



Toward Globalization of Korean Sociology*

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This paper aims to understand how Korean sociology has developed in reflection of social changes both in Korea and worldwide. As Korean society underwent very rapid and radical changes since it was liberated from the Japanese colonial rule, Korean sociology also made great progress in a very short period of time. Increase both in the number of sociology departments and of sociologists was very impressive, the numbers of which now total 40 departments and around 500 sociologists nationwide. Colonization, division between South and North Korea, economic development and crisis, dictatorship and democratization, all of which characterized Korean society in the modern period, provided very significant research agendas to Korean sociologists who eagerly utilized them for a better understanding of the world they lived in. Finally, the trend of globalization constitutes another important research subject, to which Korean sociologist responded very aptly by producing a number of papers on global issues. Although the interest of Korean sociologists in global issues is still limited, they will transcend this restriction soon as they try ever harder to relate local, national and global issues in their researches.

Keywords: Korean sociology, Korean society, economic development and crisis, political democratization, globalization

Sociologists in Korea have long made various efforts to develop their own field of discipline, quite often under very adverse situations. In the academic sphere, after the Ministry of Education implemented an American-style undergraduate education program, sociologists have had to compete to attract students with other social sciences, especially those popular professional disciplines such as business administration and communication studies. In the practical world, they have fought against the constraints imposed by dictatorial political regimes that lasted until 1987 when Korea began its formal democratization process. When

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Korean sociologists more or less successfully transcended these obstacles, they faced the new challenge of globalization, which possessed unprecedented influence not only on Korean sociologists but also the Korean people in general. In this context, this paper aims at understanding how sociology has developed in Korea; how it has been institutionalized in Korea; how Korean society presented research subjects to Korean sociologists and how they in turn handled it for a better understanding of Korean society; and finally how these academics have coped with a new trend of globalization in recent years.

SOCIOLOGY IN KOREA

Korea was very late in importing sociology, a foreign academic discipline not available in traditional period, into its academic fields. It was first introduced in Korea during the colonial period when a small number of courses were taught by some pioneering sociologists. For that reason, Korea shares with Japan its formal term for sociology, *sahoehak*(사회학, 社會學), which literally means the study of society. When Korea was liberated from the Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the Korean people hastened to gain independence from Japanese influence in all fields of social life, most notably in political, economical, social and cultural spheres. Academic institutions and disciplines were no exception from this general trend. Korean sociologists tried to establish their own department at Seoul National University in 1946, which was followed by another national university in Taegu, Kyungbuk University in 1954.

Along with these efforts of the Korean government to institutionalize sociology departments at national universities, private hands also followed in the same footsteps. Ewha Women's University was the harbinger in this trend by setting up its own sociology department in 1958, followed by Korea University, which celebrated its forty-fifth anniversary this year. Yonsei University was rather a latecomer in this wave as it institutionalized its sociology department in 1972. The further institutionalization of sociology departments was hindered by the dominance of dictatorial regimes in the 1970s. Park Chung-hee, then the president of Korea and former military junta, and his government strictly controlled the expansion of sociology departments, since they believed sociology departments were one of the main sources of protests against the military regime.

It was natural, therefore, that his assassination in 1979 furnished a very favorable ground for the prosperity of sociology departments, evidenced by their surge the next year. However, once the discipline blossomed, the Korean government again came under another group of military dictators who captured power through illegitimate means of military coup in 1980, yet failed to tighten its firm grips in controlling dissident sociologists and sociology departments. Eventually, when Korea overcame all these political hardships with the inception of

democratization in 1987, the number of sociology department increased quite significantly, which now totals 40 departments nationwide.

Institutionalization of sociology departments accompanied the formation of the national organization of Korean sociologists in October 1956, henceforth known as the Korean Sociological Association (hereafter referred to as KSA). Initially, altogether 14 sociologists collaborated to found the association and elected Professor Sang-baek Lee as its first chair. Lee was succeeded by his colleagues at Seoul National University, Mun-hwan Choi and Man-gap Lee, until the first locale origin president from Kyoungbuk National University, Yong-kwang Bae, was elected in 1963 (<http://www.kas.re.kr/INTRODUCE/main5.php>). The proliferation of sociology departments since the 1980s produced numerous sociologists, while the KSA kept growing to include 578 members as of 2007.

