The Development of East Asian Studies in Korea

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The aim of this paper is to examine East Asian studies in Korea discussed by Korean intellectuals within and with out the academic circles since the 1990s from the perspective of sociology of knowledge. The reason for an added emphasis on the 1990s is due to an appearance of a new trend of discourses in this period that differed dramatically in quality from the previous academic discussions on neighboring Asian countries. The contents of East Asian studies in the 1990s are too various to be discussed in one paper. While there is a cultural perspective dating back to distant ages, there is also a socio-economic one emphasizing the future tasks of the studies. With regard to the regional boundary of East Asian studies, some restrict the area to Korea, China, and Japan while others include Vietnam and Southeast Asian nations, and even the

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1. Baek Yeong-seo, classified East Asian studies as a regional solidarity, a unit of civilization and an intellectual experimentation, while Kim Hui-gyo mentioned four types of East Asian studies: the theory of Asian value, East Asian studies from the perspective of state power, the theory of solidarity from the dimension of civilians, and the theory of community in East Asia. Ha Se-bong classified East Asian studies into three: the purpose (the theory of transformation/ the theory of alternative civilization), the method (comparative history, thoughts and culture, relations and negotiations) and the main subject, those who studied abroad, and the generation who fell into intellectual confusion). Kim Kwang-eok mentioned the formation of regional community, the rediscovery of what is Oriental and the analysis of cultural identity in East Asia). All of them explained various contents of East Asian studies.

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I. Historical Situation of the 1990s

In order to understand how East Asian studies began to emerge in Korea, we must inquire into the atmosphere of Korean society in the 1990s. First, within the context of historical changes, the fall of socialism and the end of the Cold War had great influences on Korean society. The collapse of the Eastern Europe and the dismantlement of the former Soviet Union had fundamentally crumbled the cold war structure. The post-cold war impact on the Asian bloc was so great that, as one scholar put it, there appeared various patterns of “either an alliance of states against a powerful enemy or a confederacy of nations,” which had been unimaginable in the Cold War era. With the opening of diplomatic relationships with the socialist-bloc countries, including Russia and China, as an outcome of “Nordpolitik,” Korea expanded its concern to the regions whose relationship with her had previously been cut off. In particular, the reemergence of a relationship with China has resulted in a restoration of life long historical experiences between the two countries that led Korea to regard the traditional and regional orders of East Asia.

Also the economic development of Korea was clearly recognized both at home and abroad. Since the 1990s, capitalism in Korea proved a success not only in heavy and chemical industries but also in high-technology sectors such as information and computers. There has been a significant change in the standard of consumption and mode of life. Furthermore, Korea actively pushed itself forward to globalization targeting global markets. Market principles gained universal acceptance with the weakening of nation-states and their borders. At the same, the inefficiency of interventions among nations was discussed. While Korean

2. East Asian studies have been dealt with by many scholars. You may consult the essays of Baek Won-dam (1999), Kim Hui-gyo (2000), Ha Se-bong (1999) and Lee Seung-hwan (1998).
society proclaimed to actively stand for globalization, it faced difficulties in breaking away from the long-cherished nation-oriented mode of thinking. Conflicts and tension between the role of the government and the freedom of the market have become more serious than ever.

The social changes that occurred the 1990s exerted a great influence on the intellectual community of Korea. Above all, a capitalistic development paradigm gained strength. Thus, Korea was promoted as a non-Western nation that succeeded in achieving swift industrialization in contrast to the collapse of socialist states. Korea’s pride of having achieved political democratization has contributed greatly to fostering the new trend. Korea also actively accepted and introduced the intellectual discourses of the West, which evaluated Korea’s economic growth highly. An example is a publication of the OECD titled “The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy” that came out in 1993. With the emergence of post-nationalism and globalization, the humanities and social sciences of Korea were criticized both at home and abroad as being captivated by nationalism.

