

Academic Dependency: Western-centrism in Korean Political Science

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Abstract

This paper deals with the academic dependency of Korean political science in light of Western-centrism. Contemporary Korean social sciences have been introduced and developed under the overwhelming influence of American political science since the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. This is also closely intertwined with Korea's political, economic, social, and cultural dependency on the United States. Thus, using political science in Korea as an example, the author explores the negative impact of Western-centrism and the dependency of Korean academia on American political science. To do so, he analyzes the impact of American political science on Korean political science in three ways: "Westernization of critical thinking in Korean scholarship," "assimilationist interpretation of the Korean experience according to Western theory," and "marginalization of the Korean (non-Western) experience by Western-centrism."

Keywords: political science, Western-centrism, colonization, marginalization, American political science, identity crisis, universal, John Rawls, democratization

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A Brief History of Korean Political Science and Western-centrism

As a professor of political science in Korea, I always ask myself: “What, how, and why do I teach?” or “Does what I teach have any relevance and value to my students?” Like many young scholars in Korea, when I first began teaching an introductory course in political science, I unconsciously selected and used textbooks written by Korean political scientists who came before me and Korean translations of American political science texts, supplementing them with some of my own knowledge. After years of teaching, I now find myself constantly nagged by the question of whether what I have taught is suitable or adequate for my students, as well as what the standard for suitability or adequacy would be. Without a satisfactory answer, the question weighs heavier on my mind every day. The weight is particularly acute when considering the gap between political systems and experience represented in textbooks and actual Korean political reality. Although the gap has narrowed somewhat since democratization in 1987, the Western political systems and theories described in the political science textbooks and the Western cases used to illustrate them have, more of than not, little relevance to the Korean political experience. This lack of relevance has been an issue in Korean political science scholarship ever since the first political science departments were established, and continues to be an issue today. Periodically, the issue is raised in the academic community as an “identity crisis.”¹

American political science has been the key model upon which political science in Korea developed. As is well-known, the basic outline of contemporary Korean political science was shaped by the overwhelming influence of American political science under the U.S.

1. The most recent acknowledgement of this identity crisis is found in two papers by two senior political scientists in *Hanguk jeongchi hakhoe 50 nyeonsa* (Fifty Years of the Korean Political Science Association), published by the Korean Political Science Association to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary. See Cha (2003) and Han (2003).

Army Military Government in Korea immediately after the end of World War II. During Japanese colonial rule, the German model of *Staatslehre* (state science), adopted by Meiji Japan during its modernization period, was introduced to Korea by Japanese scholars. Some Koreans who had studied in Japan and returned to Korea after liberation continued to teach the same Japanese model of political science for a while. When the U.S. Military Government occupied Korea in 1945, however, it began reforming the educational system and introducing American-style democratic government and democracy to the curriculum. From 1946, both national and provincial universities had already begun establishing political science departments and recruiting and training political scientists with support from the U.S. military government. In the late 1950s, after the end of the 6/25 War,² a substantial number of Korean scholars left the country to study abroad in American universities under the sponsorship of the U.S. government. At the same time, translations of American textbooks began to be used as political science textbooks in Korean universities and knowledge about political theories and systems, primarily borrowed from the West, began to be taught on a full scale. Also, political science faculty members were recruited primarily from those who had been trained in the United States, reinforcing American influence over the development of Korean political science.³ This is also linked

2. Because the expression “Korean War” places Koreans in the third person, creating an “other-izing” effect, I will maintain the usage of “6/25 War.” For the same reason, I reject the terms “Vietnam War,” “Iraq War,” and “Gulf War.” That said, I do not mean to attack their usage by the United States, for all nations adopt expressions from their own perspectives.

3. As of the end of 2002, one study estimates, some 600 Koreans had received doctoral degrees in political science from the U.S., the largest group after the number of doctoral degrees received from domestic universities. With 2,057 members in the Korean Political Science Association, as of December 2002, the American doctorate holders would make up 29 percent of the total membership. As of October 2003, among the total 49 political science professors in the top three Korean universities (Seoul National, Yonsei, and Korea), 48 have foreign degrees, 43 of which are from the U.S. This would mean that about 88 percent of the faculty has American doctorates (Chung 2003, 142-143).

to Korea's political, economical, social, and cultural dependency on the United States.

