough T. Saeji. Would you tell us a little about the history behind it and also some background information on you before coming to Korea?

Prof. Saeji: I changed my name when I was six because I wanted an original name. And Saeji is my husband's clan name, so at this point only my middle name has been with me since I was born. Before coming to Korea, I was working a variety of environment related jobs: I worked for the Yakama Indian Nation doing salmon habitat restoration, was a naturalist, sea kayak guide, worked for Greenpeace, stuff like that.

TEC: How did you end up moving to Korea?

Prof. Saeji: I moved to Korea a few years after I finished my undergraduate work, with my ex. He wanted to try teaching to see if it was a good career for him. Coming to Korea was actually a compromise. We had to go somewhere where

rise worldwide of the Korean Wave – *hallyu* – in such a short time from a relatively small nation?

Prof. Saeji: From my perspective this has been very gradual. Somewhere, I have a newspaper clipping from HOT's first overseas performance; it was on the front page of the *Korea Times*. I was reading academic papers on hallyu already in 2004 and 2005, but not many people were looking beyond films and television at that time. My first conference presentation on K-pop was in 2009, partially inspired by BoA's attempt to break into the West.



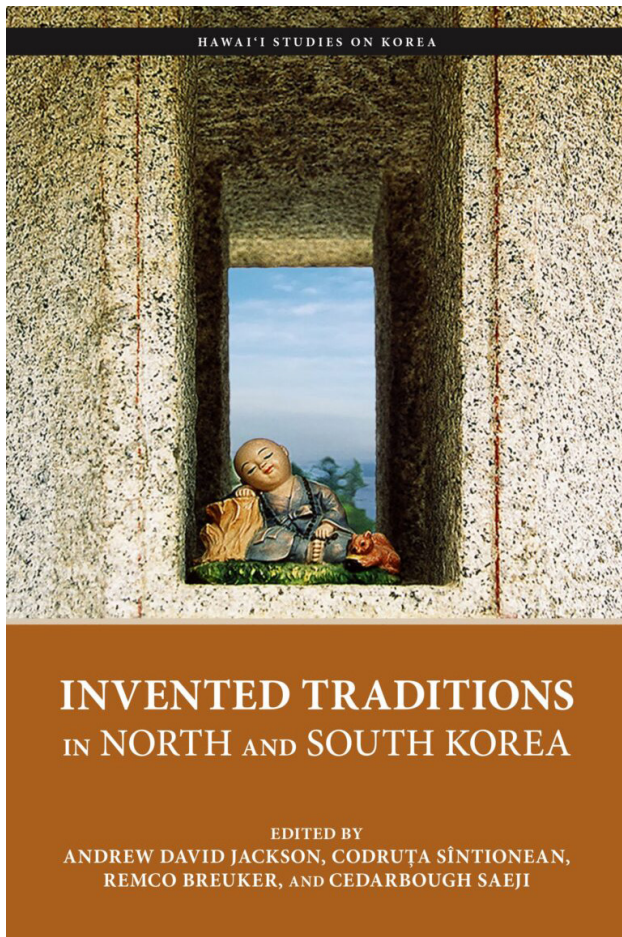
What's behind hallyu? Well, when Korea democratized a lot of young people went to get MFAs in film schools, principally USC and UCLA (which have great film schools). When they got back to Korea in the early to mid-1990s it was initially hard to find a job, but then under Kim Youngsam, there was the *Jurassic Park* moment, where he was told that the movie had earned as much as exporting 1.5 million Hyundai automobiles. Starting then, in 1994, the government encouraged investment in the film industry and that helped television as well. A lot of *jaebeol* began film divisions, and they often hired these young innovative recent film-school graduates who began to remake the industry. Then in 1997, the financial crisis happened and the IMF partially blamed Korea's crisis on the tendency of the *jaebeol* to have so many subsidiary businesses, forcing them to divest subsidiaries not closely related to their core business. The film-related businesses were mostly spun off into independent (and therefore much more nimble) companies; this empowered young directors. Simultaneously, due to the economic crisis not hitting Japan, Japanese TV shows became too expensive for many neighboring countries, and Korea benefited by exporting TV programs, which had improved greatly in quality in the 1990s. The basis of hallyu can be traced to this history. The success of TV dramas (and to some extent film) was synergistic with other creative industries, including K-pop, as singers also acted, or recorded OSTs.

TEC: We usually think of K-pop as just music, but you've said that K-pop has spawned adjacent industries. Could you expound on this?

