

What Can Sociology Do for East Asia, and Vice Versa?

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Introduction

Introduced to East Asia in the late nineteenth century, sociology had a tremendous impact both practically and ideologically in Korea, China, and Japan. Faced with a period of historic transformation in which the West began to occupy the East, scholars in the East Asian region, who had actively pursued system reform, were all recipients of sociology's intellectual christening. Whereas political science and economics had received attention on a practical and pragmatic dimension, sociology stressed the organizations and relationships, the communication and practices, and the communal solidarity necessary to create enlightened people. Though the sociology academy rooted in the university system had yet to discover it, Comte's positivism, Spencer's evolutionism, Durkheim's social integration, Marx's theory of class, and Weber's theory of moral culture all began to be understood as factors central to modernity and modernization, playing a large part in providing a zeitgeist and new worldview.

Sociology in twenty-first century East Asia is facing a new reality. Along with the tides of globalization, interdependency between East Asian nations has grown, and exchange and cooperation between them has opened up as well. Numerous activities based on the common framework of "East Asia" are in-progress, and there is no dearth of literature which espouses a "East Asian sociology," nor is there any lack of collaborative research between East Asian scholars. In June of 2018, sociologists from Korea, China, and Japan established the East Asia Sociological Association (EASA), and in March of 2019 it held its first international congress in Tokyo, Japan, with remarkable success. To reflect this changing era, Korea's representative sociological

journal, *Development and Society*, has been renamed the *Journal of Asian Sociology*. These events all reflect the changing era in which interest in East Asia is growing. With these occurrences in mind, this paper intends to look at how East Asia's changing reality and East Asian sociology are interlocked. Namely, it asks two questions: what types of effects do East Asia's dynamic experience have on sociology? And what horizon of expectations can the intellectual traditions and theoretical orientations of sociology open for the future of the East Asian region? I hope to share some thoughts on these two questions here.

Society and sociology in East Asia revisited

East Asia's modern and contemporary history took course over broadly three stages, during which time sociology underwent its own transformations as well. The first stage is early modernization, which took place following the late nineteenth century, during which Western civilization was actively received and modernity was a game of catching up. As reforming traditions and accepting civilization were becoming increasingly emphasized, scholars from Korea, China, and Japan began to share a new frame through which to understand the times. It was turbulent era in which society and knowledge were no exception to the transition towards the modern and the pursuit of innovations of civilization, and a passion for new knowledge and a shared civilization beyond the borders of countries was fervid. Though the pursuit of academic stridency or research capacity were insufficient, one could argue that scholars who empathized with the reception and application Western civilization in East Asia were at a stage of concocting sociological standpoints and considerations.

The second stage took place in the period during which the standard of sharing of a sociological vision had greatly atrophied due to imperialist domination and the introduction of the Cold War system; it was an era of deepening divides and renewed conflicts. In this era the regulatory power of nationalist sentiments and ideologies was fierce, and political action and ideological homogeneity overpowered all other areas of social life. The preservation of an ethnic identity and establishment of a nation-state were considered the paramount goals, and the competition and divide between the capitalist system, with the US at the center, and communism, with USSR at the center, swept the region. As a result, rather than intellectual communication,

cultural exchange, and a shared vision between East Asian countries, antagonism and competition, conflict and ruptures overtook the region. With the Korean peninsula at its center, the East Asian region became trapped in a system of division based on antagonistic ideologies and systems. In turn, the openness which had accompanied early reception of modern civilization declined, and the logic of national prosperity and military power at the level of individual countries gained power. As it was an era in which practical and instrumental knowledge was stressed, sociology became a field of study which was avoided for some time.

The third stage occurred in the era throughout and following the 1970s, during which East Asia captivated the world with its rapid economic development. With the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US, China's transition towards economic reforms and liberalization became clear, and at the same time Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore's economic development began to emerge. As East Asia's development model drew the world's attention, often being referred to as the "Four Dragons" or "Asian Giants," theories of developing nations, Asian values, and authoritarian countries began to be discussed within the field of sociology as well. An increased sociological interest in population changes, the middle class, inequality, occupations, family institution, values, urban and rural areas, as well as culture during this era of unprecedentedly rapid development was attributed to such social transformation. Japan, who had risen from its defeat in WWII to the ranks of second in the world in terms of economic power, lent an impetus to this international interest, which then led to a focus on the similarities of the East Asian development model, which had appeared in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea. Furthermore, as the giant China started to emerge as the most representative example of this development model, this interest in the region grew further. In this context, East Asia's theory of national development, its catch-up model of development, political transitions and civil society, and Asian values and culture all began to be a subject of attention.

