

SOCIOLOGY IN KOREA: PAST AND PRESENT

Doo-Seung Hong

Introduction

Over the past 60 years, the discipline of sociology in South Korea (hereafter Korea) has developed rapidly, as seen by the number of academics engaged in sociological research and teaching, the volume of research papers presented at conferences and seminars, and the number of research committees in the Korean Sociological Association (KSA 2007; 2017). In the 2010s, sociology departments were established in 38 four-year universities in Korea, and the membership of the KSA reached more than 1,000. Korea has also transformed from a pre-industrial to a post-industrial society. In the 40-year period 1970–2010, the share of people working in agricultural, forestry and fishery industries dropped from 50.4% to 6.6%, and that of people in the mining and manufacturing sectors increased slightly from 14.3% to 17.0%, which was offset by a sharp increase in social overhead capital (SOC) and other service sectors from 35.3% to 76.4% (Statistics Korea 2018a). In this process, Korean society has encountered various kinds of prosperity and adversity, such as rapid economic growth and financial crises, authoritarianism and democratization, and the awkward coexistence of traditional and postmodern perspectives inevitably brought about by “compressed modernity” (Chang 1999; 2010). Accordingly, the research agenda and academic discourse that sociologists were devoted to should have reflected the social cleavages and political turbulence prevalent in this society.

Emergence of Sociology in Korea: The Early Years

The term “sociology” first appeared in the Korean media in the early 20th century. Lee Injik (1862–1916), a modern novelist, introduced sociology in the monthly youth magazine *Youth Korean Peninsula* in 1906. In the following decade, the works

of classical sociologists (e.g., Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer) were introduced by pioneers of modernization such as Chang Jiyoun (1864–1921), a journalist, and Jung Gwanjo (1883–1951), a religious man (Choi 1976). The record shows that sociology was first taught at Yonhee College (now Yonsei University) by H. H. Underwood (1890–1951) in 1918. Underwood was for many years a missionary of the Presbyterian Board in Korea and later, in 1934, became president of Yonhee College. In the early 1930s, introductory sociology textbooks came to be produced by scholars professionally trained overseas in the discipline of sociology; e.g., by Kim Hyunjoon (1898–1950) who studied in Germany, Ha Kyungduk (1897–1951) and Han Chijin (1901–?) who studied in the United States, and Gong Tak (1900–1972) who did his studies in France (Choi 1974). However, during the Japanese colonial period (1910–45), sociology was discouraged in college curricula by the colonial government and only taught within the boundaries of philosophy.

After the end of World War II and the following liberation from Japanese rule, a sociology department was established for the first time at Seoul National University (SNU) in 1946. In October 1956, a handful of sociologists gathered and decided to launch a professional association of sociology. In the following year, the Korean Sociological Association (KSA) officially started with 28 individual members. They elected as its first president Prof. Lee Sangbaek (1904–1966) of SNU, who had majored in social philosophy for undergraduate and graduate work in the Department of Philosophy of Waseda University in Japan in the 1920-30s (KSA 2017). He was the founder of the SNU Sociology Department, the first sociology department in the country (SNU Department of Sociology, 1996). In 1964, the KSA published the first issue of an official journal of the association, the *Korean Journal of Sociology* (*KJS*; *hanguk sahoehak*).

Development of Sociological Research in the Contemporary Period

In the 1960s and 1970s, Korean sociologists were predominantly concerned with compelling social issues that Korean society had to face and solve in the process of industrialization and modernization. These issues included, among others,

population explosion, rural poverty and urbanization. Population policy was directed towards changing the traditional family values of deep-seated son preference. During the period of a baby boom (1955–63) following the Korean War (1950–53), the total fertility rate (TFR: the average number of children born to a woman of reproductive age) marked 6.1. In the 1960s–70s, the government launched family planning campaigns encouraging women to have no more than two children. Due to such campaigns, the TFR dropped to 2.1 births per woman in the mid-1980s, which reached the level of advanced industrial countries. Since then, the fertility rate has been falling incessantly, and in the early 2000s Korea became one of the “lowest-low fertility” (TFR below 1.3) countries in the world (Kim 2017). In 2017, the TFR was recorded at 1.05, and in 2018 it fell below 1 for the first time in the history of Korea (Chosun Ilbo 2018). The country now faces a demographic cliff. At the same time, the proportion of the aged population continuously increased, making the country an “aging society” in the early 2000s. The population aged 65 and over constituted 13.8% in 2017, which was 2.8 times higher than 5.0% in 1990 (Kim 2017; Statistics Korea 2018a).

