Notes on “Japan in Korea, Korea in Japan”

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How the seminar and online guidebook project “Japan in Korea, Korea in Japan” worked:

This project was supported by three years of generous funding from the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service Centennial Lab program, which made it possible for two faculty and fourteen undergraduates to travel to Japan and Korea for two weeks each summer. Additional support was provided by the Korea Foundation. Professors Christine Kim (Korean history) and Professor Jordan Sand (Japanese history) taught a Spring-semester seminar on campus, followed by travel to Asia with the entire seminar group, with further support from Professor Toshihiro Higuchi (US diplomatic history, Asian Studies).

The basic assignment for all of the students was to research and write entries for the digital guidebook “Japan in Korea, Korea in Japan.” One or two students from the class served as webmaster/site-builder each year, uploading and formatting all of the material using the program StoryMaps. Most of the website work happened in the summer, during and after our trip.

The way we arrived at this collaborative seminar idea is described in the introduction to the website, here:

https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/3f0d81fa36e84b06b53bab21286df564

The seminar had the conventional trappings of a class, with assigned readings and discussion each week, occasional short lectures from us, and student research presentations. However, the students understood from the beginning that they were writing for internet publication. In the second and third years, the group read entries from the previous years. They were encouraged to find new topics, but some also built on topics already covered. In general, students chose their own research topics, but with coaching and vetting by the instructors. We nudged them each time toward topics that would work in our guidebook by being place-focused and addressing connections between the two countries. Our requirements and the style of submissions evolved over three years, but we held onto these two essential features.

The two of us selected the cities we would visit and made travel arrangements. The students collaborated (with a lot of coaching) in choosing specific sites to visit and

mapping out itineraries in and around the cities we visited. On site, students divided into small groups to do fieldwork, usually but not always accompanied by a faculty member. On occasion, they were accompanied by students at local institutions who assisted with site navigation and shared their own impressions. Time was set aside at the end of each day for write-up (although this often became difficult to guarantee). Field reports were to be submitted during or shortly after the end of the trip.

Photographs were an important component of the fieldwork. Students were required to provide identifying information for the photos they used. We also included a category of reports we called “photo essays,” heavier on images and treating more idiosyncratic themes the students chose. Students were also told to collect paper ephemera from museums and other historic sites, some of which went into their reports and some into a digital collage.

None of the students came to the course with expertise. Some had heritage ability in Japanese or Korean and some were studying one or both languages, but language was not a prerequisite. We encouraged the use of translation apps.

We gave students a fairly long tether with regard to AI use in researching their guidebook entries, while emphasizing that the writing itself must be their own. All reports during the semester were first presented in class and went through revisions at least twice before going to the webmasters. Thanks to AI, students increasingly drew on Japanese- and Korean-language sources—even students with no knowledge of the language in question. We and our webmasters checked sources before letting things go online. We also emphasized to students that all of their footnotes had to check out and that they could expect the people whose work they cited would be reading as well. This probably helped ensure fair use but did not completely eliminate the occasional AI-hallucinated footnote.

The reports produced were of varying quality, as it was a tall order to bring together the semester’s readings, fieldwork notes and observations, and research in a cogent manner. But the truly engaged students were able to communicate in their writings the experience of approaching a site and making sense of its role in historical memory. By analyzing the state of its physical condition, the commemorative marker, and ephemera, students were able to get a sense of what the place means to the various communities connected to it, thereby adding a dimension to historical understanding beyond the conventional seminar.