

The 12th World Congress of Korean Studies
Keynote Address

Korean Studies from the Perspectives of Area Studies: The Case of Vietnam
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As an anthropologist, when I visit other countries and societies these days I'm often taken aback by the scale of the Korean Wave. It is commonplace now to encounter locals in the countries I visit who, after asking me where I'm from, then proceed to share their views on Korean movies, dramas, K-pop, and various other socio-cultural phenomena from Korea. In particular, the number of those who recognize that language is the foundation of culture and try to learn Korean is on the steady rise. Walking the streets of other countries, it is even becoming possible to encounter people who can offer simple greetings in Korean, or even employ advanced Korean vocabulary. The recent and rapid development of Korean studies is connected to these trends.

And the proof of these changes is in the numbers. As of May 2024, there are 1,407 Korean studies institutions worldwide. Northeast Asia has the most with 703, but Southeast Asia (142), North and South America (185), and Western and Central Europe (166) are moving quickly to establish the institutional foundations for Korean studies. Curiosity about Korea and a desire to explore it are on the rise, not only in "neighboring countries" geographically proximate to Korea, but even in "distant countries" where there has traditionally been a "cultural gap" between East and West. Particularly impressive is not only the number of Korean-language schools and centers worldwide, which now surpass one thousand, but also the growing number of institutions globally that grant Korean studies degrees, in other words, which attempt to systematically understand Korean society and culture, be they at the bachelor's (578), master's (199), or doctoral (122) levels.

And Vietnam, which has been a focus of my own research for over 25 years, is a perfect case in point. Here also one can witness the rapid advances in both the Korean Wave and Korean studies. In 1998, when I began my long-term fieldwork here, you could count on one hand the number of institutions teaching the Korean language in Vietnam, and these were in Ho Chi Minh City and southern Vietnam. But even these were either private schools that also

taught other foreign languages or religious centers dedicated to missionary work. At the time, Korean firms operating in the country were challenged to find Vietnamese employees for interpretation, so the best they could do was hire people who had studied abroad in North Korea or had Korean-Vietnamese interpretation experience from the Vietnam War. When some universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City began to establish Korean-language departments, it was difficult to find instructors to teach Korean language, society, and culture. For this reason, Korean companies hired Koreans who had majored in Vietnamese, but their communication skills were limited. Just knowing everyday language does not make “cultural translation” possible. Compared to those days, one cannot but admire the number of Vietnamese professionals today with fluency in the Korean language and an understanding of Korean culture.

Compared to 20 years ago when there were concerns about the lack of employment opportunities for Vietnamese students studying abroad in Korea, it is amazing to realize that in Vietnam alone there are now nearly 40 institutions teaching the Korean language. Among these institutions, about 30 universities offer bachelor’s degrees, 3 offer master’s, and one is even offering doctoral degrees, and there are nearly another 30 institutions that teach Korean language and culture, though not offering degrees. The rapid growth of educational institutions offering Korean that I witness every time I visit Vietnam truly astonishes when compared to any other country in the world. In fact, events related to Korean studies, such as this World Congress of Korean Studies hosted by the Academy of Korean Studies, are almost monthly events in Vietnam. The positive effects of this are manifold. First, Korean scholars from various fields are taking a greater interest in overseas Korean studies and Vietnam, and are being provided with an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between these two countries. In addition, the growing number of Korean studies institutions in the country is increasing the understanding of Korean society among Vietnamese, which in turn is fostering reciprocal relations and mutual understanding.