In the meantime, society also changed from “culturally homogeneous” with respect to ethnicity and language to “multicultural.” The official statistics show that immigrant workers reached 846,000 in 2018; however, about 40% of these are employed as temporary or daily workers, far above the 23.8% of Korean workers. Approximately 42.7% are ethnic Korean of Chinese nationality (Statistics Korea 2018b). But these figures seem estimated somewhat conservatively, and in fact the actual number of immigrant workers is presumed to be higher than the official record. During the 30-year period of 1987–2017, immigrant workers increased from 6,409 to 941,773, excluding illegal immigrants (Seoul 2018). As of December 2017, marriage migrants reached 155,457 (83.8% were women), mostly from China (37.1%), Vietnam (27.1%), Japan (8.6%) and the Philippines (7.6%) (Korea Immigration Service 2017). The total number of marriage migrants as of the end of 2017 was 6.2 times higher than the 25,182 in 2001.

In response to the changes in social composition and cultural values, since 2000, more specialized areas have come to attract the scholarly attention of Korean sociologists, such as gender (e.g., gender inequality, integration, etc.) and multi-

culturalism (e.g., multicultural family, immigrant workers, marriage migrants, etc.) (Kim 2018; Seol, Ko, & Yoo 2018). It was not until the early 1980s that Korean sociologists began to examine women's studies as an independent subject, not as a part of family studies or demography. In June 1981, the KSA organized a symposium on "Issues and Problems Faced by Korean women," where research papers on rural women, housewives and working women were presented and discussed following an overall review of sociological, psychological and anthropological approaches to gender issues (KSA 1990). Today, more than 10 universities have an independent department of women's studies or offer a joint program with other disciplines, including sociology, at the graduate level.

In the course of unprecedentedly rapid social change, social conflict and integration became some of the most prominent and recurrent social issues in this society. Facing social challenges, the KSA organized occasional symposia on social conflict and conflict resolution. For example, we may list the symposia on "Social conflict and social development" (held in December 1984), "Regionalism and inter-regional conflict in Korea" (April 1989), and "Social conflict and strategy for social integration in Korea" (March 2010). The symposium session discussions were on topics like the various types of conflicts encountered in contemporary Korean society with respect to the discrepancy between regions, classes, generations, genders and multicultural ethnic groups and ideological orientations, eventually exploring solutions to such conflicts through social cohesion (KSA, 2010).

Most recently, the main theme of the KSA's annual meeting held in December 2018 was "Beyond a Society of Cracks and Aversion: A Sociological Reflection for Solidarity and Cure." This theme seems to reflect a topical issue currently faced by Korean society, where social conflict and antagonism between contrasting blocs of different (conservative vs. progressive) ideological orientation have been ever increasing in recent years. The policy agenda of the incumbent government has been perceived by people as leaning towards the have-nots against the haves.

Since the 1980s, the voice of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on controversial sociopolitical issues has grown stronger to a tremendous degree, and they have played influential roles in decision-making processes in national and local governments. NGOs in diverse fields have implemented a wide spectrum of activities

and virtually become one of the strongest power groups in national politics. Moreover, former active members of the civic movement have turned from observers into participants by being appointed to key posts in the incumbent government. However, some NGOs are politically deflected, often showing a partisan and biased stance with regard to the national agenda. On the positive side, the activation of civic movements in fact indicates that democracy is now in the process of settling firmly in Korean society after prolonged authoritarian regimes in the pre-1990s period, although there is still some skepticism about the procedural justice and efficiency of democracy in the country. The topics of the civic movement and civil society have attracted the wide attention of critical sociologists (Kim 2013; Yoon 2005).

Traditionally, the Korean people have valued egalitarianism, equity and justice. Throughout the period in question, widening gaps between social strata emerged as a disturbing issue about which Korean sociologists were most concerned. In 2006, the KSA organized a series of forums on the role of the middle class and social development, jointly with the Joongang Daily, and as a result, produced *The Middle Class at the Crossroads*, a collection of research papers presented at the forums (KSA 2008). However, the collapse of the middle class, particularly small-scale entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, self-employed service workers, etc., has turned out to be a social problem in recent years.

Indigenization and Globalization of Korean Sociology

Over the years, in an effort to establish the identity of Korean sociology, sociologists in this country have been deeply concerned with the issue of indigenizing Western-based sociology in a Korean context (Kim 2007; Yoon 1997; Park & Chang 1999). During the post-war period in Korea, contemporary sociological knowledge was mostly imported from the United States. In the earlier period, sociology was taught by sociologists who had mostly studied in Japan under Japanese colonial rule.