The "identity crisis" in Korean political science is not unique to Korea, but is prevalent among other non-Western academic communities. Even European and Japanese political science have confronted similar problems to some extent. Yogesh Atal characterizes the current state of political science in Asia as existing in an "adaptive" or "imitative" stage (Atal 1995, 250). He contends that the primary function of teaching and researching political science in Asia is to transmit Western knowledge, namely that of American political science, and Asian scholars diligently perform the role of "conveyor belt" of that knowledge (Atal 1995, 260). Hence, the political and social experiences of Asian countries are interpreted and defined within a Western (American) framework (Atal 1995, 263). Therefore, an analysis of a political phenomenon in a non-Western country by an indigenous scholar is a mere exercise in illustrating American political theory. The identity crisis in political science in Asian countries can be traced back to the end of the Second World War, when these countries were liberated from colonial rule. They adopted the American university system and established political science as a separate and independent discipline under the strong political influence of the United States.

Using political science in Korea as an example, I will explore the negative impact of Western-centrism and the dependency of Korean academia on American political science. The concept of "Western-centrism" is constructed upon three premises: that modern Western civilization, which first centered on Western Europe but has been transplanted by the United States and Canada and so on, has reached the most advanced stage of human history; that the historical development of Western civilization is universally valid in all of human history around the world; and that non-Western societies, which still lag far behind in historical development can only advance by imitating or adapting the Western developmental model through either civilization (colonial/imperial period) or modernization (postcolonial period) (Kim S. Y. 1995, 16-17). In short, Western-centrism can be

summarized by Western supremacy, universalism/historicism, and civilization/modernization (= Westernization).⁴

The reason Western-centrism must be overcome is that it legitimizes Western cultural domination by indoctrinating non-Western societies into accepting the superiority and universality of Western civilization. Non-Western people have internalized the belief that the Western worldview, values, institutions, and practices are superior and universal and have assimilated them. This has driven them to self-marginalization, self-abasement, and self-negation. In this state, they have not been able to form independent worldviews, a fact that eventually rendered them as self-alienated.

In this light, the general public or scholars in non-Western societies can be said to be victims of Western-centrism. Given their privileged position in non-Western societies, however, those who receive the benefits of power, wealth, and prestige from Western-centrism are consciously or unconsciously disinclined to resist and fight it, even as they acknowledge the negative impact of Western-centrism officially or publicly. America has been the main source of influence in shaping modern Korea, and its main beneficiaries are often the members of the privileged class. Korean scholars, the conveyors of Western knowledge, are also beneficiaries of a Western-centric political, economical, social, and cultural structure that they have themselves helped institute. In my effort to show why Western-centrism must be overcome academically, I will focus on its impact on scholarship in three ways: the "Westernization of critical thinking in Korean scholarship," the "assimilationist interpretation of the Korean experience according to Western theory," and the "marginalization of the Korean (non-Western) experience by Western-centrism."

4. For a more detailed discussion of Western-centrism, see Kang (2004). Considering the particularly American influence over Korean political science, one may argue that it is more appropriate to call it "American-centrism." However, given that American political science is a product of the nineteenth century European social sciences, and that some Western political thought and theory are dependent on European countries including England, France, and Germany, I believe the term Western-centrism is more inclusive and appropriate for the purpose of the present discussion.

The Colonization of Korean Political Science

The Westernization of Critical Thinking in Korean Scholarship

As they digest “advanced” Western theories, non-Western scholars internalize the Western mode of thinking as both universal and preferential while failing to craft the critical tools to theorize their own unique political experience. As a result, they formulate political theory and concepts that have little bearing on their own societies. Research trends in Korean scholarship on John Rawls’ political philosophy, particularly his “theory of justice,” and on the 6/25 War are two cases that show the negative impact of the Westernization of critical thinking in Korean scholarship.

John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* was published in the early 1970s, the period in which the United States enjoyed unprecedented prosperity as the world’s most powerful nation. This followed soon after the introduction of the “Great Society” reform program by the Johnson administration. Rawls’ theory of justice, which sought to justify a welfare state within the framework of liberalism, had both theoretical and practical relevance to American society. Considering that the Korean case differs from the American social and political context, however, one has to wonder what practical implications and significance it had for Korean philosophers or political scientists to elaborate on Rawls’ political theory or to criticize it occasionally from a radical or progressive perspective.