Though many factors have contributed to this craze in Vietnam to learn about Korean language and culture, the primary driving force has clearly been the steady expansion over the last two decades of support for overseas Korean studies by the Korean government and educational institutions. Led by the Korea Foundation (KF) and the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS)—two leaders in the support of overseas Korean studies initiatives—major universities in Korea are now operating various programs and increasing support for the promotion of

overseas Korean studies. In the 2010s (2011–2020) alone, the KF helped launch courses at 130 universities in 39 countries, with some 40,000 students. To maintain these initiatives, the KF raises funds to establish Korean studies professorships and provide scholarships to graduate students, postdoc fellows, and diplomats as a way of fostering Korean experts. In particular, the KF-supported “Global e-School” has provided over 3,700 courses for overseas university students since 2011, organizing seminars between leading Korean scholars and overseas students, not only to teach Korean language, but also aspects of Korean politics, economy, society, and culture. In the process, over 400 courses (approximately 11% of the total) were provided in Vietnam. In recent years I have also led e-School courses for students of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, experiences that proved interesting in many ways. The students’ Korean-language abilities, their curiosity about Korean society, and the process of identifying and understanding each other’s cultural differences felt much like conducting fieldwork. This may be because the process of Korean lecturers meeting locals in other cultures who are interested in the study of Korea, and the mutual reflecting on each other’s cultures through these classroom encounters, resembles the basic activities of area studies, including anthropology, which aims for mutual understanding among humanity.

While the KF focuses its energies on fostering global interest in popular Korean studies, that is, in Korean society, the AKS support for Korean studies is geared toward professional academic institutions and the training of scholars. To achieve this latter goal, the AKS is carrying out projects to support research on the foundations of Korean society in the humanities and social sciences, as well as projects to foster Korean studies research institutions both in Korea and abroad. Among these, the project that is receiving the most attention among overseas scholars seeking to establish Korean studies programs in the educational systems of their home countries is probably the “Global Korean Studies Promotion Program.” Through this program, the AKS is implementing long-term support for Korean studies education at overseas educational institutions with weak infrastructure through the “Seed Program for Korean Studies” project, and for institutions that already possess a certain level of instructional and research capacity, through its “Core University Program for Korean Studies.” All this is attracting the attention of overseas scholars seeking to implement Korean studies in their home or host countries. AKS’s Korean Studies Promotion Program also operates various other initiatives, such as supporting Korean Studies Strategic Research Institutes and academic translations, but it seems that the “Global Korean Studies Promotion Program”

promises the greatest response from educators and researchers looking to establish and foster Korean studies outside Korea. The KF and AKS clearly play key roles in promoting Korean studies abroad, but the production and dissemination of knowledge about Korean studies must inevitably come from Korean educational institutions, especially universities. As of March 2023, there are 336 universities in Korea, and among these, 190 general universities and 10 colleges of education have departments that teach and research basic knowledge related to Korean studies. Nearly all of these institutions have departments of Korean language and literature, Korean language education, and Korean history, while some even have specialized Korean-language education centers (so-called Korean language schools, or Hangugeo hakdang). As I will recap in my concluding remarks, there is a growing need to expand the horizon of Korean studies by going beyond language education and “traditional national studies” (traditional culture and history), to integrate the study of such areas as contemporary Korean politics, economics, society, and culture. There are growing voices calling for the rebirth of Korean studies as a field that goes beyond introducing Korean language, history, and traditional culture to explore and teach facets of modern Korean society. If we are to reflect these voices in the future promotion of Korean studies, international academic collaboration and the development of universities and research institutes that study contemporary Korean society will be of paramount importance.

The institutional support and implementation of the overseas Korean studies education and research initiatives examined above clearly demonstrate the why and how of the development of Korean studies worldwide. But regarding the growth of Korean studies, I believe it is necessary to note not only these explicit institutional factors but also structural changes. Because only by explaining these structural factors can we gauge not only the driving force behind the development of Korean studies, but also its future sustainability. In addition, this will also allow us to reflect on both the problems and achievements of Korean studies development and determine new directions. Based on this awareness, I will now examine those structural factors that have led to the remarkable development of Korean studies, taking Vietnam as an example. In the process, I will emphasize the need to view Korean studies as a facet of area studies, a contemporary academic field, and emphasize the need to reflect on the problems that Korean studies must avoid and the direction it should pursue, based on the experiences of area studies. The basis for the rapid development and expansion of Korean studies over such a short period is South Korea’s miraculous economic growth. A mere 30 years ago, Korea was considered an underdeveloped country in Northeast Asia, but by 2022,

