

UPF Europe and Middle East's Paris Conference on Korean Thought Sparks Wide Interest

Jacques Marion
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Paris, France – Reflecting the growing international interest in all things Korean, UPF-France held a conference on June 7, 2025 at its Paris headquarters, on the theme: “The History of Korean Thought in the Light of the 21st Century.” The keynote speaker was **Dr. Olivier Bailblé**, senior lecturer in Korean Studies in the Department of Asian Studies at Aix-Marseille University. Nearly 100 participants attended, either in person or online, eager to better understand the foundations of Korea’s growing cultural and economic influence on the global stage.



Korean studies are experiencing a surge in popularity, particularly among young people, and are gaining

increasing recognition within European universities. According to Dr. Bailblé, the Korean Studies Center at Aix-Marseille University receives nearly 2,000 applications each year, but can accept only 100 students.



At the heart of his lecture, Dr. Bailblé addressed a central question: How did the small Korean Peninsula, divided after World War II, devastated by war, and marked by millions of casualties, manage to become a leading cultural and technological power, captivating young people around the world with its music, cinema, and innovations?



He traced the major stages in the development of Korean civilization, shaped by Buddhist and Confucian traditions inherited from China, yet enriched by a distinctly Korean identity and original philosophical thought. He highlighted the period of Mongol occupation, during which Korean monks reaffirmed their spiritual and historical roots, forging a unique national consciousness through myth and collective memory.

Dr. Bailblé explained how, from the early centuries of the Common Era, Korean Buddhist monks

developed specific typographic systems to facilitate the reading of Chinese texts. He then described the creation of Hangul in the 15th century, an original alphabet designed to make knowledge more accessible to the Korean people. He also discussed the rise of Confucianism from the 14th century onwards, which brought Korean culture to new intellectual heights, notably through the contributions of Neo-Confucian thinkers.



Beginning in the 19th century, the gradual integration of Eastern philosophy with Christian ideas from the West, combined with a deeply resilient and creative Korean spirit, enabled the nation to overcome the trials of Japanese colonization and the Korean War. This dynamic laid the foundations for Korea's renaissance in the second half of the 20th century, transforming it in just a few decades from a war-torn nation into a global leader in economic innovation and cultural influence.



The conference also honored the memory of French scholar Philippe Thiébault (1945–2012), who dedicated his life to the study of Chinese and Korean philosophy. After earning his doctorate at the prestigious Royal Academy Songgyun'gwan in Korea, he taught at Hanyang University in Seoul, the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles, and the Catholic University of Louvain-la-

Neuve in Belgium. He was the author of the groundbreaking work Korean Thought – At the Source of the Heart-Mind, and was the first to translate several foundational texts of Korean philosophy into French.



The numerous questions from the audience led Professor Bailblé to share his teaching experiences, both in the East and in France, sparking great interest and prompting participants to share their own stories.