Granted, there are aspects to Rawls’ theory of justice that would be extremely appealing if they could be applied to Korean society. A significant number of studies on Rawls’ theory of justice were produced in Korea from the early 1980s. Oddly enough, Korea—at least until 1987—lacked some of the critical elements that are prerequisite conditions for Rawls’ theory, such as democracy, relative affluence, or the existence of international autonomy of the given political community (self-contained wholeness). Prior to 1987, Korea functioned under a military dictatorship and was struggling economically. Furthermore, Korea, which was still engaged in an effort to “catch up” to

the advanced economies and politics of the West, was not free enough from the influence of international pressure to reorder the social system and function according to the will of the community as dictated by the principle of justice. Under these circumstances, one is then compelled to ask: how relevant was Rawls’ theory of justice, which was based on the “principle of difference” and the “principle of redress,” to a society like Korea?

Given the disparities in the political realities, the studies and debates around Rawls’ theory of justice seem like an exercise in intellectual vanity or an escapist intellectual pursuit that ignores the pressing issues on the ground in Korea. Even with the economic prosperity required to earn membership in the OECD and having accomplished the task of democratization, Korea flounders within a wave of global neoliberalism, shrieking for “strengthened global competitiveness” and “productive welfare.” Thus there is still no room for Rawls’ theory of justice that seeks to maximize welfare.

In the era after the 1987 Democratization, the effort to develop a theory of justice that Korean political science scholars could adopt based on democratic consensus is certainly not futile. It would be a great academic contribution if the key elements of Rawls’ theory of justice were made compatible with the Korean context. Unfortunately, however, it would be more accurate to say that Korean scholars have indulged in “refined” theory, such as Rawls’ theory of justice, by uncritically following it. Thus the theory of justice was very popular among Korean scholars, despite its questionable relevance to Korea.

A similar observation can be found in Kim Dong-Choon’s incisive criticism of trends in Korean scholarship on the 6/25 War. On the recent debate over who started the 6/25 War, whether by the Soviet Union and North Korea according to the traditionalists or by the United States according to the revisionists (Kim D. 2000, 34), Kim offers the following insightful and critical observation on the implicit Westernization (or, in this case, Americanization) of framing the issue regarding the 6/25 War:

It is important to remember that the traditionalist/revisionist oppositional structure in interpreting the war was not formed by Koreans. In other words, the oppositional structure has its genesis in the confrontation between the traditionalist view and the revisionist view of American foreign policy. Similarly, Cumings' monumental work has its starting point in critiquing the American foreign policy line at the time of the Korean War. His critical approach is appropriate only as an American scholar trying to critically evaluate his own nation's history and politics (Kim D. 2000, 35).

Kim claims that the approach to the 6/25 War should be taken from the perspective of the "Korean people" who bore the heaviest casualties during the war and continue to suffer the division of the peninsula. Thus the appropriate question for Korean scholars to ask about the war is not "who" started it but "why." And even more important than the why question is that of who and what benefited from it (Kim D. 2000, 35). Criticizing the elitist, Westernized (Americanized) critical approach adopted by Korean scholars in their research on the 6/25 War, Kim suggests a need for the *minjunghwa* [viewing from the perspective of the suffering masses] and "Koreanization" of any critical approach.

Kim's observation is applicable to the general trend of Korean scholarship of the last two decades that focused on subjects of little relevance to Korean reality: discussions of the "relative autonomy of the state" in the 1980s, postmodern theoretical wrestling with the "death of reason" or the "death of the subject" in the 1990s, and, more recently, the liberalism/communitarianism debate and scholarly immersion in the philosophy of Heidegger and Richard Rorty.⁵ "What

5. In the case of the liberalism/communitarianism debate, communitarianism is a criticism of the liberalism or individualism that has been firmly established in Western societies. However, to debate the "excess" of liberalism in Korean society, where liberalism and its key concepts of "freedom" and "individual" were still new and unfamiliar, is tragic and comical, like Don Quixote mistaking windmills for the enemy. (See Lee S. 1999 for an incisive criticism of this debate.) For the same reason, I feel that most Korean research on Heidegger or Rorty seems to be somewhat aimless or misguided. Because Heidegger and Rorty have their philo-

is the significance of 'reason' in Korean society?" "What does the 'subject' mean for Korean people?" "What do Heidegger and Rorty have to offer as resolutions to the practical and philosophical issues in Korean society?" Such questions should have been properly posed and articulated by Korean scholars concerned, yet they were buried in Western texts, without recontextualizing them to Korean reality.⁶ While Korean scholars are engaged in a hollow debate that tends to focus on Western-centered issues, the urgent issues confronted by Korean society never gain the opportunity to even be theorized, and end up being tossed aside as frivolous, get transposed or assimilated into Western issues, or altogether disappear into the realm of the abstract.

