Not So Universal? The Search for Indigenous International Relations Theories in South Korea

Byoung Won Min

This paper looks at and assesses the interest in and the passion for indigenous IR theory which has been proposed for more than half a century in South Korea. South Korea has experienced so many precious chances to think about IR both as its ontological as well as epistemological base. Colonialism, sovereign independence, national partition, a civil war, ideological and military confrontations between the North and the South, and enduring influences of strong neighbors have been just a few elements of IR in South Korea. As such, IR in South Korea have been eventually overwhelmed by its ontological destiny with practical motivations for policy and politics. In this context, this paper evaluates South Korean scholars' voices for indigenous theory in IR in the perspective of postcolonialism. In the second section, the paper investigates the current situation of IR studies, centering on the publications in the *Korean Journal of International Studies* for the last decade. This short survey shows how much Korean scholars have tried to overcome their academic dependence on the American theories. Also the paper will discuss the implications of these surveys on the voices for indigenous theories. The final section suggests the missions and future agendas for South Korean IR scholars to contemplate in terms of three dimensions -- the scope of theory, decolonization, and the search for a trading zone between different paradigms.

Key Words: indigenous IR theories, South Korea, *Korean Journal of International Studies*, decolonization, paradigms

Evaluating the history and performance of an academic society does not seem to be so easy in any country. It is more so in the case of late developers or Third World countries that had experienced twisted historical trajectories, such

*Byoung Won Min (byomin@ewha.ac.kr) is Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of Ewha Womans University. His research interests have been in international relations theories, security studies, culture, and information politics. He has recently published academic papers on cyber deterrence, East Asian international relations, transnational social movements, and emotional politics in the *Korean Journal of International Studies* and many others. This research was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2015S1A3A2046903). An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a Summer Conference of the Korean Association of International Studies in June 2016. The author wishes to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

as colonialism, modernization projects, and many rounds of civil wars. Like other East Asian countries, South Korea is likely to be included in such a list, particularly considering its past encounters with imperial powers, the division of the nation, a civil war and the tension thereafter, authoritarian motivations for national development, and persistent environments of suppressed sovereignty due to its geopolitical location. These factors have made international relations (IR) for South Korea more difficult than for many other countries around the world. Drawing on this background, this paper evaluates the voices and achievements of the society of international relations scholars in South Korea and their work during the last decade.

One of the most intriguing aspects of IR studies in South Korea, along with China and Japan, is that the voices calling for a local perspective and theorization have become louder in the last decade. The mid-1980s was a turning point for IR studies in East Asia due to many scholars independently standing up to an earlier dependence on Western paradigms. Considering the long history of IR studies in South Korea, which recently celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, it seems natural for scholars to want to have a unified identity. This is particularly so because many students of IR have relied too heavily on American IR for many reasons. Korean scholars have had chances to study in America since the Korean War, and many more have rushed to cross the Pacific while longing for the acquisition of advanced knowledge. As Stanley Hoffmann described, IR existed as an "American social science" in South Korea, too (Hoffmann 1977).

This paper looks at and assesses the interest in and the passion for the development of an indigenous IR theory that has been proposed for more than half a century in South Korea. Although this work should be considered part of an extensive project for identifying an East Asian mode of IR studies, this paper focuses only on South Korea as a starting point. South Korean scholars, since the country's independence in 1945, have experienced many precious chances to think about IR both from its ontological as well as epistemological foundations. Colonialism, sovereign independence, national partition, civil war, ideological and military confrontations between the North and the South, and enduring influences of strong neighbors have been just a few elements of IR characterizing South Korea's post-independence experience. As such, IR in South Korea has been overwhelmed by its ontological destiny, with practical motivations for policy and politics. Above all, the trauma of the Korean War has made South Korea's academic, as well as practical, IR societies inclined to follow those of the United States. The long, unrepentant legacy of the Cold War strengthened this tendency so much so that researchers, with the emergence of delayed postcolonial motivations, began to worry about the deep level of dependency of South Korean IR on

America.