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I could pay my loans, which meant many countries were impossible, but he wanted Taiwan, while I wanted to go to Japan. So, we ended up in Korea as a compromise. I thought I'd come to Korea for just one year, but I loved the challenges of living in Korea, and I loved how I was constantly learning. Of course, that was back when ordinary people didn't really use the internet, and there weren't big box stores in Korea. You could spend a whole day looking for dried basil and never find any. You couldn't just ask Every Expat in Korea where to find something or if something was possible, you literally just had to beat your head against the wall trying.

TEC: It wasn't too many years ago that there were only two Korean loanwords in the English language: *kimchi* and *taekwondo* (the latter still spelled as three words in Merriam-Webster's dictionary). What exactly is behind the phenomenal



Prof. Saeji: Lots of scholars talk about how K-pop fans can organize to create exposure, drive up streaming counts, or strategically purchase music to put it on the charts. It is really amazing how hard fans work, but most of them work hard just out of love – a volunteer effort. However, I’ve also noticed that a statistically much smaller group of fans decided that they should take their fandom and turn it into their career by making goods or offering services that fans want. These K-pop adjacent industries, as I call them, include people who write mass market books, offer K-pop dance classes, make unique fan merchandise, and then of course, there are the people with YouTube and TikTok channels who make content about K-pop, such as explaining or reacting to a music video. I find it amazing that there are fans establishing a licensed business who take online orders, get the item produced, and ship them out to buyers, even filing taxes, at twenty years old. It takes so much initiative and drive!

TEC: Although you have the moniker “The K-Pop Prof,” K-pop is not your only “K” interest. You also do research in Korean traditions and culture. In fact, your main session at KOTESOL 2024 is entitled “Dressing Up in the Korean Past: Hanbok Wearing as Play Informed by Popular Culture.” I wore my *hanbok* on my wedding day, but there wasn’t any play involved. Could you explain a little about your session’s title?

Prof. Saeji: In addition to my work on K-pop, which I began more recently, I have published extensively on Korean heritage, everything from Buddhist art at the National Museum, to shamanic ceremonies, to gender in the performance of Korean mask dance dramas.

Hanbok wearing, by the 1990s was mostly confined to contexts such as female relatives of the couple at a wedding, and as in your case, during the *pyebaek* ceremony for the bride and groom as well. This makes the current visibility of hanbok significant. My presentation examines the phenomenon of

renting hanbok, particularly foreign tourists charmed by Korean pop culture who rent hanbok and wander through Korean palaces. This and several recent publications bring together my interests in Korean tradition and in popular culture – how pop culture can influence how contemporary people, including Koreans, understand and interact with traditional culture.

TEC: The second session that you will be doing for us at the international conference will be on teaching and using pop culture in the classroom. What aspects of Korean pop culture will this focus on?

Prof. Saeji: I will mainly discuss how I productively use K-pop in the classroom because ever since my first job in Korea in the mid-1990s, I found that K-pop was one of the best ways to get my students to express themselves. I thought that introducing some of my pedagogical methods could give some good ideas to the conference attendees.

TEC: You are currently a professor of Korean and East Asian Studies at Pusan National University, not in an English-related area. How much of your past teaching has been with Korean EFL students?

Prof. Saeji: I taught EFL full time in the 1990s and became increasingly only part time in the early 2000s. Including part time, I taught English for eight years; one of those years was in China right before I started my MA at Yonsei. I was done paying off my loans by then. But honestly, even now, I teach primarily EFL students, I just don’t teach them English. In my job at PNU, my classroom is usually about 15–20% Korean students, and the rest are exchange students from across the world. But curiously, we hardly get any from the US. I joke that it is like the UN because I have students from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Latin America, and of course different places in East and Southeast Asia. It’s quite amazing!

TEC: You recently co-edited a volume on *Invented Traditions in North and South Korea* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2022). What are some of the “monumental” invented traditions that this compilation deals with?

Prof. Saeji: Previous publications elsewhere have discussed the inventedness of taekwondo, for example. Invented traditions are still traditions, it is just that we can pinpoint when the discourse about them as traditions (in the modern sense) arose, and invented traditions are almost always created to support certain national or nationalistic narratives. This edited volume addresses very diverse cases, for example, we have a chapter on North Korean food because culinary traditions and dishes provide a context for narratives about Kim Il-sung and the heroic guerilla fighters and the privation they overcame while fighting for Korea’s independence. Another chapter addresses pseudo-historians who use wishful thinking and nationalist verve to compensate for the fact that they are not trained historians, just hobbyists. It is amazing how these pseudo-historians, by fanning the flames of nationalism, actually create barriers for real historians in contemporary Korea. The book is very wide ranging: Other chapters cover the Joseon-era discourse of Korea as the politest country in East Asia; the annual children’s march in North Korea; and how certain types of Korean traditional performance, once considered plebeian and for the commoners and slaves, were elevated and given the status of “national music” in the present era.