The Assimilationist Interpretation of Korean Political Experience

There is a tendency to explain Korean reality by assimilating it into Western theory. Non-Western scholars, immersed in advanced Western theory, sometimes distort the realities of their own societies when they are not able to locate the relevance of Western theory. Or sometimes they "queue" their research to wait for the day their country finally "catches up" with the "advanced" West so that it can be matched with Western theory.

Recent studies of Korean democratization also display the same symptom of trying to fit the square peg of the Korean political experience into the round hole of Western theory. To counter the tradition-

sophical roots in Europe or America, which have a completely different philosophical background from Korea, it is imperative to point out the contextual differences between the West and Korea and to find the point of relevance of the two philosophies to the practical or philosophical concerns of Korean society. In other words, research into the philosophies of Heidegger and Rorty should accompany a search for their "compatibility" and "commensurability" to Korean reality. Unfortunately, this has not been done in Korea.

6. It is interesting to note that Kim Hye-suk attributes the development of American philosophy to the "native language approach" and the "pragmatic rationality only conceptualized from the perspective of interests and critical thinking" of Americans (Kim H. 1999).

al, historical view of “without bourgeoisie, no democracy” some Western progressive scholars began to persuasively argue for the significant role played by the working class in the rise of Western democracy (Thompson, 1963; Therborn, 1977; Rueschemeyer et. al., 1992). They argued that it was the heroic struggle of the working class that brought about the democratization of liberal oligarchy or authoritarian systems in the nineteenth-century Europe. By exposing the exaggeration in the claim that placed too much importance on the bourgeoisie’s role in the democratization of Europe, these progressive scholars challenged the hegemonic historical view centered on the bourgeoisie. Some Korean progressive scholars, mimicking their Western counterparts, also argued that democratization in Korea was made possible by the working class struggle for democracy, without presenting any empirical evidence for their claim. The findings of progressive Western scholars may be a useful guide in understanding the democratization of Korea, but an analysis of Western history should not be a substitute for empirical analysis of the Korean political experience.

Before making such a claim, it is also important to pay attention to the contextual differences in the key factors that led to democratization in Korea and Western societies. If the decisive factor for the democratization of non-Western countries was the holding of fair and open elections, such as the direct presidential election in Korea, it was the granting of universal suffrage that consolidated Western democratization. Since it was the working class that was excluded from politics until the very final stage of the long democratization process of the West and it was their struggle that finally established universal suffrage, it makes perfect sense to discuss the role of the working class in relation to democratization.⁷ In the case of Korea, however, no one had to struggle for universal suffrage since it was granted gratuitously to both men and women with the founding of the Republic in 1948. Accordingly, no class or group had a claim on

7. Feminists would disagree with this interpretation, since women’s suffrage did not come about until much later.

establishing universal suffrage in Korea. Moreover, the working class did not play a bigger role than other classes in the democratization movement that ultimately led to the June 29 Declaration in 1987. As in other non-Western nations, it was the distortion of the election system that prevented democracy from functioning in Korea. Thus, it is only logical that the Korean democratization movement’s foremost focus was on establishing and administering fair and open elections.

Given such contextual differences, it is important to note that the theories and interpretations regarding the development of Western democracy are not universally applicable, and certainly not in Korea. Yet, many Korean scholars attempt to expand the applicability of Western theories according to their arbitrary goal or subjective desires. Without questioning the issue of applicability, they tailor reality in such a way as to fit Western theories to prove their universality and distort Korean political experience. This misrepresentation is often the consequence of the uncritical application of Western theory and not necessarily because of its inherent Western-centeredness. Therefore, the blame should not be placed entirely on the Western scholars who formulated these theories or the theories themselves.