Korean sociologists witnessed another milestone in the development of Korean sociology in 1964, with the publication of the Korean version of the association's official journal, *Korean Journal of Sociology* (hereafter referred to as *KJS*). After prolonged contribution to the enhancement of the quality of sociological papers in Korea, the journal added an English version in 2008. Currently, the journal is published 8 times a year, including two volumes of English version, and contains numerous research papers in diverse fields of sociology: social theory, political sociology, economic sociology, demography, sociology of culture, etc. The general trend of papers published in *KJS* in terms of their subject fields can be summarized as follows.

As the above table shows, the subjects of sociology papers in *KJS* have generally reflected the conditions of Korean society. In the 1960s, when Korea had just started its industrialization process, rural sociology was the most popular field of sociological study, followed by social psychology and family studies. This trend changed in the 1970s and 1980s when papers on social theory came to dominate the discipline. This shift in focus attests to how much Korean sociology was preoccupied with theoretical discussion, which, in turn, represents the peculiarity of Korean sociology compared with its counterpart in the U.S. Emphasis on the importance of theoretical debate was further accentuated by another important factor that Korean sociologists were fully concerned with — the investigation on the nature of Korean society. A fierce debate occurred among Korean sociologists, starting in the late 1970s and intensifying in the 1980s (see, for example, Park and Cho 1989). The debates revolved around the issues of how to define then the current situation of Korean society, especially in its relationship with foreign (imperial) forces, the U.S., and what the main contradiction of Korean society was. This controversy produced a large number of theoretical papers in those decades.

Deepening of industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s called for more researches in the fields of industrial sociology (including labor relations) and social inequalities. This was especially the case since the Korean government adopted an unbalanced economic development plan by which social disparities among regions and social classes were designed

Table 1. The Subjects of Papers Published in *KJS*

Subjects \ Decades	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	Total
Social Theory	3	6	13	10	24	56
Industrial Sociology (Labor Relations)	0	2	7	17	36	62
Economic Sociology	1	1	4	14	22	42
Political Sociology	0	1	4	10	22	37
Family Studies	6	3	4	10	12	35
Social Psychology	5	4	3	8	14	34
Sociology of Science	1	1	0	6	25	33
Social Inequalities	0	1	9	6	12	28
Historical Sociology	1	2	4	9	9	25
Comparative Sociology	1	0	3	5	16	25
Gender Studies	0	0	3	5	15	23
Developmental Studies	1	2	2	8	6	19
Social Welfare/Social Policy	1	0	0	4	14	19
Rural Sociology	9	3	3	2	1	18
Sociology of Culture	0	0	0	8	10	18
Sociology of Religion	0	1	1	7	8	17
Urban Sociology	0	1	5	8	1	15
Demography	0	0	0	11	2	13
Gerontology	0	0	2	2	8	12
Social Organization	0	2	0	1	9	12
Sociology of Education	0	0	0	1	10	11
North Korean Studies	0	0	0	6	5	11
Social Movements	0	0	1	5	4	10
Etc	2	5	3	20	19	49
Area Studies	4	2	10	23	34	73
Total	35	37	81	206	338	697

Note | Data in this table is reorganized from the original one collected by Professor Joon Han at Yonsei University.

from the beginning (Kim 1999) and the working class was intentionally planned to be the most disadvantaged one among social classes (Koo 2001). Labor disputes ensued even amidst harsh suppression by the dictatorial regimes and intensified with political democratization in the late 1980s. These efforts for change were fully analyzed in excellent papers on this subject in *KJS*. On the other hand, economic prosperity incurred by the industrialization project brought about rapid increase in the number of papers in economic sociology, which was mainly interested in the micro-foundation of business corporations or how the firms are organized and operated.

With the “cultural turn” in the 1990s (Bonnell and Hunt 1999), sociology of culture emerged as a new sphere of attention, together with gender studies. This new tendency confirms the female scholars’ active participation in the academic world, to the extent that research in both fields were mainly carried out by female sociologists, The most dramatic

turnover in the general trend of sociology papers of the time in *KJS* is found in area studies. The number of papers in this subject showed phenomenal increase since the 1990s, representing the effect of the overwhelming tide of globalization on Korean society and Korean sociology. This paper will analyze this problem in the later section.