On the other hand, the intellectual influence of Marxism, which had established itself as a philosophical basis of progressivism, has considerably weakened. Debates on social formation in the 1980s have become a mere subject for academic discussion. Instead, Korea actively accepted various “post-”related cultural theories from the West. The “post-” discourses introduced rapidly from Europe synchronous with the weakening of Marxism have criticized modernism and Western-oriented thoughts. Michel Foucault’s theory and Edward Said’s Orientalism instead emphasized microscopic and partial discussions, diversity, and decentralization. These trends have instigated efforts to construct decolonized and self-directed discourses, revoked new concerns on tradition, and created a new trend that was considered Oriental thoughts.

II. The Development of East Asian Studies

Since the mid-1990s, East Asian studies developed in various forms. Several categories of East Asian studies that have attracted diverse concerns are addressed below.
East Asian Perspective as a Critical Theory

East Asian discourse appeared as an intellectual countermovement against the cultural atmosphere of the 1990s. It was *Creation & Criticism*, a magazine that initiated a progressive social theory, who advocated East Asian perspectives as a new intellectual discourse. In 1993, Choe Won-sik, an editor of the magazine, expressed his worries about the intellectual orientations of the 1990s saying that a historic eschatology, which emphasizes the final success of the Western capitalism, should be criticized. Choe emphasized the “East Asian viewpoint” that would enable Koreans to overcome both the imperialistic viewpoint of the West and the endogenous development theory of the Korean academia. Paik Nak-chung (1993), the publisher of the magazine, also underscored the importance of the East Asian perspective because the division of the Korean peninsula is closely related to the tragedies found in modern history of East Asian countries including Japan and China. Baek Yeong-seo, another editor of the magazine, also called the re-illumination on East Asia based on the experiences of various social forces or groups. Paying attention to the criticism that East Asian studies tend to rely on cultural homogeneity, Baek maintained the necessity of watching the cultures of three East Asian nations not as a single unit of existence but as a field of competition among various tendencies. He argued for the necessity of searching for East Asia as a stronghold for resisting the standardized logic of capitalism.

3. The term “East Asia” can be found in the writings of several debaters before the 1990s. The term, however, was mostly used as an expression of combining individual matters of concern about China and Japan, or as a concept of indicating long tradition of the Orient. This means that, in England and America, the term of East Asia was used to express the nations in this area without having no connotations as a special category.

4. Paik Nak-chung, was very critical about defining the regional system of East Asia as an intermediary linking the Korean peninsula and the world system, because it was hard to set up a regional category of East Asia and it was hard to understand East Asia as an individual category which differs from the capitalist world system. He, however, made it clear that the traditional legacy of East Asia, in other words, Confucianism or experiences of anti-regime struggles, could be developed into a useful asset of civilization which could help seek for new alternatives.
East Asian Studies as a Development Theory

One of the grand changes in the mid-1990s was the emergence of East Asian studies as a social theory of Korean economic development. Discussions were aimed at accepting Korea’s economic growth as a noteworthy case in history and at understanding the process of development in relation to the ‘East Asian factors.’ The development theory of the West had a great influence in developing this intellectual discourse. Since the late 1980s, Western developmental theories on East Asia were introduced in Korea actively by social scientists including the world system theory and the ‘wild-goose’ theory. Confucian capitalism theory that emphasized the Confucian tradition as a common cultural basis of East Asia accepted the success of capitalism as an inevitable historical process and precondition and pointed out that only East Asia could have achieved a success among non-Western societies. Ham Jae-bong (1997) indicated that East Asian countries “were creating more efficient, stable and orderly patterns of capitalism compared with the original capitalism.” Yu Seok-chun (1997) noted that Korea’s capitalism is Confucianism-oriented introduced by the upper class or government officials. According to Yu, collusive relations between political and business circles and the effect of personal connections in official works were “inevitably the structural results accompanied by the development of Confucian capitalism.” He went on to maintain that they were “the best and reliable method of reducing transactional costs.” Confucian capitalism theory was able to attract social attention in the absence of intellectual discussions aimed at explaining an optimistic atmosphere created by Korea’s economic growth in mid-1990s.

5. Other than the report of the OECD, those books or writings of the West, which have dealt with the issue of East Asia’s economic growth until the first half of 1990s, included the following.
   Alvin Y. So & Stephen W. K. Chiu, 1995, East Asia and the World Economy, SAGE.