Skepticism was continuously raised as to whether the discipline of sociology properly handles the issues Korean society has to urgently grapple with under the circumstances of rapid change and transformation of the social structure and values

of people. The KSA has made meaningful contributions to forming scholarly identity through research activities. Such themes of conferences, seminars or workshops as “Theory and methods of contemporary sociology” (1970), “How to proceed with sociology education” (1983), “Towards a Korean sociology of the 21st century” (1994) and “Crisis of sociology” (2001) simply reflected the topical issues and dilemmas encountered by the Korean sociology community as a whole.

In parallel with indigenization, globalization also appeared as a pressing task that Korean sociologists are expected to pursue (Hong 2008; Kim 2008). The KSA has hosted many international symposia, seminars and full-scale conferences. In December 1987, the fifth Asian Regional Conference of Sociology was held in Seoul. The theme of this conference was “Industrial East Asia: Tasks and Challenges.” In addition to local Korean participants, scholars from East and Southeast Asian countries were widely represented among the participants, including those from Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong and Singapore. Two years later, in June 1989, another international conference was held, entitled “Asia in the 21st Century: Challenges and Prospects”. This time, sociologists from Western countries, including the United States, France and West Germany, were also very active in paper presentations and discussions, along with those from Eastern countries. In September 2007, the KSA held an international conference on “Diversity and dynamics of globalization: Socioeconomic models in global capitalism.”

Korean sociologists began to attend the World Congress of Sociology organized by the International Sociological Association starting from the fifth meeting held in Washington D.C. in 1962. The seventh Congress took place in Varna, Bulgaria in 1970, but no Korean sociologists are recorded to have participated. An interim meeting of the International Sociological Association Research Committee on Armed Forces and Conflict Resolution (RC01) was held at Seoul National University and the Korea Military Academy in Seoul in August 2008, and the Research Committee on Social Stratification (RC28) also had a conference in May 2018 at Yonsei University in Seoul.

For the globalization of Korean sociology and overseas dissemination of research products by Korean sociologists, the KSA has published a biannual English version of *KJS* since 2008. Likewise, since 2014, the Regional Sociological Asso-

ciation has published one out of three annual issues of its official journal, *Korean Regional Sociology*, in English. The Institute for Social Development and Policy Research, which is affiliated with the Department of Sociology of SNU, publishes an English-language quarterly (SCOPUS indexed), *Development and Society* (Han, Lee, & Sung 2014).

Expanding the Scope of Sociological Investigation

During the past decades, the scope of sociological interests has expanded tremendously. In this process, individual sociologists have been very active in KSA-affiliated research committees or other sociology-related, often multidisciplinary, academic associations. The KSA listed 23 independent academic associations either affiliated with the KSA or whose key members are sociologists. These associations and their published journals (in brackets) include the Korean Social History Association (*Society and History*), the Korean Association of Regional Sociology (*Korean Regional Sociology*), the Korean Association for Survey Research (*Survey Research*), the Korean Association for Information Society (*Information Society & Media*), the Critical Sociological Association of Korea (*Economy and Society*), the Population Association of Korea (*Korea Journal of Population Studies*), the Korean Family Studies Association (*Family and Culture*), the Korean Rural Sociological Society (*Rural Society*), the Korean Social Theory Association (*Social Theory*), the Association of East Asian Social Thoughts (*Social Thoughts and Culture*), etc.

Sociological knowledge and perspectives have often been adopted by other social science disciplines to deal with their own issues and problems. Sociologists are extensively involved in planning and implementing social policy issues encompassing a wide range of social interests and concerns. Research topics in sociology have also been diversified and the key words in individual research are more likely to be based on specific theories in each area rather than on the grand theories prevalent in previous periods (KSA, 2017).

Concluding Remarks

In the 21st century, the discipline of sociology shows a slowly declining trend in its popularity and viability. Anticipating the decline of college populations, universities and colleges are starting to carry out action plans to reform the university structure for survival. Some universities have already changed the department title or merged it with other social science disciplines in order to aptly cope with the uncertain atmosphere of post-secondary education in the future. Of course, this applies not only to sociology, but to other human sciences as well. Some universities have down-sized independent departments and changed them into programs. The low fertility rate, already below the replacement level, determines a negative outlook on the college population within the next 20 years.