it had joined the ranks of the advanced economies, ranking 5th in the world in terms of trade balance, 13th in gross domestic product (GDP), and 22nd in GDP per capita. The so-called "Miracle on the Han River," or era of "compressed growth," is an anomaly in the structurally unequal history of global capitalism in that very few countries have moved from the periphery to the semi-periphery and then to the core ranks. Today, Korea is a key producer of high-end and mid-level products in the global manufacturing value chain. It is also recognized as a major producer not only in traditional labor-intensive industries such as shoes and apparel, but also in technology-intensive industries such as semiconductors, automobiles, and consumer electronics. This compressed economic growth in South Korea, which actually lacks natural resources, can be credited to an economic strategy centered on manufacturing and trade as well as a fervor for education that has produced a highly educated workforce.

The development of Korean studies is closely linked to this special nature of South Korea's economic growth. The sustainability of the South Korean economy, which is centered on manufacturing and trade, depends on overseas consumer markets, and for this, close relationships and cooperation with other countries are essential. In essence, foreign demand for Korean products is the lifeline of the South Korean economy. What's more, in recent years, Korean manufacturing bases have been relocating to developing countries in the pursuit of lower wages and thus lower production costs, making cooperation with other countries yet more critical. These two conditions, namely the rapid growth of the Korean economy and that economy's dependence on overseas labor and consumer markets, have provided the impetus for the development of Korean studies. Vietnam is a classic example of this.

Today, Korea and Vietnam are in many aspects one another's closest neighbor. Such a close relationship was made possible because from the time the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992, they have each provided the other with what it needed economically. Since the 1990s, Korea's labor-intensive industries, faced with rapid wage increases, began to look for countries with high-quality, low-cost labor, while Vietnam, which needed economic growth and job creation following the implementation of Doi Moi (its reform and openness policy), desperately needed to attract foreign capital that matched its technological level. The interests of both countries, in their respective stage of economic growth, aligned well, and South Korea today is Vietnam's number investor, while Vietnam is a valuable partner to South Korea, providing labor to Korean industries.

One need only look at Korea's regional exports to understand how important an economic partner Vietnam is. As of the late 2010s, ASEAN countries accounted for about 15% of Korea's exports, while Vietnam accounted for more than half of that, or about 8%. For South Korea, in terms of importance this is a trade relationship comparable to that with Japan (home to roughly 5% of South Korean exports), the United States (about 12%), and the EU (about 9%). Recently, the trade relationship between South Korea and Vietnam has become more important with the gradual decrease of South Korean exports to China, which once accounted for about 25%. It is worth noting that Vietnam is a much more economically important country to South Korea than many South Koreans might imagine, as they have been accustomed to viewing relationships with the United States and Japan as the most important ones since modernization.

This intimate economic relationship between Korea and Vietnam has naturally resulted in more active people-to-people exchanges between the two nations. Though the number has dropped relative to the years immediately prior to COVID-19, as of 2023, there were about 150,000 Koreans living in Vietnam. This dramatic increase in the number of Koreans in Vietnam over the thirty years since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992 can be attributed to the fact that today there are more than 8,000 South Korean companies operating in Vietnam. In the 1990s, Korean firms were concentrated mostly in the textile and footwear industries, but from the 2000s, South Korean companies in the sectors of finance, transport, and real estate began to enter the country. Finally, in the late 2000s, Samsung and LG, cornerstones of Korean manufacturing, moved their production bases to the northern cities of Bac Ninh and Hai Phong, respectively. As a result, most major Korean companies are a common sight in Vietnam today. This corporate relocation has caused not only managers but also many small business owners who cater to them, to make the move from South Korea to Vietnam.