TEC: While on the topic of books, I believe you are working on a book on Korean mask dance dramas and cultural policy. In what way do mask dance dramas relate to Korean culture policy?

Prof. Saeji: My book is under review. Korea has both nationally and regionally registered heritage mask dance dramas, now also listed with UNESCO, and the registration

process means that the government's cultural policies are enmeshed in every part of who, where, when, and why they perform. As the context of the arts dramatically shifts, performers must constantly negotiate between satisfying a system for preserving arts that paradoxically changes the arts it seeks to preserve, and the demands of life in the twenty-first century. The main argument of the book is that state interventions have compelled the practitioners into transforming their vocation into a professionalized career dissociated from its pre-modern cultural context. By presenting rich ethnographic data obtained over eighteen years of participant observation with three Korean mask dance dramas, I cut against the grain of a folkloric imagination to demonstrate different ways in which human actors carry heritage traditions forward in contemporary Korea. My book presents case studies showing how heritage bearers understand the project to protect heritage, and the decisions they make in performing, educating, and crafting cultural enterprises around the arts. In an era where Korean popular music borrows liberally from traditional arts, I raise concerns about heritage stewardship and commodification.

TEC: People often say that Korean students are reticent, or that it can be difficult to get them to speak up in the classroom. Do you find that to be true?

Prof Saeji: I think as educators, it is our job to establish, from the first day in the classroom, how much we welcome questions and student voices. Students can learn from each other and grow analytically through listening to diverse perspectives, but Korean students have been socialized to respect the needs of the group to learn from the teacher. In many of their previous educational contexts, if a student spoke, other students would have thought they were wasting group time by preventing the instructor from communicating as much. This was connected to the fear of not understanding a part of the basic curriculum that appears on the *suneung* exam (the Korean college entry exam). That socialization is built around a lecture model – instructor speaks, student listens – and around getting into college. However, in university, it is our job to make them comfortable with other teaching styles. By making it clear that I do not teach that way and by providing clear guidance in how I expect them to contribute, I have found that Korean students speak just as much as other students. It is not fair to just say “Talk! Ask questions!” you need to create structures, build new habits. For example, I use organized student-led discussions,

provide space in my syllabus for student-chosen sub-topics, and even require students to submit their questions about required readings in advance of the class, so they have prepared to ask questions. Of course, it is super important to respond in a way that will encourage them to speak up next time.

TEC: Looking forward, what do you have planned for the future – new books, new areas of research, delving deeper into current areas of research, new horizons?

Prof. Saeji: Since I have mostly finished my first book project, the logical step is to work on a second book project. However, in Korea, points towards tenure are focused on articles. Typically, I am examining how Korean media producers, artists, and government agencies are framing Korea for an imagined foreign gaze. The research examines this phenomenon through hit cultural products, such as K-pop videos and K-dramas; through dedicated Korean promotional material, such as the advertisements of the Korea Tourism Organization; and through educational tools funded by the government, such as those produced by the Korea Foundation. This project ranges from archival to visual studies and will dig into the ways that “Koreanness” is communicated, often through quasi-exotification, and how Korean places and things are being re-packaged in commodified, simplified, visitable formats that are also consumed domestically. At present, I am not sure if this will take the form of a second book, or just a series of articles.

TEC: It sounds like you have all of 2024 planned out! In concluding this interview, what would you like to add for our readers?

Prof. Saeji: I know that it's hard to study Korean while also teaching in English, but I think that if you live in Korea your life will be immeasurably richer if you can speak. These days it's possible to survive without Korean, but to really thrive, I hope you learn Korean and embark on some real study of the rich history and culture of Korea.

TEC: Well, thank you for this interview. It has covered quite a range of topics – from hallyu to jaebeol, to K-pop and hanbok, to EFL and suneung, and to mask dance dramas and invented tradition – a range representative of your research. I'm eagerly looking forward to your sessions at the international conference.

Interviewed by David Shaffer.



▲ Tourists dressed in *hanbok* visiting a Seoul palace.