6. One of the interesting things is that Confucian capitalism had not drawn any attention from the economics circle. Song Byeong-rak (1996) wrote a similar writing, but it just introduced the discussions of foreign scholars. As was
East Asian Studies as a Cultural Study

As the areas of East Asian studies expanded to include philosophy, literature, and history, East Asia is understood as a region that shared a common value from the past and that such a resource has exerted a great influence in the region until now. In this context, the modernities of both the West and of Asia were told to have different characteristics. Confucianism, Chinese characters, the idea of unity of nature and men, organicism, communitarian ethics, etc. were pointed out as East Asian factors. Researchers of humanistic science aimed at re-discovering Confucianism as a resource of communitarian spirit and moralism, which were distinguished from the liberalism and individualism of the West. Some political scientists advocated these discussions in an effort to reinterpret Asia’s authoritarianism. Though Chung Jae-seo (1997) focused on the spirit of Taoism rather than Confucianism, East Asian studies as a cultural phenomenon was in most cases transformed into a “theory of East Asian culture” and was explained as a theory of Confucian culture. The discourse that emphasized the positive function of Confucianism was criticized as covering up the problem of regimes and mystifying what is Oriental. Such a tendency was under extensive attacks from anthropologists. Kim Gwang-eok (1997), for example, criticized East Asian studies as fossilizing culture without considering inner diversity, historical necessity, and variability of culture. Discussions between theorists of East Asian studies and anthropologists, however, have failed to develop into deeper academic disputes.

Asia-Pacific Regional Studies

The Korean government and the business sector have begun to pay attention to the region of East Asia since the mid-1990s. They, however, directed more attention to the category of the Asia-Pacific bloc including the United States, rather than the category of East Asia. Their attitudes manifested during the period of Korea’s IMF crisis, economists seemed to have had critical views on Confucian capitalism. 7. Ham Jae-bong saw that Confucianism could develop into a new alternative which could overcome both the extreme individualism and the non-communitarian aspects of the Cold War-style liberalism.
were natural from the viewpoint of the conservative camp, which advocated the American hegemony of the regional orders after the end of World War II. From an economic side, Korea’s trade depended heavily on the relationship with American markets than with East Asian markets. From a political or military side, the existence of the United States in East Asia occupied a core position. The activities of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) have become more brisk after the change in attitudes of the United States in 1993. Reflecting such a trend, the Quarterly Sasang introduced discussions on the Asia-Pacific region including a report on the U.S. strategy toward the Asia-Pacific region. Considering that Arif Dirlik (1993) pointed out the category of the Asia-Pacific region was politically constructed in consideration of the strategies of the United States, the problematic of the discussions on the category of Asia-Pacific was different from other East Asian perspectives. It was mainly discussed by the ruling class for a strategic purpose and accepted the trend of globalization as inevitable, but, nevertheless, accentuated the bilateral relations with the United States.8

III. East Asian Peoples’ Solidarity

In the mid-1990s, there appeared discussions that advocated the solidarity of the East Asian people, especially, the solidarity among the grass-roots level. They were the result of various civil rights movements and the activities of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They called for constructing a new regional order by overcoming the nation- or capital-oriented regional integration through the voluntary solidarity of the people or the progressive forces in East Asian countries. While placing stress on the task of paving the way for a solidarity among the people of the Asian region, dotted with disputes and discords, the term “diversity” is preferred to a mere statement of “Asia is

8. Kang Kyung-shik (1996), who was deeply involved in the economic policy of the Korean government, opposed the Japan-oriented wild goose-style integration, called for the necessity of constructing an open-system information community of East Asia, and suggested holding an ad hoc meeting for the preparations. But he presented the logic of ruling class who maintained that such a project should be initiated by political leaders of each nations.
one.” Simultaneously, feminists, environmentalists, and civil rights movement activists who advocated post-nationalism, called for discussions on solidarity among East Asian countries. An Byeong-mu emphasized a connection between “the solidarity of the people and the peace of Northeast Asia,” and Kim Min-ung called for the formation of solidarity with much emphasis on the protection of the weak in Asia. Cho-Han Hye-jeong underlined that the very concept of binding the whole Asia into one should be discarded whether the initiator is either the capital or the nation. As the civilization of Confucianism itself was a kind of a logic oppressing women, Cho-Han said, those attempts to revive the past as a precious culture or beautify it should be thoroughly criticized. Since 1997, civilian-led symposiums were held under the slogan of promoting peace and human rights in East Asia, including Kwangju, Okinawa, and Taiwan. Most of the discussions maintained the necessity of consolidation among intellectuals or various movement groups of Asia and confirmed the significance of holding such concrete events.