As noted, these economic exchanges between the two countries inevitably led to increased human exchanges. Exchanges involving tourism, migrant work, and study abroad have become more common between the two countries, while Korea-Vietnam international marriages have also increased. From the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, more than 90% of international marriages in South Korea (approximately 370,000 cases for the period 1987–2006) were between Chinese (mainly ethnic Koreans from China), Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asians, but as of 2018, approximately 40% were between Koreans and Vietnamese. The majority of

these international marriages are cases of Vietnamese women “marrying into” South Korea and forming “multicultural families,” but there is also a rising trend of Koreans marrying Vietnamese and settling in Vietnam. According to my knowledge, in the late 2010s, there were more than 3,000 couples forming these so-called “Korean-Vietnamese families” in Ho Chi Minh City alone.

The rapid growth of Korean studies in Vietnam is a product of this human exchange that is founded upon economic exchange. However, there are also cultural factors that cannot be explained by this alone. Since the time I began my field research in Vietnam in the late 1990s, the popularity of Korean dramas and actors has been enormous. At the time, many pointed to the cultural similarities between Korea and Vietnam as a factor in the popularity of Korean pop culture in Vietnam. Here the argument went that the two countries shared similar Confucian views of the family and of love. However, even to one such as myself with limited knowledge and no expert on the Korean Wave (or Hallyu), this explanation struck me as incomplete. For the Korean Wave was not limited to Vietnam, but had washed over other Southeast Asian countries. What is clear is that in Vietnam, as in other countries, Korean pop culture spread rapidly as a result of globalization and the development of digital media.

Consumption of Korean content via OTT services like Netflix is now commonplace in Vietnam. It is now easy to come across people in Vietnam who know the characters and storyline of *Squid Game*, *Itaewon Class*, and *The Glory* better than I do. In Vietnam you’d be hard-pressed to find a teen who didn’t know not only Super Junior, Girls’ Generation, and Wonder Girls—who have already become the “old generation”—but also BTS, Blackpink, and NewJeans. The Vietnamese people’s interest in not only Korean dramas, movies, and K-pop, but also Korean beauty, fashion, and music reminds us of the extent and reach of the Korean Wave, which has truly become a global phenomenon in the 2020s. Therefore, as in other countries, it is difficult to view the popularity of the Korean Wave in Vietnam as merely a product of economic and human exchange. However, the development of Korean studies in Vietnam is based on the close economic relations between the two countries and the human exchange that has been activated accordingly, and compared to other countries, Korean studies in Vietnam has the potential to be quantitatively greater and qualitatively more sustainable. The development of Korean studies is closely related to the development of economic relations and the revitalization of human exchanges.

It is worth noting how the importance of structural factors implied in the case of Vietnam forces us to reflect on the ambivalent and contradictory effects of promoting Korean studies. In other words, it makes us realize that there are both positives and negatives in the development of Korean studies in other countries. On the one hand, a positive effect is that Korean studies acts as a medium fostering affinity and mutual understanding between Korea and other countries. On the other hand, there is a negative effect in that Korean studies promotes the illusion of a “cultural petit-empire” and “ethnocentrism” among Koreans. In fact, among Koreans, interpretations of the spread of the Korean Wave and Korean studies in Korea and Vietnam, often, perhaps unknowingly, go beyond cultural pride and satisfaction with cultural exchange to flaunting cultural superiority or otherizing groups that enjoy other cultures. In order to reflect on these problems, I would like to examine several perspectives that I, as an anthropologist practicing regional studies, need to consider in the process of intercultural exchange.

Cultural relativism is a perspective that anthropologists or area studies scholars who examine the cultures of other regions and groups have internalized as a kind of norm. It involves learning to understand other cultures from the perspective of the locals. This breaks from ethnocentrism, which interprets other cultures through the lens of one’s own. In practice, however, cultural relativism is not as straightforward and easy as it sounds. There are dilemmas. For instance, when a foreigner approaches Korean studies as a way of understanding Korean society and culture, is it right to completely adopt a cultural relativist perspective and regard all aspects of Korean culture as possessing meaningful value? Or is it appropriate to point out problems if one believes that Korean culture is subject to criticism from one’s own cultural perspective? Similarly, when Koreans teach Korean studies and explain Korean culture to foreigners, is it appropriate to help them understand the Korean perspective while at the same time critically reflecting on the problematic aspects of that perspective?

