Korea Journal, vol. 61, no. 3 (autumn 2021): 5–14.
doi: 10.25024/kj.2021.61.3.5

On This Topic

English-based Korean Studies and Korean-based Korean Studies

Myounhoi DO

This year 2021 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the *Korea Journal*. In its commemoration, the Academy of Korean Studies initially planned a symposium under the theme of "English-based Korean Studies and Korean-based Korean Studies" to be held October 16, 2020, but had to cancel it due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In its place, it decided to compile the presenters' papers and discussants' comments and publish them in a themed Autumn 2021 number of the journal. As can be inferred from the title of the aborted symposium, this special endeavor intends to examine research outcomes in English-language Korean Studies in the English- and Korean-speaking worlds, with a focus on their interrelations, characteristics, and future prospects and challenges, and to incorporate the results into the journal's future editorial policy. Working with limited time and budget, the original aim to have presentation topics across all areas of Korean Studies could not be pursued, and the following five papers by scholars solicited on the *Korea Journal* Editorial Board's recommendation and from willing contributors from that board have been arranged:

Myounhoi DO is a professor in the Department of History & Culture, Daejeon University. He is Editor-in-Chief of the Korea Journal. E-mail: yoktal@dju.kr.

- Jae-moon Hwang, "English-Language Journals in Korean Studies: *Their Significance and Challenges*"
- Duol Kim and Hann Earl Kim, "Is Commanding Korean a Source of Competitiveness?: *An Analysis of Publications in English by Korean Economics Professors Affiliated with Korean Universities*"
- Don Baker, "Moving Beyond Politics: *Western Scholarship on Joseon*"
- Henry Em, "North Korea as Neighbor: *Critical Scholarship on North Korea (in English)*"
- Sem Vermeersch, "Representing Korean Buddhism: *Toward a Transnational Understanding of the Field of Korean Buddhist Studies*"

In terms of the language zone examined by the five papers, two relate to the Korean-speaking zone (Hwang's examination of English-language journals in Korean Studies and Korean economic history by Kim and Kim); another two are linked with the English zone (Baker on Joseon history and Em on North Korea); and then there is a comparative analysis of research on Korean Buddhism in the English- and Korean-language zones (Vermeersch). Discussions on the above papers are made by Dongjun Kim, Changkeun Lee, Seung B. Kye, Byung Wook Jung, and Sumi Lee, respectively. I would like to express my deep appreciation to the five discussants.

It is often said that Korean Studies is a discipline that studies various fields of Korea, including but not limited to language, history, geography, politics, economy, and society. This is, however, only reflective of the view of Europe and the United States, where Korean Studies is primarily regarded as a subfield of Area Studies. As each of those fields known to be studied in Korean Studies (language, history, geography, etc.) have a corresponding discipline of its own, in Korea, *Korean Studies* is not recognized as a discipline and there is no such thing as a Department of Korean Studies or a Korean Studies major at most universities in Korea. During the colonial period, Japan did not generate anything like Korean Studies or Joseon Studies, unlike European countries, where Egyptian Studies or Indian Studies existed as Area Studies. Why such difference?

After the annexation of Korea in 1910, the Japanese Government General of Korea (JGGK) declared Korea not a colony but a newly

incorporated territory. Japan's ruling policy was established on the pretext that Korea and Japan, which had the same ethnic roots in antiquity, were conjoined in 1910 under Japan's lead after having been separated for over a millennium following Silla's unification of the Three Kingdoms. To support this, the JGGK conducted surveys of Korean customs, institutions, and old records to prove that Koreans and Japanese had once lived as one people.

But the attempts to demonstrate that the two countries shared the same roots ended in failure. After the March First Independence Movement of 1919, the JGGK admitted that Japanese and Koreans were different peoples, each with their own national culture. It launched survey projects on an extensive scale to understand Korea's natural environment, religions, institutions, and customs, as part of a scheme to formulate a ruling policy. The project findings were released in a series of publications amounting to over fifty volumes, covering diverse aspects of Korean society and culture—markets, commerce, independence thought, the public, cooperatives, ceramics, products, national character, population, crime, disasters, folk beliefs, practices of tenancy, living conditions, villages and settlements, and religion. Further, *Joseonsa* (History of Joseon) was compiled in thirty-five volumes and based on a full-blown and systematic study of Korean history.