That Western-centrism has infiltrated scholarly writings about Korean political research methodology has created even greater challenges to theorizing the Korean experience.⁸ For example, Sonn Hochul in *Hyeondae hanguk jeongchi* (Contemporary Korean Politics) (1997) lists seven categories of methodological issues related to Korean politics: the world system and the dynamic relationships between world system and single states, part and whole, structure and behavior, reality and theory, levels of analysis (structure, conjunctural phase, and event), a pan-Korean peninsula perspective, and standpoint (Sonn 1997, 15-40). The seven categories deserve serious consideration since they are often discussed in relation to the issue of the relevance of political science research in Korea. It is telling that of the seven categories, only the pan-Korean peninsula perspective is spe-

8. Behavioralism, rational choice theory, and the political culture approach are also subject to the same criticism.

cific to the Korean political experience, whereas the rest are universal issues applicable to both Western and Korean societies. In other words, there is no methodological debate about how to theorize the experiences of non-Western societies with colonial pasts, such as Korea, whose political experience is shaped by external changes and discontinuity in tradition and modernity.⁹ The absence of such an experience in the West may explain why such a methodological issue has not been articulated. With Western methodology as the reference point, the debate over finding a proper methodology to help understand Korea's distinct political experience of the past 130 years never took place. Anything particular to the Korean political experience that cannot be explained by Western theory might be put aside without gaining the opportunity for theoretical attention.

Marginalization of the Korean (non-Western) Experience

With the prevalence of Westernized critical thinking and assimilationist interpretative frameworks, the reality or facts of non-Western societies continue to be marginalized. In their uncritical application of Western theories, scholars tend to privilege the Western experience, and allow for diverse interpretations of the Western experience, whereas non-Western experiences are used merely for the sake of applying Western theories.¹⁰

This tendency may be due in part to the ignorance or indifference of the scholars to their own political contexts. Instead of looking at the contradictions or conflicts in Korean politics to articulate theories and concepts about the Korean experience, Korean scholars adopt a "universalist" approach. They try to work within the frame-

9. This is not to say that such a debate does not exist in academic communities of the West as well as in Korea. This is an area of interest that intersects with that of postcolonial studies.

10. It seems that the same criticism is applicable to Indian scholars. According to Bhikhu Parekh, most Indian scholars are so immersed in the latest trend in Western theories that they ignore their own past and do not bother to theorize their own political experience (Parekh 1992, 548).

work of Western theories or thoughts and in this process they only "incidentally" form the basis for critical thought in relation to the Korean experience. As a consequence there should be a gulf between theory and reality, and Korean scholars are relatively indifferent towards or ignorant of Korean politics.¹¹ With all the time spent on absorbing and processing abstruse and abstract Western theories and on trying to understand their political, social, historical, and cultural contexts, it is no wonder that Korean scholars have no time to invest academically in articulating and theorizing their own political and historical realities.

Western theories are privileged as "classical" and Western history as "normal facts." For example, when reading Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Korean scholars may gain extensive knowledge of the nineteenth century French penal system, while having no inkling about the nineteenth century penal system in Korea. Likewise, as a scholar of democracy, I may know more about the Glorious Revolution in England and the French Revolution than about key events in modern Korean political history, such as the April Revolution, the Gwangju Democratization Movement, and the June Uprising of 1987.

The negative consequence is replicated and reinforced in standard college textbooks. As an example, let us consider Professor Lee Keuk Chan's *Jeongchihak* (Political Science) (2003), one of the most widely used textbooks in introductory courses in political science. The majority of the pages of this textbook are devoted to introducing Western thoughts and theories, and only a few cases from Korea's

11. Those specializing in Korean politics fare better on this point. Since their topic of research is clearly defined as Korean politics and they have accumulated substantial knowledge in that area, it allows them to be more sensitive to any disparity between reality and theory. However, in the case of those who do not specialize in Korean politics but still address the topic of Korean politics, their analyses clearly reveal many problems. An extreme case in point would be how those specializing in political thought apply Habermas' concept of the public sphere uncritically in order to analyze the Korean political experience. In this case, the damage would be doubled as it results in the distortion of both Korean politics and Habermas' theory.

own political experience or history are cited to illustrate the theories.¹² In this respect, Professor Lee's introduction to political science cannot be distinguished from an edited Korean translation of Western political science literature. Without any mention of the traditional as well as modern Korean political experience, the students taking the introductory course in political science may feel as though they have embarked on a journey to foreign lands. No one would deny the necessity of understanding Western politics and political science, since both politics and political science in Korea have been molded within a Western framework. Nevertheless, in teaching political science, these textbooks should try to introduce traditional Korean political thought, or at least (and everyone would agree that this is a practical necessity) attempt to explain or illuminate political phenomena or important political figures in traditional or modern Korea. However, such efforts were never made, despite all the revisions and expansions that Professor Lee's textbook has undergone in the thirty years since its first publication in 1969.¹³ Moreover, there are no Korean books cited in the bibliography of Professor Lee's textbook, except for Korean translations of foreign books, and the index of names only has an alphabetical list of Western names. The subject index of the textbook is not only "de-Koreanized," with no reference to events or concepts related to Korean politics but also "de-Asianized" to the extent that China, Japan, and Korea are completely excluded, and the only Asian subjects listed are the names of international organizations, such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization), OAPC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries), and APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation).