KOREA IN SOCIOLOGY

Korea has experienced very rapid social changes in the modern period. After the collapse of the last Chosun dynasty, which lasted more than 500 years since 1392, Korea's modern society underwent a series of social upheavals. The first of them was the colonization of Korea by Japan in 1910 when Korea lost its sovereignty and independence to Japan without so much as a single war. Sufferings of the Korean people continued until 1945 when they were liberated from the colonial rule with the victory of the Allied Forces over Japan in the Pacific War. Despite the grave ordeal of the Korean people, Korean society transformed from the traditional one to the modern during this period. A more centralized political system was institutionalized and the capitalist economy was introduced in full scale. In addition, everyday life of the Korean people also changed very radically with the permeation of modern technologies and cultures, including railroad, telecommunication, radio broadcasting, newspapers, Western cosmetics, films, department stores, to name a few. This suddenly new and confusing situation, originating from an interminglement of colonial exploitation and modern transformation, bred very important research agendas for Korean sociologists, especially those interested in historical sociology. They were eager to identify various aspects of colonial modernity in Korea as it is distinct from other cases of colonial rule (see, for example, Robinson and Shin 1999).

Liberation of Korea was a very short-lived blessing for the most Korean people. Their country was soon divided into two parts along the thirty-eighth parallel and the two Koreas eventually waged a war for three years from 1950. The continuation of the division and ever increasing tension between South and North Korea were directly related to the consolidation of dictatorial political regimes in both parts. South Korea fortified its strong control on its people under the pretext of eliminating the sources of national insecurity. Harsh suppression of the oppressive state became even worse with a couple of the military coups, the first being in 1961 and the second in 1980 (Choi 1989). The Korean people, however, terminated the enduring military dictatorship with a month-long strike against it in 1987, initiating political democratization processes that are still going on. All these political changes furnished very significant research subjects for Korean sociologists in the fields of political sociology and social movements. This explains why papers in these subject fields increased very rapidly in the last two decades, as revealed in the Table 1.

The economic transformation of the country was never less dramatic than the political one just outlined. Korea was a very poor country when it started its industrialization project in 1962 with less than \$100 of GNP per capita. Emulating the successful achievement of Japan after World War II, the Korean government adopted very peculiar economic development plans, carried out by the developmental state. The state controlled all aspects of Korean economy and concentrated scarce resources to a few selected industrial sectors, business groups, social classes, and regions. The rationale underlying this strategy was to enhance the efficiency of Korean economy, which at the time lacked both financial resources and advanced technologies. In this way, the developmental state intentionally excluded some sectors of Korean society from the redistribution of economic wealth accumulated through the industrialization process.

This strategy of economic development yielded mixed results. On the one hand, Korea transformed from a poor, agricultural country to rich, industrial one. The transition was so successful that Korea showed remarkable achievements in almost all economic indices. The share of industrial sector in GDP increased from 22% in 1968 to 32% in 1999, while that of primary sector decreased from 29% to 5% in the same period. An average annual growth rate for the 30 years from 1965 was 8%; it was even much higher during the heyday of industrialization, reaching almost 10% in the 1970s and 1980s. GNP per capita also skyrocketed in this period, increasing from \$79 in 1960 to \$10,037 in 1995. Now Korea ranks 12th in the amount of export and 13th in that of import worldwide.

These impressive accomplishments, however, accompanied many social disasters, mainly because the Korean government was concerned only with economic growth without paying due attention to various types of social inequalities. The developmental state was too busy enlarging the size and quantitative aspects of Korean economy to take care of the quality of everyday life of the Korean people. The socially disadvantaged ones were the most critical victims of the state's disinterest in the welfare system. Their economic conditions were further aggravated when Korea was hit hard by the globalizing trend of the world economy in 1997. The internal vulnerability of Korean economy, deriving from moral hazards of financial institutions and an illegitimate coalition between the government and business firms, was so serious that when it was coupled with the external pressure, the Korean economy began to collapse (Samsung Kyōngje Yōn'guso 1998). The so-called "IMF economic crisis" not only revealed the weakness of Korean economy but, more critically, put many lower class people below the subsistence level.

This dramatic turn from economic prosperity to economic disaster provided Korean sociologists many diverse research subjects, especially in the fields of economic sociology, social welfare, social policy, industrial sociology, etc. Economic sociologists tried to find the organizational principles of Korean business corporations, while sociologists studying labor relations endeavored to find some ways to improve economic conditions of the working class. After the economic crisis in the late 1990s, the necessity to build a social safety network was

presented as a new problematic issue to the sociologists investigating the institutional arrangements of the welfare state.