This paper starts with an evaluation of the voices of South Korean scholars who have been calling for a more indigenous IR theory from the perspective of post-colonialism. The second section is an investigation of the current situation of IR studies in Korea, centering on articles published in the *Korean Journal of International Studies* during the last decade. This short survey will show just how much Korean scholars have tried to overcome their academic dependence on American theories. A comparison between the slogans for indigenous IR theory and academic achievements in South Korea will be conducted in this survey. Also, the paper will discuss the implications of these surveys on the voices calling for indigenous theory development. The final section suggests the missions and future agendas for South Korean IR scholars to contemplate in terms of three dimensions: the scope of theory, decolonization, and the search for a trading zone between different paradigms.

POSTCOLONIAL VOICES FOR INDIGENOUS IR THEORIES

Since the late 1970s and the early 1980s, South Korean scholars have been proposing an indigenous theory of IR. This was a response to higher demands for home-grown theories to explain specific phenomena on the Korean Peninsula beyond the universal theories imported from the West. This new trend was based on a "marginalized spirit," which Yong-gu Kim named the "epistemological turnover" (Kim 2003, 281).¹ The turnover, even though it began as a movement to overcome the academic dependence of Korea's IR scholars on the West, marked the predisposition of Korea's academic community to reflect its own conditions and to seek a path beyond its colonial past. The movement for indigenous theories, therefore, should have represented not only epistemological but also ontological motivations by scholars who wanted to establish autonomous frameworks for analyzing the reality they experienced. In that way, the movement for indigenous IR theories in South Korea must have been a part of the anticipated

¹ South Korea, according to Kim, had to implement practical as well as academic missions, such as reunification and modernization, since its independence from Japanese colonialism at the end of World War II. South Korea's academic community had to "catch up with" advanced countries in economic and academic development at the same time. Recognizing this mixed agenda, South Korean scholars have been expressing their ambitions for indigenous theories.

academic agenda for the future.

The slogans for indigenous IR theories in South Korea have been articulated as “Korean IR,” the “Koreanization of IR,” “Korean-type IR theory” and as a “Korean identity of IR studies” (Min 2007, 41-42). All of these represent the ambitions of Korean scholars for developing indigenous theories not dependent upon Western IR theories. Those scholars have been aware that the IR theories they have studied and taught at academic institutions have been built upon Western histories and experiences. In particular, an “Americanized” IR in South Korea seems to have caused a lot of biases in explicating the local problems of East Asia and the Korean Peninsula. As such, scholars began to find reasons to study IR in the time and space to which they belonged. A universal theory of IR, such as the neorealism of Kenneth Waltz, does not seem to have contributed much in resolving a lot of the problems that many Koreans thought were imperative while intending to explain the working of international society.

There were two historical sources for the movement toward indigenous theorizing. One was development studies, which reflected on the experiences of marginalized people. The Third World, in this context, has paid special attention to an alternative, non-Western way of modernization.² In terms of developmental studies, local people should be considered in the process of agenda-setting, which previously had been dominated by the West. The other source of indigenous theorizing was postcolonialism, which has been revealed to be the nexus between power and knowledge. Universally accepted knowledge so far should be understood, in this perspective, as a “historical product” generated by Western imperialism either in a political or an academic sense (Briggs and Sharp 2004, 665-666). It is necessary for us to review the background of academic anti-imperialism and postcolonialism in order to understand the nature of the movement for indigenous IR theories in South Korea.

Kang Jung In, in his provocative book *Beyond the Shadow of Eurocentrism*, represented the anti-Western atmosphere in South Korea’s social science disciplines. Kang’s main argument was that Eurocentrism, which dominated social sciences in Korea, had spoiled scholars in many ways. The most severe side effect of Eurocentrism can be found in the Westernization of theoretical motivations in Korean social sciences. For example, Kang discussed the case of John Rawls’ the-

² Although the experiences of marginalized people has been used in the West, it has not contributed much in developing any indigenous knowledge in local settings (Briggs and Sharp 2004, 664).

ory of justice, which had been built upon the American political and social experiences of the 1960s. So heterogeneous and context-dependent were the American social circumstances, according to Kang, Rawls' theory of justice was unlikely to be applicable to Korea's situation in any meaningful way (Kang 2004, 395-396). Like other social sciences, the field of IR in Korea seemed to be even more seriously contaminated by America-centered theories because research motivations were based on ontological experiences.