Without incessant efforts by sociologists to make their discipline valuable to society and the nation, the future of sociology in Korea does not seem to be very positive. The Korean sociology community has to meet the harsh challenges of reformulating its identity and utility in response to the changing socioeconomic and political environment.

References

[In English]

- Chang, Kyung-Sup. 1999. Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition. *Economy and Society*, 28(1): 30–55.
- _____. 2010. *South Korea under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition*. London: Routledge.
- Han, Shin-Kap, Sang-Jic Lee, & Yun-Joo Sung. 2014. Shifting Focus in Development Studies: Papers in *Development and Society*, 1998–2013. *Development and Society*, 43(1): 59–80.
- Kim, Dong-Choon. 2013. “Growth and Crisis of the Korean Citizens’ Movement.” In: Hee-Yeon Cho, Lawrence Surendra & Hyo-Je Cho (eds.), *Contemporary South Korean Society: A Critical Perspective* (pp. 85–95). London: Routledge.
- Kim, Dong No. 2008. Toward Globalization of Korean Sociology. *Korean Journal of Sociology*, 42(8): 1–11.
- Kim, Kyong-Dong. 2007. Alternative Discourses in Korean Sociology: The Limits of Indigenization. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 35(2): 242–257.
- Kim, Minjeong. 2018. *Elusive Belonging: Marriage Immigrants and “Multiculturalism” in Rural South Korea*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Park, Myoung-Kyu, & Kyung-Sup Chang. 1999. Sociology between Western Theory and Korean Reality: Accommodation, Tension and a Search for Alternatives. *International Sociology*, 14(2): 139–156.

- Seol, Dong-Hoon. 2018. Population Aging and International Migration Policy in South Korea. *Journal of the Korean Welfare State and Social Policy*, 2(2): 73–108.
- Yoon, Jeong-Ro. 1997. In Search of Identity in Korean Sociology. *Contemporary Sociology*, 26(3): 308–310.

[In Korean]

- Choi, Jae Seok. 1974. Korean Sociology in Early Periods. *Korean Journal of Sociology*, 9: 5–29.
- _____. 1976. Korean Sociology in the Thirty Years after Liberation. *Korean Journal of Sociology*, 10: 7–46.
- Chosun Ilbo. 2018. “This Year ‘0.9 Shock’, Maginot Line of Low Fertility collapses.” http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/09/03/...html. Accessed on December 24, 2018.
- Hong, Doo-Seung. 2008. Sociology and Area Studies: Toward a Globalization of Korean Sociology. *Korean Journal of Sociology*, 42(1): 1–26.
- Kim, Doo Sub. 2017. “Major Trends of Population Area”. In: *Korean Social Trends 2017*. Daejeon: Statistical Research Institute, Statistics Korea, pp. 24–35.
- Korea Immigration Service. 2017. *Korea Immigration Service Statistics 2017*. <http://www.immigration.go.kr>. Accessed on December 26, 2018.
- Korean Sociological Association (KSA). 1990. *Forty-five Years of Korean Sociology: A Collection of KSA's Activities*. Seoul.
- _____. 2007. *Fifty Years of the Korean Sociological Association, 1957–2007*. Seoul.
- _____. (ed.). 2008. *The Middle Class at the Crossroads: Tasks for a Diagnosis of Reality and Restoration*. Seoul: Ingansarang.
- _____. 2010. *Proceedings of the Symposium on Social Conflict and Strategy for Social Integration in Korea*. March 19, Korea Press Center, Seoul.
- _____. 2017. *Sixty Years of the Korean Sociological Association, 1957–2017*. Seoul.
- Seol, Dong-Hoon, Jae-Hun Ko, & Seung-Hwan Yoo. 2018. Korean Sociological Association and Sociological Research: Changes in the Areas of Sociology in Korea, 1964–2017. *Korean Journal of Sociology*, 52(1): 153–213.
- Seoul National University (SNU) Department of Sociology. 1996. *Fifty Years of the Department of Sociology, Seoul National University, 1946–1996*. Seoul.
- Statistics Korea. 2018a. *Social Indicators in Korea, 2017*. Daejeon: Statistics Korea.
- _____. 2018b. “Survey Results on the Residence Status and Employment of Immigrants, 2018.” Press Release, December 18, <http://kostat.go.kr>. Accessed on December 26, 2018.
- Yoon, Sang-Chul. 2005. “Korean Social Movement in the 1990s: Separation and Centrality.” *Economy and Society*, 66: 39–71.

Biographical note: Doo-Seung Hong is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Seoul National University. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago and served as president of the Korean Sociological Association in 2008.