Answering these questions is problematic. For instance, it is often unclear how to interpret and respond to another culture when it violates human rights or is perceived as violent. When one encounters gender-discriminatory aesthetic practices in some cultures—circumcision, foot-binding, and necklace-wearing among the Karen, to take some examples—it can be difficult to decide whether to accept these from a cultural relativist perspective, or to criticize and demand their correction. As an answer to this dilemma, some argue for a distinction between cultural relativism and “ethical relativism.” That is, while acknowledging other cultures,

we should point out and correct things that harm or oppress others or otherwise violate universal ethics. However, the notion of ethical relativism, which at first seems like an astute solution, still demands the difficult question of who or what cultural perspective will determine what is ethical. For example, what if a Karen woman, who wanted to wear as many necklaces as possible for beauty, even with the risks to her health, were to protest, "How can you condone cosmetic surgery that cruelly disfigures the body and then criticize our practices as uncivilized?"

This dilemma of cultural relativism and ethical relativism is compounded because not all the cultures we practice and enjoy are equally valid and rational. The well-known cow worship in India, the cannibalism of the Aztecs, and the Kuru disease of the Fore people of Papua New Guinea are all cases that force us to consider this dilemma. Should cow worship in India be respected from an Indian perspective? Or should it be considered an irrational custom from a critical perspective? The problems such questions incapsulate are ones that foreigners learning about Korea and Koreans seeking to help foreigners understand Korea constantly face.

The reason I broach this conundrum facing anthropologists and human geographers is to reflect on the fact that the spread of Korean culture and the growth of Korean studies may have the problematic effect of spreading certain cultures in one direction. Indeed, while it may seem that all societies aspire to that "salad bowl" of diversity and mixed cultures, there are actually forces at work that prefer the "melting pot," in which all cultures are simmered together into one. When we learn about other cultures, we are likely to go back and forth between cultural assimilation and multi-culturalism.

Finally, it seems worth considering the epistemological issues facing Korean studies. Today, when foreigners seek to learn about and explore Korean society, culture, and history (or when Koreans try to teach these things to foreigners), there is the risk of understanding Korea as an isolated or cut-off entity. In fact, Korean society and culture have always been open and changing. Their boundaries, identities, forms, and contents have ever been fluid and in flux through interaction with the outside world. Aspects of that culture we now understand to be Korean may not be that old (take kimchi, for example), and it is very difficult to identify characteristics of Korean culture that are unique and completely Korean. Particularly with the rapid advancements in communication and transportation, where even cultures in peripheral

regions are being drawn into the vortex of globalization, Korean culture today has inevitably taken on transnational characteristics. In this reality, Korean studies needs to consider how to best understand Korean society, culture, and history.

Korean studies cannot be a one-way street; it needs to be a two-way or multidirectional undertaking. As foreigners learn about and grow to like Korea, they should also seek mutual understanding and connectivity between Korean culture and their own. In addition, we need to avoid pigeonholing Korea and promoting stereotypes, and instead aim for a Korean studies that understands Korea in the context of its past, its present, and its history of acculturation with other cultures. To this end, it needs to become a regional studies that constantly reflects on the dilemmas of cultural relativism, the dualities of cultural rationality versus irrationality and pluralism versus assimilation, and the impacts of globalization and transnationalism. If we consider these points, we can develop a multidisciplinary Korean studies based on intercultural exchange and which encompasses both tradition and modernity. In this way, we can ensure the future sustainability of Korean studies, in Vietnam and elsewhere in the world.

Thank you for your attention.