

FREEING MINDS

SAN QUENTIN STATE PRISON IS HOME TO DEATH ROW INMATES—AND A KOREAN HISTORY COURSE.

> Story and Photographs By Kathleen Richards

FROM the moment you step inside the sparse, fluorescent-lit classroom, it's clear that this isn't your typical college history class. And it's not just because it's housed deep inside a heavily fortified state prison and that all the students are inmates.

Well, that's part of the reason. San



Quentin State Prison, which sits overlooking the north side of the San Francisco Bay, is best known for notorious residents like Richard Allen Davis, Scott Peterson and Richard Ramirez. But on a Monday evening in April, instructor Christine Hong is leading a discussion on North Korea within its walls. About 20 men sit a few to a table with their pens and notebooks open. Dressed in blue button-down shirts and jeans, the students look thoroughly engaged.

A mixed group including African



Americans, Vietnamese and whites, the men are enrolled in a course titled "History, Memory and Culture in Modern Korea." The class is offered through the Prison University Project, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to provide higher education to inmates. San Quentin may seem like an unlikely place to learn about Korea, but Hong—the course's brainchild and a post-doc at the University of California, Berkeley, soon to be teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz—would beg to differ.

The intensive, 15-week course, which meets for two hours twice a week, pays particular attention to marginalized voices—a position many of its students could relate to. The class, for example, examines the experiences of the *zainichi*, ethnic Koreans living in Japan who confronted discrimination, as well as the "comfort women" forced into sexual slavery during World War II and the North Koreans imprisoned in South Korea in the 1950s and '60s who were tortured in order to get them to renounce their communist loyalties. Required readings include the works of late North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung and former Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver. Even for a course at a mainstream college, the class's approach would be considered radical, as it embraces the histories of both South and North Korea.

"What's unusual about our syllabus ... is that we don't neglect North Korean history," explains Hong, who co-teaches the course with Taejin Hwang, a Ph.D. candidate also at Berkeley. "And we also emphasize the problem of historiography from the outset, which is a question of not only what is Korean history in the 20th century, but what perspectives are privileged and what sort of ideological vantage points are favored. So, in other words, it's not only what is Korean history, but who's telling it and why."

Back in the classroom, Hong reads from Kim Il Sung's 1993 declaration, the *10-Point Programme of the Great Unity of the Whole Nation for the Reunification of the Country*. "All those who are concerned about the destiny of the nation, whether they be in the north, or in the south or overseas..." Listen how capacious this is," Hong says, addressing the

students. "Even *diasporic* Koreans — what's surprising about this?"

She calls on a student, James.

"Sounds like they want to keep the same government," he says.

"That's right," Hong concurs. "But what's striking about this notion of all Koreans—both on the peninsula and overseas, Koreans of all political stripes? This is Kim Il Sung, you guys. There are certain kinds of notions about this man, his political ideology, the narrow constraints of his political ideology. So what's surprising about this?"

Rodney, a loquacious student sitting in the back of the classroom, pipes up. "Throughout the paper he uses the term 'unify' or 'reunify' over and over and over..., so [Kim] is pretty much calling to reunify. Let them know that they were divided by powers that had nothing to do with them. Let's come back together."

"Right," said Hong. "It's addressing that the original state of Korea was not divided, so ... let's regain that lost state, right?" After further discussion, Hong adds: "This letter has the gentle feeling and conciliatory feeling of a kind of open appeal. It's taking advantage of the moment in which the Cold War bipolar politics of the Korean peninsula are thawing. It's an incredibly rich symbolic moment."

The level of engagement in the class—in its seventh week at the time of this report—is stunning, especially considering the fact that few knew anything about Korea prior to taking the class. Student Gregory Sanders said that just a few months ago, the extent of his knowledge of Korea was "I could find it on a map." Today, the 57-year-old wants to discuss with this reporter how the recent missile launch by North Korea will impact the feasibility of reunification with its southern neighbor.