While also focusing on the common element of East Asia, sociology during this era fundamentally began to introduce individual countries as the subject of interest and unit of analysis. The primary agent of change and development was each individual country, and the factors which determined the success or failure of development were analyzed on the level of individual countries. In addition, as economic development was considered the utmost value at the time, social phenomena also started to be assessed from an economic viewpoint. Spheres of sociological research such as those

concerning family, cities, class, and populations began to be interpreted and explained in relation to economic growth. These characteristics also resulted in sociology beginning to consider and research phenomena at the level of individual countries. Theoretical discussions of the concept of developing states and development models in each country further reflected and reinforced this fact. In short, you could say that sociology, which focused on societies country-by-country, society as limited to a single country, and society as supported by the state, had itself developed. For the large part, studies which had been called East Asian research focused on urbanization, transitions in family, demographic changes, class structure, occupation structure, and so forth of individual countries within the region and compared them with those of other countries, trying to understand the apparent differences. Though theories of Asian values or Confucian development theories, among others, offered tools to transcend the unit of individual countries, ultimately research which analyzed the efficiency of authoritarian countries or patriarchal cultural roots country-by-country were fruitless, and failed to adequately bring into question the peculiarities of the East Asian region.

A new sociology grounded in East Asian experiences

Sociology in the twenty-first century is being called on to go through a total intellectual overhaul. This is because phenomena such as late modernity, post-modernity, and hypermodernity, which are difficult to parse through modernist paradigms are encroaching. Sociologists across the globe are already focusing on phenomena such as globalization, informatization, and digitalization and emphasizing mobility, supra-nationalism, liquidity, fluidity, networking as well as proposing new concepts, theories, and networks by which to discuss and assess these phenomena. The experiences of contemporary East Asia can become an invaluable resource for this intellectual reform of sociology. The political, economic, cultural, and social changes being experienced within the East Asian region are more than sufficient to become the foundational knowledge of the issues, problems, and vision necessary for constructing a new sociology.

What I should first emphasize is that while being an open region which actively accommodates the forces of twenty-first century globalization, East Asia is also a field which comprehensively illustrates the anxieties and problems caused by globalization. The effects of globalization differ by

region, and thus the situations we see in Europe, North and South America, and the Middle East necessarily are different from those in East Asia. As an area which actively participates in globalization, informatization, marketization, and liberalization on a global scale, East Asia has taken charge of a core portion of the twenty-first century world system. At the same time, it is also a problem-space in which we can survey of the multiple layers and paradoxes are brought about by the diverse cultures and traditions which exist in the region, as well as differences in historical path dependency. East Asia is a peculiar site in which Western and Eastern civilization both fuses and is in conflict; it is a place where global level markets and technologies operate at a high degree at the same time that longstanding cultural and traditional roots remain firmly engrained in society. In the powerful tide of globalization, we can see on the one hand that the movement of information, commodities, and people is occurring at unprecedented rates, and the change to real-time compacting of networks is intensifying fluidization, mobility, and liquification, while simultaneously there is a movement towards emphasizing powerful states and cultural distinctiveness.

In twenty-first century East Asia, diverse activities and practices beyond countries' borders are becoming a part of everyday life, and new living space is beginning to emerge. Large cities, border areas, industrial parks, ports, and hinterlands are transforming into new network spaces in which technology and commodities are being distributed. The movement of countless international students and tourists, along with the younger generations' identification with cultural products is also producing a new field. Environmental collaboration aimed at solving ecological problems such as environmental problems and air pollution are growing more robust and the level of regional cooperation regarding the internationalization of crime, the circulation of illicit substances, and the possibility of large-scale catastrophe are on the rise. However, calls for state-led control, surveillance, and supervision are also increasing. The question of what types of changes, possibilities, and problems will occur when technological innovation, marketization, and globalization are met with intense nationalist tendencies, is a concern that all of humanity is now facing in the twenty-first century. East Asia is a fitting case for future-oriented research in regard to this issue we are now facing on a global scale. In order to do this, sociological concepts and standpoints through which to focus on the regional category and perceptively detect the interaction between nations are more necessary than ever. Both the neoliberal stance, which views the world as a single market made up of nation-states, and well as the technologically concerned thoughts, which view the entirety of