Beneath this challenge to Eurocentrism lies a critique of the "theoretical anticipation" that has overshadowed social sciences in late-modernizers. Kang assumed that scholars in the Third World expected that the realities of late development would improve if their countries followed the way of advanced countries. That is, the tendency of theoretical anticipation presumes a teleological tendency to imitate the Western path to modernization without considering the contextual differences of Third World countries. As such, social scientists in South Korea have marginalized themselves within the mainstream studies of the West. This resulted in fixing the peripheral status of their country by providing test-beds for those mainstream theories without considering their relevance. Most of the 'colonized' social sciences, including an IR that had been Americanized in this way, missed opportunities to be interpreted in diverse ways (Kang 2004, 406).

The trend Kang emphasized represented a challenge to the West's existing academic hegemony. Under the flag of "general theory," social sciences in the West have formulated a "broad vision of the social" that can or should be applied to every corner of the world beyond a particular place or time. The predictions based upon this vision should be proposed to the followers of Third World countries regardless of the relevancy of presupposed theses and the differences in spaces and contexts. This "Northernness" of general theories, as a product of Western social sciences, has led to accumulation problems in its expansion to non-Western regions. First of all, it claims the universal relevance of general theory under the assumption that all societies are the same, and they are to be understood implicitly as well as explicitly in accordance with universal theory. Secondly, due to the metropolitan slant of general theories, peripheries are read and interpreted by the center. Context-dependency and the distinctiveness of those peripheries were sacrificed for the abstractness of general theory. Thirdly, the peripheral and colonized world has been excluded and marginalized without any notable reference. Fourthly, this has led to the "grand erasure" of the majority of human experiences from this 'Northern' theorizing (Connell 2007, 44-48).

Kang's argument against Eurocentrism exemplifies a counter-movement in South Korea's social science communities, and it also is closely linked to the post-positivist debate in IR. Since the late 1980s, scholars in IR have identified them-

selves as post-positivists in their propensity to defy the “suffocating straitjackets” of positivism. The hot issues of post-positivism in the “Third Debate,” such as meta-scientific paradigms, premises and assumptions, and methodological pluralism, have made IR scholars aware of the “least self-reflexivity” of Western social sciences and IR (Lapid 1989, 249-250). Here, post-positivism presented the notion of “reflexivity” as the keyword of postcolonial perspectives by stimulating theoretical and epistemological motivations in IR theory. The drive to self-reflexivity should reveal the dangers of the monolithic dogmatism of mainstream positivism by reexamining heterogeneous, dissident perspectives from the non-Western world.

The voices for indigenous IR theory in South Korea, along with those from the post-positivist Third Debate, have required consideration of the notion of the “self-reflexivity” of the discipline. These voices expressed Robert Cox’s (1986) distinction between “problem-solving theory” and “critical theory,” the latter of which is necessary to disclose the political and hegemonic relations inherent in knowledge production. Therefore, from a post-positivistic perspective, the condition of reflexivity requires IR scholars to reveal who dominates and who are dominated so that the latter can be emancipated from the academic shackles imported and imposed by the West.³ In this way, critical theorists have stressed the intimate relationship between academic works and practical exercises. The voices for indigenous IR theory in South Korea have been loudest among scholars who wanted to address the discrepancy between an imported epistemology and their indigenous ontology.

