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## Professor helps open Cambridge to Korea



Peter Kornicki, an East Asian studies professor at the University of Cambridge, speaks with The Korea Times at the Westin Chosun Hotel in central Seoul, Thursday. / Korea Times photo by Michael Schreiber

By Ines Min

“If you are trying to teach East Asian studies, East Asian studies without Korea makes no sense.”

This is the sentiment of professor Peter Kornicki of the University of Cambridge, who spoke with The Korea Times last Thursday at the Westin Chosun Hotel, ahead of a speech about the prestigious school's budding Korean program.

The scholar, who is spearheading the curriculum, visited Seoul in order to find sponsors for a permanent lecturing post at Cambridge. Though Kornicki himself focused his teaching career on Japanese literature, he also studied Korean as an undergraduate at Oxford University and holds a special interest in East Asia — currently a professor at the East Asian Studies department in Cambridge.

“I’ve kept up my interest in Korea all the time,” Kornicki said, explaining that he offered classes to students who were interested in the peninsula country once he began teaching in Australia and Japan. The creation of a more formal Korean curriculum at Cambridge stemmed from his steady dedication.

A post for Korean studies was created in 2008 — currently occupied by Dr. Michael Shin — and Kornicki’s colleagues specializing in cinema and international relations worked with him to offer a range of classes covering Korean contemporary culture, politics and history.

“Since then, things have been booming, I’m very happy to say,” he said. “Not only in terms of students, undergraduates studying Japanese or Chinese also doing Korean, but also studying Korean history and courses at a masters’ level or undergraduate level.”

Kornicki added that a main goal of the program is to thoroughly integrate East Asian

studies to engage in a broader perspective. All students entering must take classes on Korea, though focused study can be pursued individually.

“In the past, students of Chinese just studied narrowly Chinese. But now they’re forced to also study Japanese history and the history of Korea,” he said. “You cannot really look at the history of any one of these countries separate from the others. In the present, but also in the past, they’re very closely interrelated.

“I think both Western scholars and scholars in East Asia have tended to focus on just one nation instead of trying to see the interconnections. The balance is shifting and I think that’s a good a thing.”

The major relevance of Korea in the current atmosphere of tense nuclear politics and growing cultural sphere is a helpful factor in garnering interest in the program.

“In the contemporary world, Korea is very much at the prominence of some of the most intractable problems on the Pacific rim,” Kornicki said. “So the relevance from a social science perspective is enormous.

“I’m a historian and also the relevance historically is terribly interesting because of Korea’s involvement in East Asian Buddhism, the connections between Korea and India, Korea and Japan, Korea and China. These interconnections have had a huge impact, both on Korea and also on the other countries. For me, that’s my motivation.”

Although often the students the professor comes across are largely ignorant of the country — except, perhaps, through electronics, film and food — the program offers a broad range of information and relevant knowledge.

“What pleases me most is that students who decide to study Chinese, for example, find enough room in their imagination to be interested also in Korea,” Kornicki said. “So that for them, it’s a completely new horizon and the students have responded so far very well, with enthusiasm, with great interest.”