In this way, Korean sociology faithfully reflected the characteristics of Korean society. Of course, sometimes the attempts of Korean sociologists to better understand Korean society did not bring about satisfactory results but rather caused controversies among sociologists. Korean sociologists sporadically looked back upon their achievements and tried to find better ways to enhance the quality of their works (see, for example, Hankuk Sahoe Hakhoe 1988; Park 1995; Kim 2002). One good example of this kind can be found in the controversy among Marxist sociologists in the 1980s when they attempted to identify the main characteristic of Korean society. A group of sociologists defined that Korea was in the state of semi-colony of the U.S. and thus the real solution to the problems of Korean society was to disconnect its relationship with the U.S. Another group of scholars, however, argued that Korea's main problem was an internal contradiction, the domination of Korean society by the ruling coalition of the oppressive state and the capitalist class, not the external intervention of the U.S., and thus the solution they suggested was to dismantle this coalition. The controversy continued for several years without drawing the conclusion regarding who was the final winner. The debate, however, revealed how keenly aware Korean sociologists were of the real situations of Korean society and how much they were concerned with the theorization of the social situations they lived in.

KOREAN SOCIOLOGY IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS

It is very hard to figure out when the trend of globalization started in Korea. It is very clear, however, that Korean society was placed near the whirlwind of globalization ever since it entered into the industrialization process in the 1960s. From the start, the Korean government planned to import foreign capital and technology and export its industrial goods to foreign markets, because the accumulation of financial resources and technology was very rudimentary and the domestic market was very much underdeveloped. The trend of globalization became more visible in the 1990s when the Korean government formally announced that it would pursue globalization as one of its goals of state governance. In the economic sphere, the Korean people firsthand experienced the effect of globalization with the advent of the economic crisis in the late 1990s as the disaster originated from the attack of foreign capital on Korean economy. In the everyday life of the Korean people, they came to realize the influence of globalization as a large-scale migration occurred of foreign laborers in urban areas and spouses for peasants in rural ones. In this way, globalization became part and parcel of Korean society, which naturally increased the number of sociological papers in this field. We have already checked in table 1 that the single most popular subject of papers published in *KJS* was area studies. We can confirm the influence of globalization on Korean sociology more in detail

Table 2. The Trend of Papers in Area Studies Published in *KJS*

Subject \ Decades	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	Total
Economic Sociology	0	0	3	3	5	11
Industrial Sociology (Labor Relations)	0	0	0	4	6	10
Social Welfare/ Social Policy	0	0	0	1	6	7
Family Studies	1	0	1	2	1	5
Social Psychology	1	1	3	0	0	5
Political Sociology	0	0	0	1	3	4
Social Movements	0	1	0	1	2	4
Urban Sociology	0	0	1	0	2	3
Youth Studies	0	0	0	1	2	3
Etc.	2	0	2	10	7	21
Total	4	2	10	23	34	73

Note | Etc. includes social inequalities, rural sociology, developmental studies, demography, sociology of law and other 11 subjects.

by analyzing these papers, which is summarized as follows.

The above Table testifies that the number of papers in area studies rapidly increased in the 1990s and 2000s, reflecting the enormous influence of globalization in these decades. In terms of subject fields, economic sociology and industrial sociology took the lead, followed by social policy and family studies. This order is somewhat expected, since globalization in Korea endowed an opportunity to reflect upon the operation of Korean business firms and the impact of foreign capital on Korean economy, the two central themes of economic sociology. The migration of foreign workers naturally produced a lot of problems in labor relations, as they replaced Korean laborers for many manual jobs. International marriage also created significant social problems as the foreign spouses suffered from diverse linguistic difficulties and cultural shocks, which need to be addressed by Korean sociologists. Finally, influx of foreigners into the “land of morning calm” (the traditional pseudonym for Korea) required the Korean government to devise various social policies for them and sociologists were committed to helping the Korean government in its efforts to deal with social issues arising from globalization.