Theoretical reflexivity is defined, according to Mark Neufeld, as “theoretical reflection of the process of theorizing itself” (Neufeld 1995, 40). Minor IR theoretical perspectives such as neo-Gramscianism, postmodernism, and feminism represent those reflexive theorizations. As many Korean IR scholars also have acknowledged the origins and political aspects of mainstream IR theories, they could be said to have been oriented toward theoretical reflexivity (Min 2007). Any reflexive agents should be self-conscious about the underlying premises of any theory, to recognize the inherently politico-normative dimensions of all paradigms and the normal sciences, and to affirm that reasoned judgments about the merits of contending paradigms are not possible in the absence of a neutral lan-

³ In this sense, postcolonialism and IR studies have been regarded as sharing fundamental perspectives and motivations. Some scholars have argued for highlighting possible intersections and mutual engagements (Darby and Paolini 1994, 384)

guage (Neufeld 1995, 40). The consequent expectations of any reflexive IR theory ask us to focus on predisposed assumptions of an Americanized paradigm and its intentionality for political domination. We may evaluate the emerging movement towards an indigenous Korean IR theory as fulfilling these two requirements for reflexivity. However, it is not so clear whether it meets the third condition of finding a common space for different paradigms, which is a topic to be discussed in the final section.

Postcolonialists have underscored the deficiency of the notion of an "objectified world," which leads to a dangerous "reification." According to Berger and Luckman, reification is the "apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly superhuman terms." This is an extreme version of positivism in which knowledge is a kind of non-human product based on the assumption that the object and the subject are divisible from each other. Therefore, in the positivist's world, the objectified reality of human beings is no longer comprehensible because it is comprehended as non-human and non-controllable.⁴ According to Berger and Luckman, man paradoxically is producing a "reality that denies him" (Berger and Luckman 1966, 89). As more human behaviors become objectified, they have been incorporated into everyday life. Then reality will be understood as "things" that are lifeless objects. While the trend toward objectification can be either good or bad, its usage has become more pejorative than before. It has become more morally objectionable as it has come to signify the "denial of autonomy or subjectivity" (Nussbaum 1995, 249-251).

The postcolonial voices in South Korea calling for indigenous IR theory have also reflected on the problem of an "objectified" and "reified" world under Western criteria in evaluating the progress of theory. Mainstream IR theories under the tradition of rationalism and positivism, such as neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism, frequently have been applied to many IR issues of East Asia and the Korean Peninsula, but they have not been dealt with in a way that researchers find satisfying. That is why IR scholars in South Korea have tried to search for an alternative framework that would embrace the subjective beyond this objectified worldview. Finally, the voices for indigenous IR theory in South

⁴ Axel Honneth (2008, 52-53) developed an idea of reification as implying "forgetfulness of recognition," which assumes the loss of antecedent recognition, an empathetic and engaged relationship with oneself, others and the world that precedes any more-concrete relationship. If this antecedent recognition is forgotten, according to Honneth, people's mental states and environments are experienced as lifeless things.

Korea, as well as other peripheral regions around the world, reflect a local demand for an identity within a new and autonomous framework, even though it may result in the loss of the rigor necessary for more parsimonious scientific theory. A more reflexive, indigenous IR theory, based on our own interests and experiences, has become the goal of meeting this challenge that has arisen since the mid-1980s.

ESTIMATING THE LAST DECADE: HOW MUCH HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

The previous section discussed the postcolonial and reflexive voices calling for indigenous IR theory in South Korea, and this section will evaluate actual IR studies conducted by Korean scholars during the last decade. A survey of the *Korean Journal of International Relations* (*KJIR*) during the last ten years, which was published in Korean, was made of the 412 academic papers that were peer-reviewed.⁵ All the papers analyzed were written in Korean, though others written in English were not included as they began to be published in a separate issue in 2010. Although the total number of papers is not enough to represent the whole society of IR researchers in South Korea — as more than a dozen journals are competing for IR readers in South Korea and beyond — this journal deserves to be considered the most representative and influential for Korea's entire IR community because it has been produced as a unique publication dedicated to the study of IR in Korea for more than a half century and is still the most authoritative among competing journals in the field.