12. This tendency is even more pronounced in the textbooks for comparative politics and international politics. Except for textbooks Korean politics, such as on Korean political theory, it seems as though traditional Korean politics, or even modern Korean politics, is either extinct or nonexistent.

13. I have no intention to abase or denigrate Professor Yi's pioneering contribution to the development of political science in Korea. The responsibility for the flaws discussed here belongs not to Professor Yi but to all political scientists in Korea, including myself.

Deciding what to include and how much importance to place on each subject is a key issue in publishing a political science textbook. The task should be approached thoughtfully since it requires a thorough and systemic reflection on Korean politics and political science. Even at a glance, it is apparent that there are some serious problems. The first chapter heading is "Humans and Politics in Modern Times," and the first chapter subtitle is "The Politicization of Modern Society and Human Life." Yet the chapter mentions only the works of Western scholars (Rousseau, Bertrand Russell, Hobbes, Aristotle, Luther, Locke, Carl Becker, Walter Lippmann, Erich Fromm, Jose Ortega y Gasset, etc.) and only political events that took place in the West (the Industrial Revolution, the Renaissance, the Reformation, liberalism, social contract theory, the welfare state, etc.). There is scarcely any reference to East Asian or Korean literature or thinkers at all, except for a footnote on the meaning of the Chinese character for "peace" (*pyeonghwa*, 平和) (Lee K. 2003, 2). If I survey the book in terms of placing relative weight on various subjects, chapter eight bears the heading "The Liberal Democratic System and the Totalitarian System." The special attention given to the liberal democratic system is understandable since it is the dominant political system of the modern period; however, I cannot comprehend spending some twenty pages on discussing a totalitarian system (maybe it mirrors the level of interest in the subject among Western scholars at the time) while devoting less than one page to concerns over the authoritarian system, which was the prevalent political system among Third World countries, and allocating only three pages for socialism under the heading "The Ebbing and Collapse of Socialism."

Similarly, the chapters "Political Science as an Academic Discipline" and "Political Power" mainly introduce Western concepts and theories with almost no mention of concepts and theories from East Asia. There is a reference to the three elements of government (sufficiency of food, sufficiency of soldiers, and people's trust in their ruler) mentioned by Confucius in *Lunyu* (The Analects of Confucius) (Lee K. 2003, 89), Confucian political concepts such as *paedo* (霸道, rule by the sword), *yeak* (禮樂, rites and music), *wangdo* (王道, rule by

royal benevolence), and *inui* (仁義, benevolence and righteousness) (Lee K. 2003, 92), and a passing reference to what Confucius says in the Analects of Confucius: “To govern is to rectify” (Lee K. 1995, 92, 98).¹⁴ Even when discussing political power, the book only discusses the Western concept of the phrase even though the concept of *gwol-lyeok* (權力) in East Asian countries, which share the Chinese lexicon, is considerably different from that of “political power” in the West. Again, Western theories and examples are used to discuss subjects such as power, political leadership, political culture, political party, and political institutions, and no attempt is made to illustrate to which of these categories Korean political culture, political party and political institutions belong.¹⁵ Consequently, Professor Lee’s textbook, which excludes most of the political theories and facts that originated in Korea and other East Asian countries,¹⁶ may be extremely useful for learning about Western (especially American) political science, but it is far less informative about Asia than the Korean translations of American introductory books on political science.¹⁷

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the Korean academic community is not the only community negatively impacted by Western-centrism. In “The Poverty of Indian Political Theory,” Bhikhu Parekh points out that this problem is not just found in the Indian academic world, but in acade-

14. “政者正也。”

15. Perhaps the Korean case is reserved for practicing the application of Western theory.

16. Even in the section on military coups, there is no mention of Korea’s experience with oppressive military governments. However, this omission may be evidence of Korea’s own political past, when even political science textbooks were forcibly depoliticized.