IV. Issues of East Asian Studies

The economic crisis that began in Southeast Asia and extended to all over East Asia had a significant impact not only on philosophical and intellectual but also in political and economic areas. It was a period when Asia or East Asia was regarded as an entity, which had close connections with each other and, at the same time, various theories of advocating the development of East Asia disintegrated.

Asian Value and Development

When Korea experienced an economic crisis, the optimistic theories of East Asian studies based on Korea’s economic growth or Confucian capitalism theory fell into a great chaos. Confucian capitalism was despised as ‘crony’ capitalism. Development economics, which were initiated under the patronage of the government, was denied due to the elasticity of the market, and the Western-style transparency was demanded forcibly in every area. Such criticisms were more noteworthy in overseas than at home. In the end, the logic of the IMF, backed by the
strength of the dollar, was imposed in the name of a universal principle. At the same time, the cultural perspective, which seeks to understand East Asia as a culturally homogeneous unit faced many questions. Why has the tradition of the past, or Confucianism, reappeared today? Can one or two cultural aspects interpret the whole region of East Asia? And what are the political effects? On what degree can Asian values be detached from Confucian values? How sincerely and flexibly can Asian values cope with feminists’ critiques against the patriarchal tradition?

Cho Hee-yeon saw Korea’s capitalism, which had been called Confucian capitalism, as a case of dependent development in the world capitalist system, and criticized theoretical explanations of Confucian capitalism. Lee Seung-whan said “we should cease to decorate Korean capitalism, which is neither Confucian nor Western-style, with Confucian terms, and to justify it.” Lee also maintained that mutual dependence continually adjusted between the nations and markets should be respected more. To some, however, Confucian capitalism theory was interpreted as a discourse of resistance against neo-liberalism of the West’s hegemonic control of capital. It remains unsolved whether Confucian capitalism theory could develop into a discourse that could determine the spiritual basis of Korean capitalism and discuss the related problems, rather than into an ideology only explaining the reality retrospectively.

Alternatively, the economic crisis amplified the resistance and criticism against the Western-style authority. Paradoxically, an increasing number of people felt the necessity of restoring the collective identity, which had been reduced by the crisis. This reflected the resistance of the intellectuals against American-centered ideas. Both the logic of communitarian countermove under the name of overcoming national crisis and the reflective mood of welcoming the 21st century with a nationalistic rhetoric played a role in fostering this trend. Ham Jae-bong (2000) asked a question whether it would proper to accept American-style capitalism while partly admitting the criticism on Confucian capitalism theory as an alternative. Some academic journals tried to highlight Asian Values in a modern context during Korea’s economic crisis.  

9. “Culture and Thoughts of East Asia” and “East Asian Social Thoughts” were first published in order to advocate the discourses of East Asian studies during
messages of the journals published mainly by those scholars who were specializing in Confucianism or Oriental studies, pointed out that Asian values have positive elements to solve contemporary socio-economic conflicts. Choe Min-ja (1998) stated that “East Asian civilization is an alternative for the Western one,” adding that Korean people should never fall into Western-style universalism or remain as passive assistants. Ham Jae-bong (2000) promoted the theory of Confucian democracy and sought for finding a philosophical basis for overcoming the limit of Western-style free democracy. After pointing out that the Confucian culture of East Asia is about sharing the cultural characteristics that cherish the spirit of community, Lee Seung-hwan (2000) called for the construction of a real community through decentralization of power that would give people more power. It reflected the people’s aspiration for the community under the circumstance that neo-liberalism was losing its power of consolidation.