Japan shaped its knowledge system on Korea from the stance that Korea was an undeveloped, backward, and savage country of anti-civilization, the exact opposite of Japan, which was posited as advanced and civilized. According to Japanese descriptions of Korea, the Korean people were other-directed for they had their fate swayed by foreign forces; unlike Japan, Korea did not have a feudal period, so Korean society was in a state of stagnated development; lacking an independent civilization, it adopted Chinese civilization and passed this on to Japan, acting as an intermediary; and the unique arts of the Silla and Goryeo dynasties degenerated during the Joseon era under poor governance and incessant political factionalism.

The JGGK's accumulation of knowledge and information on Korea along such lines compelled Koreans to develop "Joseon Studies" as a

knowledge system to prove Korea was a nation with an independent culture. In this effort, they formulated the notion of the homogeneity of the Korean people descending from a common forefather, Dangun, and generated representations of their independent culture as distinct from Japanese culture; featured examples were Jeong Yakyong, the scholar of the late Joseon period who systematized Silhak (Practical Learning), King Sejong who created the Korean alphabet Hangeul, and the great Admiral Yi Sunsin, who defeated the Japanese navy during the Imjin War.

After separate governments were established in North and South Koreas in 1948, intellectuals of the South upgraded the Joseon Studies of the colonial period to Gukhak (national studies) and worked on demonstrating the outstanding and unique characteristics of Korean culture and the potential of Korea's independent historical development. Particularly from the 1960s, adopting modernization theory and historical materialism on a foundation of nationalism, Korean scholars sought to verify that the nation had taken the same path of development as Europe and Japan.

Meanwhile, Korean Studies in Europe and the United States was formed based mainly on documents produced by Christian missionaries who had been active in Korea from the late 19th century, as well as from survey findings and the knowledge system on Korea accumulated by Japan in the colonial period. In a sense, it seems there were two trends in Korean Studies, each having a completely different outlook from the other. At any rate, scholars of Korean Studies were overwhelmed by the nation's successful hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympics and remarkable economic take-off, and were shaken by the disintegration of the socialist bloc in the 1990s and the gushing tide of globalization. Endorsing the post-nationalist and post-Cold War perspective, Korean scholars began to question their steadfast belief in the nationalist position, the independent development of Korean culture, and the law of monistic development for Korean history. As a result, from the 1990s, Korean Studies in Korea took the direction of encountering, communicating with, and incorporating Korean Studies in the Western hemisphere.

With this flow of Korean Studies as backdrop, Jae-moon Hwang's

paper, "English-Language Journals in Korean Studies: Their Significance and Challenges" attempts to present an overview of changes in these journals' trajectories and to present future challenges, focusing on such English-language journals from Korea with a foreign target audience as *Pictorial Korea, Korea Journal, and Seoul Journal of Korean Studies*. Before their publication, Hwang shows, Korean intellectuals such as Namgung Eok, Philip Jaisohn, and Yu Gil-jun relied on the English language to play a mediating role between Korea and the outside world—for instance, by printing English versions of newspapers like *Dongnip sinmun* (The Independent) and *Daehan maeil sinbo* (Korea Daily News). *Pictorial Korea* (Gukje bodo), which began to release a bilingual edition in 1945 presenting juxtaposed Korean and English texts, portrayed Korea on the path to development and short biographies of renowned figures of early modern Korean history, such as Ahn Chang-ho, Shin Ik-hee, and Ryu Gwansun. Yet it was the *Korea Journal*, released in the name of the UNESCO Korean Commission by the military regime established after the May 16 coup (1961), that began in earnest to transmit information and knowledge concerning Korea. This magazine, whose main audience at its inception was Koreans living abroad, began to attain traits of an academic journal from the 1970s. Transitioning to a quarterly in 1990, it published research outcomes in Korean Studies from both the English zone and the Korean zone, assuming a mediating role by offering a space where two different perspectives could interact and forge ahead to the next stage. Meanwhile, *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* was launched in 1988 by the Institute for Korean Studies, Seoul National University, claiming as its aim to overcome the biased views of Korea assembled by Japanese imperialist scholarship and to seek and promote objective scholarship. However, by emphasizing its role as introducing to a foreign readership notable research outcomes in Korean Studies in the Korean-language zone, it fell short of creating a linkage with English-language Korean Studies in the West. Although the author foresees increasingly positive interactions between Korean Studies in the two zones, he maintains the somewhat pessimistic view that the study of Korean classical literature and of premodern Korea are highly likely to linger in isolation.