17. For this paper, I have compared the fifth (1995) and sixth (2003) editions of Professor Lee’s book and found no changes regarding the issues discussed here.

mic communities worldwide that have been cultivated by the Western intellectual establishment, as well as the many other non-Western countries currently experiencing a “brain drain”:

Thanks to the frustrating and bureaucratic academic climate, and to the widely noted sense of colonial inferiority, Indian scholars tend to look to the West for recognition and approval, and they can obviously secure it only by writing on themes acceptable to the Western intellectual establishment. There is a rarely articulated but nonetheless unmistakable Western view of what ‘serious’ Third World scholars should think and write about, how they should study Western or their own societies, along what lines they may criticize either, and so on. The view is propagated through familiar channels, and well-tuned Indian scholars quickly pick up the message (Parekh 1992, 551).

Recently things appeared to have improved in the Korean social sciences community, thanks to the efforts of competent, home-bred scholars and foreign-bred ones who self-consciously underwent a painstaking readjustment process. However, the vicious cycle of privileging Western knowledge persists with the continuous influx of young scholars with a Western degree who cannot resist the urge to show off their knowledge of the latest Western theory and methodology.

Nevertheless, Korea and its academic community seem to be approaching a great turning point. With the galvanization of the student and labor movements, as well as the democratization movement, and the rise of anti-American sentiment that originally began as a reaction to American support for Chun Doo-hwan’s military regime, the American political methodologies and theories that had dominated the Korean political science community first began to be challenged in the 1980s. It was also at this time that critical and progressive Western political theories, such as materialist methodology, class theory, dependency theory, and world system theory, and the Marxist theory of the state, were widely adopted in Korea, giving rise to critical reinterpretations of Korean political history based on the

perspective of political economy. With their origins in the West, such theories should have been tested for their relevance to Korean politics, but in most cases, they were uncritically received (Chung 2003, 153). On the other hand, the dominance of Western-centrism over the Korean academic world seemed to wane as these theories had to compete for relevance to Korean political reality. With greater recognition of the need to form an identity for Korean political science, the academic community has been making various efforts, and we are now starting to see the fruit of these efforts.

There is a new movement in the Korean academic world to break from Western-centrism. One way to accomplish this goal is for the Korean academic community to cultivate a de-Westernized worldview. The academic community must engage in a conscious and continuous effort to overcome intellectual dependency. For example, it must foster the “Koreanization of a critical academic approach,” the “scrutiny and interrogation of Western theory in light of Korean experience,” and the “formulation of original theory based on Korean experience.” For example, Kim Yung-Myung advocates the use of native language in scholarship and stresses the importance of developing original or creative concepts, analytical frameworks, and theories that are relevant to Korea. He also supports the articulation of concepts and writing in the native language (Kim Y. 2006, 24). Kim Ungjin, on the other hand, is skeptical about the notion of building a methodology in the Korean language by merely thinking in Korean, because “the act of thinking in terms of Western methodology expressed in Korean, that is, merely translating Western thoughts into Korean words, is one that is still essentially Western” (Kim U. 2001, 154). In short, research methodology defines the research subject. Hence, he argues that building Korean methodology must be preceded by finding the Korean research subject (Kim U. 2001, 151). Bae Byungsam offers a somewhat different solution, namely that of “extracting” Korean identity from traditional Korean political thought as a way to save Korean political science from an identity crisis (Bae 2003, 98). He suggests that Korean political science scholarship must break free from intellectual colonization and create a new beginning

for “Koreanized political science” through the “painstaking work” of finding and bringing to light the origin of political science in Korean tradition (Bae 2003, 103).

Besides research studies that are in search of general alternatives to Western-centrism, there are quite a few individual studies that offer viable research directions or approaches: Choi Jung-Woon’s work on the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement (Choi 1999), Park Myung-Lim’s paper that takes a new approach to the 6/25 War (Park 1996), and Kim Se-Kyun’s political science textbook and Woo Chul-Koo and Park Kun Young’s textbook on international relations that attempt to include the Korean perspective (Kim S. K. et al. 2003; Woo and Park 2004).

Despite the merits of these works, they still fall short of the quality and quantity needed to overcome Western-centrism. Such works remain to be produced. What is encouraging, however, is that many political scientists have become acutely aware of the negative impact of Western-centric scholarship, and they are working to find an alternative approach in political science scholarship and are launching individual research towards this goal.

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