Unlike the subjects of papers in area studies, their geographic variation is very restricted. As Table 3 shows, area studies in Korean sociology are heavily concentrated in three regions: North America, Northeast Asia, and Europe. The dominance of North America in this table represents the great influence of the U. S. on the globalizing world. It is easy to imagine that Northeast Asian countries, like China and Japan, are the most attractive subject in area studies in Korea, since China now comprises Korea’s most important trade partner and Japan has long been a source of technology and capital for Korea’s economic development. It is somewhat

Table 3. The Geographical Distribution of Area Studies in Papers Published in *KJS*

North America	Northeast Asia	Europe	Southeast Asia	South America	Oceania	Africa	Total
27	20	22	1	1	1	1	73

Table 4. Educational Background of Korean Sociologists

Countries	Graduate Education	%
Korea	213	44
U. S.	191	39
Germany	43	9
England	13	3
France	8	2
Japan	9	2
Australia	4	1
Etc	5	1
Total	486	101

Note | Data was collected from the membership of Korean Sociological Association, excluding current students and those whose information about graduate educational background is missing.

surprising that Korean sociology paid significant attention to European countries. One possible reason is that Korea wanted to learn from Scandinavian countries and Germany in establishing desirable labor relations and social welfare system. It is pity that all other areas were almost completely excluded from the analyses of Korean sociologists.

Korean sociologists are just as globalized as Korean sociology. Many Korean sociologists with a Ph.D. degree received their graduate education in foreign countries, most notably the U.S. As Table 4 reveals, 66% of Korean sociologists possess a foreign Ph.D. degree (or MA, if they don't have Ph.D. degree), while 70% them had their graduate training in the U.S. It is pretty amazing that the number of U.S. graduate degree holders is almost equivalent to that of Korean ones. Although Germany has long been considered to be the academic resource Korean scholars wanted to exploit, mainly due to the legacy of Japanese colonial rule as Japan tried to emulate German type of modernization, its influence significantly dwindled recently with the ever-increasing dominance of the U.S. in the academic world.

Heavy reliance of Korean sociology on foreign graduate education was once blamed as the main source of "colonization" of Korean sociology by the U.S. It is pointless to deny the crucial impact of the U.S. on Korean sociology. Some Korean sociologists in the 1980s severely attacked U.S.-educated or U.S.-oriented sociologists for their lack of academic autonomy (Kim 1983; Cho and Kim 1990). They attempted to construct indigenous theoretical models and analytical tools necessary for the proper understanding of Korean society. Their critique, however, was sometimes too burdened with ideological preoccupation and revealed

the weakness in applying the strict rules of academism. The foreign-educated sociologists defended themselves with superior and sophisticated means of social research acquired through their graduate training in foreign countries and tried to formulate a more universal model of social analysis. The debate between the two camps of sociologists illustrates how the globalization of sociology can bring about conflict with local concerns and why the globalizing trend needs to be harmonized with local attempts to keep some autonomy.

Despite some concerns of Korean sociologists about their dependence on the foreign academic world, it is generally believed that prevalence of foreign-educated sociologists will allow a favorable ground for the globalization of Korean sociology. As I have outlined in this paper, Korea went through radical changes in various spheres: politics, economy, society and culture. These changes constitute very important research agendas not only for Korean sociologists but more generally for sociologists worldwide. Korean sociologists with their foreign educational experience have obtained the means of communication with sociologists abroad, not merely linguistically but more importantly sociologically. Their advantageous position in disseminating their research products will further facilitate their attempt to globalize Korean sociology

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is quite obvious that Korean sociology developed in reflection of Korean society. While Korean society underwent very rapid and radical changes since it was liberated from the Japanese colonial rule, Korean sociology also made great progress in a very short period of time. Increase both in the number of sociology departments and of sociologists is very impressive. Many went to foreign countries for their graduate training and some remained there to teach foreign students. Some Korean sociologists are teaching very prestigious foreign universities, like the University of Chicago, Stanford University, University of Pennsylvania, etc. Their achievements are not simply personal ones; rather they represent the general level of Korean sociology.

It is also quite certain that Korean sociology has a long way to go to reach the global standard. Korean sociology, however, has started to step forward and go beyond the Korean context. Although the interest of Korean sociologists in global issues is still limited, they will transcend this restriction soon as they try ever harder to relate local, national and global issues in their researches. Some Korean sociologists are enthusiastic to publish their research products in English, which recently increased the number of papers published in foreign, English journals. Thus, publication of the English version of *KJS* is an effective means to expedite their communication with outside world. It is of no doubt that the trend of globalization of Korean sociology will continue and be even more fervently pursued in the future.

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