**Nationalism and Regionalism**

Another issue in East Asian studies is the relation between nationalism and regionalism. Confucian capitalism was interpreted as a development theory of the individual state, which is deeply interrelated with the nationalistic perspective. On the other hand, some call for the necessity of overcoming the limit of endogenous development theory of individual state. In research, there are writings influenced by a strong state-centered perspective while there are other works pointing out the oppression of nationalism. For example, Yu Seok-chun emphasized the importance of the state initiative in social development, but Kim Eun-sil viewed the discourses of East Asian studies as a mere reflection of Western dualism resulted from economic development, and, in the end, closely linked to statism. The formation of a post-modernistic community, which could overcome the existing order, was also discussed in the process of assessing Asian values. Chi Myeong-gwan (2000) said “the intellectuals of East Asia should grapple with the problem of the identity of East Asia with the advent of the 21st century near at hand.” Chi maintained that “it is the issue of questioning real freedom and libera-

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the IMF crisis in 1998.
tion along with the self-recognition between what is national and what is international.” He expressed his view that East Asian studies should become a new intellectual and practical alternative under the similar context of the criticism raised by Choe Won-sik. There are, however, skeptical views or criticisms on East Asian studies.

It is noteworthy that East Asian studies in Korea fail to accompany concrete and regionalistic discussions. This is because of the lack of practical regional programs in a realistic sense. But, more importantly, this is due to criticisms against Sinocentrism and Japan’s view of an Asian currency bloc, which could be developed into a new version of Japan’s co-prosperity theory for East Asia. It is also not easy for the Koreans to materialize the idea of regionalism under the current circumstances where the United States remains as a center of regional unity as was seen in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization). Thus, a progressive form of regional solidarity - for example, Haruki Wada’s view of a common house program for Northeast Asia - failed to gain currency in East Asian studies in Korea. In other words, the settlement of the Korean peninsula question and the system of division will remain as a key for opening a new realm of regional solidarity and regionalism. More precise discussions are needed over the issue of the nation-state including the mutual alienation and confrontation of East Asian nations, the globalization of capitals, and the American strategies of assuming hegemony.

Baek Yeong-seo (1999) tried to expand the concept of East Asian studies to a “complex nation theory,” which put the limitation of nation-state in question. He saw that the ideas on East Asian civilization would be distorted by the paradigm of nation-state which itself was the acceptance of the Western-style logic. According to Baek, neither China nor Japan is able to overcome the struggles among the nation-states in East Asia. Internationalism of the “civilization of socialism in China” or the diasporic cooperation among the ethnic Chinese abroad is not enough to change Sinocentrism. Baek also criticized that reform-minded Japanese intellectuals’ theory of de-nationalization lacked efforts to seek an alternative for a political community and was very much isolated from everyday life of people. He maintained the importance of the Korean peninsula to develop a concept of complex nation.
His position can be interpreted not only as an attempt to overcoming modernism by surmounting Korea’s system of division, but also as a criticism pointing out the limit of the logic that understands East Asia from the perspective of individual nation-state. Choe Won-sik (2000) went on to say that Korea’s intellectual growth is highly necessary as it could guarantee her role as a medium-size nation-the nation which no more despises the Japanese from the viewpoint of Sinocentrism and regards coldly on China and Russia under the influence of Japan and the United States. He stressed the creation of a new concept that, in a democratic method, could intervene in self-indulgence of the free market for the sake of public interests.10

**Modernity and Coloniality**

Another point at issue is related to the relation between modernity and coloniality of the East Asian region. Modern histories of East Asia share a common experience since its encounter with the West and have the historic experience of failing to fulfill the task of decolonization under the Cold War system. It is very important to reconsider the Western impact, Japanese imperialism followed by the colonization, the history of independence movements, and decolonization from the East Asian standpoint. The questions of the Korean peninsula and Taiwan, as major issues in this region, are directly related to the rearrangement of the postwar order under the hegemony of the United States. The patriarchal principle continues to maintain a dominant position, mutual confrontations among the people of East Asia are getting severe, and finally, the spirit of keeping peaceful collaboration in the region is still weak. Cho-Han Hye-jeong refuses to acknowledge the type of East Asian studies, which may accompany nationalism and patriarchy. Chung Jae-seo criticizes the efforts explaining East Asia with the concept of common identity and goes on to maintain that East Asian studies should adopt a new strategy of writing in a new style through the efforts of decentralization. More profound discussions should be

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10. Baek Won-dam admitted that the works of Choe Won-sik and Baek Yeong-seo, had the value of making East Asian studies a part of history, but criticized them as an abstract discourse as it failed to make clear the situation of solidarity among the people.
made on the possibility that the acknowledgement of what is Asian as being fixed, fundamental, and essential might result in ignoring inner diversity and democratic differences.