As anticipated by Hwang, the number of social science papers published in English-language journals has increased steadily from the 1990s. The paper by Duol Kim and Hann Kim examines this trend using relevant statistics on publications by economics professors based in Korea, and takes note of issues lurking behind it. According to their analysis, the number of English-language papers published by Korean economics professors as a percentage of total papers published has nearly doubled over the last two decades, from 18 percent in 1998 to 33.3 percent in 2018. Yet among these English-language publications, the number addressing Korea-specific subjects has grown at a slower pace than those addressing non-Korean ones. Korea may be a relatively unattractive subject to a foreign readership, but considering Korea's rapid economic growth over the past several decades, and solid performance in recent years, why are Korean scholars of economics generating a smaller number of papers on Korea than on other topics? This is the core question the authors raise.

Their answer to this question is that it is not due to any reluctance to deal with Korean issues, but rather to two other factors. First, the Korean government does not provide sufficient financial support to promote empirical research on problems relating to Korea. Second, statistical data needed for economics research, data that are monopolized by the government, are not detailed nor plentiful enough. They think this second factor a particularly important one that needs to be addressed. The United States Census Bureau has opened to the public two centuries worth of census microdata (1740–1940) without any conditions, whereas Statistics Korea allows public access to the equivalent data only from the 1980s. For this reason, researchers have difficulties in systematically and precisely analyzing Korea's economic history and current economic issues in order to study how rapid economic growth occurred from the 1960s and what key factors were at play. As this not only works against obtaining a sound understanding of the Korean economy, but also undermines academic development, the authors urge the Korean government to make more statistics available for research.

Meanwhile, Don Baker and Henry Em conduct a critical overview of research achievements on Joseon history and North Korea, respectively.

Baker finds it regrettable that there is not a single book dealing with Joseon's five-century-long history in its entirety. He introduces a vast array of book publications on the history of Joseon produced in the English zone, ranging from the journal by Hendrick Hamel, a Dutch explorer who drifted to Korea after a shipwreck in the mid 17th century, to the latest publications (as recent as 2020). He takes note of depictions of Korean society and history during the time of enlightenment made by late-nineteenth-century missionaries (John Ross, William Elliot Griffis, Homer Hulbert, and James Scarth Gale) and professional scholars of the 1960s and 1970s (Hilary Conroy, James Palais, Harold Cook, Vipan Chandra, and Edward Wagner). He then continues by introducing an astonishing volume of books across diverse subjects: Confucianism, Donghak (Eastern Learning), Catholicism, and Buddhism (religious history); the ruling class of the late Goryeo period, *jungin* (the intermediary class) in the late Joseon period, successful candidates of the military service exams, elites in northwestern regions, rural yangban (aristocrats), women, and clans (social history); commerce, the Japan House, ginseng trade (economic history); the Japanese and Manchu invasions of Joseon, Injwa Yi's rebellion, the Iljinhoe Society (political and military history). He also covers new scholarship of the 21st century, such as royal court politics under the reigns of King Yeongjo and King Jeongjo, histories of art (landscape and genre painting), literature, regions and locales, Confucian debates, science and technology (astronomy), and medicine (*Dongui bogam* [Treasury of Eastern Medicine]).

What is characteristic of Baker's paper is that, instead of making an assessment based on a particular perspective of history, he examines the extent to which English-language scholarship has looked into various aspects of Joseon's half-a-millennium history in a balanced, in-depth, and comprehensive manner. Reading the paper, one can detect no vestige of the Orientalism that is often found in Korean Studies in the English-speaking world, nor much sympathy by the author for Koreans' nationalist position. He makes no mention of the relationship between Western and Korean descriptions of Joseon history. He tries to be objective and rational, to the degree that he thinks it a pity there has not been a single

publication covering the entire Joseon era in one volume, in contrast with a bulk of Western literature on Chinese dynasties and major periods of Japanese history. This he does purely out of a feeling of intimacy with and interest in Korean Studies. Baker also points out how there are not many young scholars studying the Joseon era and, as most of the research materials they deal with are written in Chinese characters, they need to learn Chinese to read old texts, which involves much more painstaking effort than learning Korean. He also encourages the scholarly exploration of the lives of the people, say, at work and play, rather than clinging to the typical large topics like politics and war.