The class marks the first time that any course on Korean history or culture has been taught in the 13-year existence of the prison education program, which gets volunteers—many of whom are graduate students, instructors and faculty members from San Francisco Bay Area colleges and universities—to teach the classes. San Quentin has the only on-site college degree-granting program in California's entire prison system. "It's just been real exciting," said Jody Lewen, the Prison University Project's executive



Christine Hong (at the head of the class), a post-doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley, co-teaches the 15-week Korean history course at San Quentin with Taejin Hwang (not pictured), also from Berkeley.

“Me being an African American, our histories have a lot in common. The fact that we’re both colonized people, oppressed people by imperialist forces. Our suffering, our struggles, are similar.”

—Will Packer, inmate at San Quentin, commenting on what he’s learned about the common experiences of African Americans and Koreans from a Korean history course

director, of the Korean history course. “It’s not a typical situation.”

And Hong is not your typical college instructor. The focus of her professional work, according to her, is “the U.S. military ‘peace’ that settled the Asia-Pacific region after Japan’s Pacific War defeat, and the Cold War emergence of Afro-Asian human rights cultural production as an extra-judicial mode of appeal, grievance, and critique.” Most recently, she has been instrumental in the campaign to save the Korean language program at Berkeley from budget cuts.

Before teaching the Korean history course at San Quentin, she also previously taught two literature classes at the prison. She lobbied for the Korean class, which originally was supposed to be a Cuban, Middle Eastern or Vietnamese history course, because she thought some of the themes would resonate with the students.

“The nature of contemporary Korean

history ... is profoundly international,” explains Hong. “There are so many periods of incredible difficulty and human drama, from colonialism to the war to authoritarianism. And all throughout there’s profound struggle of the Korean people for justice. And so I felt that in its own right, Korean history is so moving and complicated and so rich that students would be very interested.”

Her hunch appears to have been right. During a 10-minute break from class, inmates take turns answering this reporter’s questions. Will Packer, sitting in the back, says learning about Korea’s history has given him a greater understanding of his own culture. “Me being an African American, our histories have a lot in common,” observes Packer, who has previously taken Hong’s literature class. “The fact that we’re both colonized people, oppressed people by imperialist forces. Our suffering, our struggles, are similar.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by other students as well. “It’s very interesting to see ... the Japanese colonization in Korea, and in my country it’s the French [colonizer],” says Vu Phan, who is of Vietnamese descent.

Marvin Andrews, an African American, connects Korea’s history to the civil rights movement in the United States. “W.E.B. Du Bois had addressed some of the same stuff that was going on in Korea at the hands of the Japanese in the same time African Americans was going through the same thing in the United States,” Andrews says. “You find people that have [been through] what you been through, so it’s like you’re not alone, [and] you want to study more and get to know more about it. That way you can better understand yourself, too.”

In many ways, Hong and Hwang say, teaching students at San Quentin has had an equally profound effect on them. “This is not to romanticize our students at all, but there’s something about the quality of experience, of just lived experience, even the experience of having confronted and still daily confronting adversity that makes our students bring a very thoughtful and profound analytical lens to the subject matter of Korean history,” says Hong. “And it really makes for stark contrast for us, even though we have some really wonderful students at UC Berkeley where we both have the opportunity to teach quite frequently. There’s something qualitatively different about this experience teaching here at San Quentin.”

Hwang, who is currently finishing up her dissertation on late 20th-century U.S.-Korea relations, notes the startling questions her students often ask have forced her to reassess her own presumptions about Korean history and culture.

Both instructors acknowledge that some of their students have no possibility of parole, which begs the question: What will these inmates ultimately take from such a course?

Hwang answers this way: “One of my [undergraduate] history professors said to me, ‘The purpose of my job is not to turn out a bunch of scholars, but the most important thing about history is [teaching] critical thinking.’ And I think that skill is so valuable for anybody, and I think Korean history is a vehicle.” ☐