East Asian studies in Korea need to be understood in relation to the intellectual tradition of Korea. It is regrettable that the controversies regarding the theories of “Eastern ways and Western machines,” “defending orthodoxy and rejecting heterodoxy,” and “modernization” have not developed into sincere intellectual discussions, but ended with the political success of “modernization.” Both the traditional and the Western, both the conservative and the progressive, and both the principles of adhering to the traditional customs and of open-door policy; all these were not considered in dialectic tensions. Rather, the colonialism gained, by force, the influence during the modernization process, and the traditional mode of thinking was destroyed.

It is necessary to study more concretely about what type of political community is most desirable in the 21st century and how we can understand the inner class feuds resulted from neo-liberalism. The discussion on East Asian collaboration makes us think more deeply about the role of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), struggles between capital and labor over an economic integration, and confrontations among nations. We should be well prepared to cope with a variety of conditions that may regulate our daily lives, such as the global strategy of the United States, political and military changes in East Asia, and a trend toward realistic nationalism. Only when we are more sensitive to the task of decolonization based on the experiences of the people, can East Asian studies feature more concrete and democratic aspects.

V. The Future of East Asian Studies

East Asian studies in Korea will have to place itself in the current of the history of Korean mentality of the 20th century. The emergence of East Asian studies was noteworthy as it made us reconsider Asia in history of mentality in Korea. This means both the recovery of intellectual interest on long-forgotten time and space, and the change in views about the self and the world. New changes of the 1990s were characterized by discourses of the regional identity over the interrelations of the
nations and understanding of what is real East Asia. In this respect, East Asian studies in Korea not only restore tradition but also embody the future plan.

East Asian studies also have set a goal of constructing a new system of knowledge. With regard to this issue, we have to look back to the initial situations that provided the necessity for East Asian studies. Amidst the intellectual chaos of the 1990s, East Asian studies appeared as a knowledge system, which could overcome both narrow-minded nationalism and the inclination toward the West-oriented universality, and thereby could acquire real universality for the Third World and the masses. The backdrop was the intellectual trend of Korean society in the 1980s. Also it is not difficult to find the effects of intellectual discussions resulting from the academic self-examination of the West in Confucian capitalism theory and the theory of Asian values.

Some may say that to take issue with the source of knowledge is one of the complexes that is inherent in the Korean academic circles (Ham Jae-bong 2000: 148-167). We, however, need more reflections on whether the sense of problem in East Asian studies is genuinely ours or how much is it affected by Western perspectives. We have to question whether or not our passion for East Asia is the result of hopes given by others and how is it deviated from the reflective illuminations coming from self-examinations of the West. Only when we enter into sincere reflections and criticisms on epistemological and practical connotations of the discussions, can they be developed into productive intellectual discourses.

Arif Dirlik (2000) said that an East Asian perspective can have real meaning only when it explains the problems of today and when it suggests a solution to the economic and political problems - which starts from the reality of today as an outcome of the past and the West. What type of globalism does East Asian studies in Korea pursue? What political and economical definitions can it set as a goal? East Asian studies cannot be isolated from various problems that may emerge in the 21st century including violence of nation, large-scale massacre, problem of minority race, decolonization, and feminism. Only when East Asian studies remains as a topic of conversation which could incessantly instigate our intellectual tension without falling or being changed into an mundane theory, can it retain its position as an important
discourse in the history of mentality in Korea. Afterwards, East Asian studies will develop into an intellectual research to overcome the problems of Western modern science, the dualism of the East and West, and the separatism of science and practice, thus contributing to the development of universalism in Korean studies.

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