Compared to Baker, Henry Em presents the issues straightforwardly and undertakes a critical review of English-language research results on North Korea, offering desirable directions for future research. Em argues that scholars of North Korea in the English zone should not regard as separate policies President Bush's decision to invade Iraq (2003) and his apparent interest in human rights in North Korea. The United States labeled North Korea as part of an axis of evil and exhibited concerns about the human rights of her people, but on the other hand, the United States invaded Iraq indiscriminately (despite the absence of any weapons of mass destruction) and legitimized the exercise of military force. This is a typical example of the US government's double-sided attitude. As a matter of fact, it has been the United States that has launched military attacks and secret operations in various parts of the world every year since World War II. Since the signing of the Armistice Agreement in 1953, the United States has introduced strategic nuclear weapons to South Korea and driven low-intensity conflict and reciprocal destruction. After 9/11, it has made people conjecture that the North Korean regime is moved by hostility and belligerence and its leader's internal and external policies are sinister in nature and that it desires to attack the United States.

In Em's view, there are several reasons critical scholarship is needed for North Korean studies in the English-speaking world. First, even if the Cold War has ended, political leaders continue to account for the North's moves at critical times based on the former Cold War standpoint, causing confusion in policy decision-making and execution. Second, among

North Korean defectors who are interviewed by the media, many do so for monetary compensation, and later their lies are disclosed. Third, the human rights frame allows the United States, previously the perpetrator and beneficiary of injustices, to assume a moral and intimidating attitude.

With this view in mind, Em suggests that North Korean studies in the English zone does not emphasize the homogeneity of North and South Koreans, but instead, focuses on their proximity as close neighbors who should live in peace. If they are to affirm the *identity* that *we are one*, they cannot live side by side for they are the victim and victimizer of each other. On the other hand, emphasis on *proximity* can promote an affective relationship (*love*) which is formed as they encounter each other face to face.

As shown above, the first two papers are about English-language Korean Studies in the Korean-speaking zone, and the other two, English-language Korean Studies in the English zone. The last paper by Sem Vermeersch compares research on Korean Buddhism in the two language zones to examine their interrelations, and calls for transnational mutual understanding between them. For Vermeersch, the foremost characteristic of the scholarly investigation of Korean Buddhism in the English zone is that, commencing with no authoritative scholars on the subject (in contrast to the cases of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism), researchers traveled to Korea in person to study the subject and produced scholarly output later back home. In this setting, a naturally arising research question was how Korean Buddhism differs from Chinese or Japanese Buddhism. The answer used to be found in Korean Buddhism's emphasis on national protection and eclecticism. From the 1990s, scholarly attention shifted to note how Chinese Buddhism influenced, and helped shape, Korean Buddhism. A more recent trend emphasizes ceasing to search for indicators of the uniqueness of Korean Buddhism, and instead to try to understand it in its East Asian context.

Despite the fact that the study of Korean Buddhism in the English zone began from an early phase with scholars visiting Korea to study it, researchers in the Korean zone tend not to refer to their English-zone counterparts. Nor do they pay attention to reputed works in other fields,

such as sociology, philosophy, and political science (e.g., Foucault, Said, Baudrillard, Anderson) which might offer methodological guidance. The only exception is Yong-tae Kim, who was the first to employ the concept of Orientalism to critically examine the ways Korean Buddhism has been studied and portrayed. Kim argued that pioneering scholars and their successors imparted utmost importance to the historical Buddha and related written evidence and disparaged Mahayana and Zen Buddhism as mysticism and superstition. He adds that Japan objectified Korea as the Other by adopting a European perspective.

Vermeersch believes that the appearance of exceptional scholars such as Yong-tae Kim has been made possible by the availability of translations of major research outcomes from the European world. The translation of Buddhist scriptures and research findings is gravely important in this field, but it involves enormously arduous work, incomparable to translating terminologies of other fields. Literal translation may not properly convey meaning to those who do not understand classical Chinese. And too liberal a translation can cause the meaning of the original text to evaporate. Therefore, the translator needs to be researcher and interpreter at the same time.

Despite all this, Vermeersch argues that studies of Korean Buddhism in the two language zones will inevitably move closer together. Digitalization of research findings has facilitated cross-referencing between fields and mutual access via databases instead of printed journals. As English is the standard language of academic publication and the pressure of publishing in English mounts, we can find reflections of this within the Korean academy. We can now obtain translations and summaries of Western studies on Korean Buddhism. In addition, Vermeersch points out the need to cultivate Korean researchers who are trained at American academic institutions and able to deliver bilingual presentations, and the importance of support by the Korean Buddhist community and government for the translation of source texts and secondary literature that requires multi-year collaborative work.

Received: 2021.08.25. Revised: 2021.09.10. Accepted: 2021.09.16.