humanity as being connected through a network and thus changing as a single community, lack an exactness requisite for addressing problem. In order to uncover what end the Janus-faced nature of the twentieth-century world—that is, the paradoxical trend of global interdependence and national fortification of competition—will bring about, we must strive for a social science which works on a regional scale. The experiences of East Asia will provide the opportunity to uncover the diverse areas of activity and the regional openness to the future while not ignoring an understanding of markets, geo-political conditions, and human geography background.

Moreover, the reality of East Asia provides a rare case for theorization to explain the asymmetrical changes which occur between politics, economics, society, and culture in the era of globalization. The roots of the Cold War structure remain imbedded here at the same time that neoliberal market dynamics are actively churning; it is a site where religions of Asian origin and Western Christianity coexist, as well as where an emerging struggle for hegemony between the US and China is playing out. Additionally, in what some call the Asian paradox, when compared with the scale of commerce or sociocultural exchange within the region, political bonds and trust are strikingly low. Anxieties over market integration and nationalism form one axis of this, and the methods by which historical legacies have been brought up to date functions as another factor in this. It seems as though the connection between the Sino-US hegemony and these factors is another outcome of this paradox; it grows increasingly important to explore the mechanisms which create these types of situations in the context of the twenty-first century transformations.

The reality of East Asia demonstrates the need for change in how sociology deals with issues of culture and identity. For ages, the Western understanding of ethnic identity was based on the framework of modernity, but the experience of East Asia require us to reevaluate and reconsider linguo-racial differences, cultural differences, historical memories, and the importance of sentiments. At the same time, the question of how interest in multiculturalism, universalism, immigration, and settlement should be interpreted differently from experiences of the West becomes a prominent issue. Comparatively speaking, in East Asia the borders between tribal units and spheres of life or language have been distinct, the lifespan of traditional states has been long, and ethnic identities have been discrete. Even within the context of global population movements in the twenty-first century, the identity of the majority group has remained unwavering, and rather than a cultural melting pot, there has been a tendency to emphasize assimilation with the majority

group at the center. The questions of what kinds of social relationships the technological revolution of digitalization will produce in the future, beyond the boundaries of culture and politics, along with how they will correspond to existing institutional principles, are all newly emerging concerns.

The future community of East Asia grounded in sociology

In comparison with other fields of study which were founded in modern era, sociology places particular weight on diversity, flexibility, as well as reflexivity. This is because unlike focusing on the state, as political science does, or the market, as economics does, it focuses on the dynamic society which is made up of diverse individuals and groups. Sociology emphasizes that humans are a social creature more so than philosophy or theology do, but at the same time it stresses that individuals have agential power, teeming with individuality and creativity that transcends sociality. Because it simultaneously emphasizes the importance of order and regulation, as well as change and autonomy, there is a dialectical property as well as a utopian orientation open to the future inherent in sociology's theories and viewpoints.

In the process of creating the future of East Asia, it is therefore necessary for sociology to keenly demonstrate its native intellectual curiosities and critical viewpoints. Though the state, markets, information, and technology are all expected to exert unprecedented power in this future society, reflecting on what kind of human effects it will have on individuals, families, collectives, and regions will become an even more vital task. Sociological thinking is absolutely necessary in assuring that the dynamic transformations in process in East Asia do not bring about inhumane results, as well as being crucial for heightening diversity and reflexivity in addition to constructing new governance. This is because, while respecting the interests, preferences, and sentiments of individuals, it also focuses on the roles of community and civil society, which consists of autonomy and mutual trust. This will become the basis of reconstructing a new lifeworld opened to the twenty-first century future by encompassing reflection on longstanding nationalism and developmentalism. Sociology will allow for a new plan and predilection to pursue quality of life, individuality, creativity, socio-cultural happiness, and the autonomy of actors beyond a growth ideology which erases peculiarities through an overemphasis on economic growth, quantitative expansion, efficiency, and standardization.

Sociology provides the concepts and conversation necessary for illumin-

ating the social foundations of regional integration. While also stressing the importance of agendas such as economic integration, political integration, security integration, we must focus on the importance of solidarity and cohesion between nongovernmental, non-market, voluntary agents working towards environmental cooperation, private sector collaboration, knowledge sharing, and cultural exchange. A sociological exploration of social relationship models and the methods of the lifeworld which are suitable in the twenty-first century, beyond the binary of individualism and nationalism, is urgent. Sociology must contribute to the intellectual pursuit of a future-model community which, while overcoming the limitations of the Western model centered on liberalism and individualism, must also overcome the authoritarian order based in Confucian culture and familialism. While bearing in mind the worldwide spread of network relationships newly enabled by digitalization, there is a need to confirm, through the example of East Asia, that the twenty-first century community can develop into an open assembly which shares values, norms, symbols, and meanings on a level surpassing those of the state or markets. There is a particular need to focus our interests on international ties between neighboring cities, as well as changing features of relationships or changes to the lifeworld brought about by the creation of super-state spaces.

Sociology can contribute to demonstrating the core of a new regional shift beyond the insights offered by geopolitics, geo-economics, or human geography. Traditionally, geopolitics has focused its attention on risk, cooperation, and security-based mutual relationships on a politico-military dimension. Geo-economics has focused on economic complementarity and market integration, as well as plans for the formation of an economic community. As we enter an age in which the exchange of cultures as well as integration and convergence is increasingly emphasized, human geography, which focuses on multicultural exchange on a regional level, is also becoming stressed. We are at a point in which soft flows such as students studying abroad, cultural exchange, commodity consumption, and travel, between China, Korea, and Japan are at record highs and phenomena explained by mobility and globalization are effecting substantial changes within the region. It is important to provide discourses and knowledge which can help predict the human-centered and relationship-oriented future community while also focusing on how the influences of the technological revolution, such as digitalization, neoliberalism, and artificial intelligence, will alter this asymmetrical balance. It is necessary to make an effort to interpret the substance and outcomes of such changes on an regional level in East Asia,

while also continually asking and reflecting on what kind of significance these changes will hold for human agents and the lifeworld. At this juncture, sociology presents a veritable treasure chest of intellectual resources, and its critical insights will continue to remain valid. Changes in East Asia and East Asian sociology provide the necessary field and perspectives for one another and are walking hand in hand into the twenty-first century. While concentrating on this changing era, it is time for sociologists to devote ourselves to a new sociological outlook which transcends geopolitics, geo-economics, or human geography; it is time to establish geo-sociology, a new intellectual outlook and scholarly practice.

Conclusion

A number of diverse efforts aimed at multilateralist cooperation and institutionalization of inter-regional relations will be developed in East Asia in the coming era. Currently the necessity of multilateral security systems is under discussion in the field of politico-security, in addition to market integration or an economic community and the necessity of environmental cooperation and cultural collaboration also being widely discussed. But the question of how much multilateral cooperation and new social space will open up in the face of intense nationalism remains to be seen. It is predicted that the competition between China, which is earnestly attempting to actualize the “Chinese dream” and rise as a great power, and the US, which is attempting to maintain its status as the world’s only hegemon, will have non-insubstantial effects on the East Asian regional order. Furthermore, how exactly the qualitative transformation to the mode of existence of humans brought about the future by digitalization, artificial intelligence, big data, and informatization—a transformation fittingly referred to as the fourth industrial revolution—will take place is accompanied both by excitement and concern.

At this juncture, it is incumbent upon us to combine East Asian sociology and practical efforts in East Asia into a common vision. Changes to come are not limited to economics or politics, and in order to move forward towards the reconstruction of the lifeworld and civilizational creativity, the grounds and views of sociology are of paramount importance. In order to create a twenty-first century amalgamative civilization and new values, as well enabling East Asia to realize high levels of integration and solidarity, sociologists in Korea, Japan, and China must make a devoted effort to

amplify the powers of explanation, sensitive to regional realities, which sociology has to offer.

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