Postcolonialists have identified a pattern of academic dependence of Third World scholars on the First World through a global "division of labor" in research and theorizing. This division of labor in academic works between the First and Third Worlds has three characteristics. First, social science in the West has been engaged in both theoretical and empirical research while non-Western regions have focused more on empirical research. Second, First World scholars have focused their attention on both their own countries and other countries, while

⁵ This survey excluded invited papers such as book reviews and research papers, even though they were sometimes reviewed by a couple of reviewers.

Third World scholars tended to limit their focus mostly to their own countries. Third, whereas scholars in the First World study IR with an overriding interest in comparative research and the generation of global data, scholars in the developing world are likely to be satisfied with single case studies on specific countries or regions (Alatas 2003, 606-607). Considering these features of research in both the developed and developing worlds, this section discusses the achievements of Korean IR scholars based on the findings from the survey of the *KJIR* in response to those voices calling for indigenous theory. Two categories are used in evaluating the achievements of the field: research type and research target.

RESEARCH TYPE: EMPIRICAL OR THEORETICAL?

KJIR articles were divided into three groups: theoretical, empirical, and theory-testing applications.⁶ As shown in Figure 1, among the total of 412 papers, almost two-thirds were dedicated to empirical studies either in the form of quantitative or qualitative analysis. This supports Alatas' statement that most Third World studies have been engaged in empirical rather than theoretical work. Papers written based on purely theoretical motivations account for only 16 percent, a much smaller portion of the total. The ratio of theory-testing application research, which tries to test mainstream theories and models using local cases, made up about 18 percent. This reflects the tendency of most IR scholars in South Korea to import Western theories in order to examine their relevance to East Asian or Korean situations. Figure 2 shows that the trend of using combinations of different research types has not changed much during the last ten years, even though the gaps between empirical studies and other types of research have been reduced slightly.

⁶ In classifying research types, "theoretical" papers were defined as those having only formal and discursive arguments without providing empirical contents for testing. "Empirical" papers were single case studies or comparative case studies without theoretical frameworks, and "theory-testing applications" were papers specifically dedicated to testing theoretical statements with empirical data in order to integrate theoretical frameworks and real-world data.

Figure 1. Research Type: Total (N = 412)

Figure 2. Research Type: 2006~2015 (N = 412)

Research papers published in the *KJIR* also can be classified into distinctive types according to their research fields: international relations, comparative studies, or area studies. As shown in Figure 3, Korean IR scholars have focused more on IR, while many still have been engaged in conducting area studies. About 60 percent of the papers were dedicated to the study of IR, while 36 percent focused on the study of a specific country or region. Comparative research constituted only four percent. This is quite natural for a small country like South Korea as it is likely to be more influenced by external factors. Most Korean IR scholars have never lost the sense of the role strong powers have played in shap-

ing Korea's academic destiny. On the other hand, unlike many Western countries, South Korean scholars have spent much less time and attention on comparative studies compared to IR or area studies. This confirms Alatas' statement that Third World scholars tend to focus more on the "international" dimensions or "areas" than on comparative analysis. One of more interesting findings in Figure 4 was that the gap between IR and area studies has widened during the last decade due to a reduced number of studies on areas or specific countries. This trend may signal more opportunities for "theorization" in IR in the coming future.

Figure 3. Research Type: Fields of Study (N = 412)

Figure 4. Research Type: Fields of Study, 2006~2015 (N = 412)

RESEARCH TARGET: GLOBAL, REGIONAL OR STATE-LEVEL?

As shown in Figure 5, South Korean scholars have distributed their research interests quite evenly among different research areas, such as security (18.3 percent), political (29.1 percent), economic (15.5 percent), cultural (14.6 percent) or domestic (20.0 percent) issues. Although the journal was committed to publishing IR studies, one fifth of the articles focused on domestic affairs as a single research target. This implies that the academic community of IR in South Korea still tends to explore domestic dimensions, along with the relations between the two Koreas, when attempting to understand or explain IR and foreign policy issues. This is especially evident when we look at the data sources of each study, as state-level data accounts for about half (48.7 percent) of the total number of 407 observations, as revealed in Figure 6. Another point that draws our attention in Figure 5 is that more than 14 percent of the published articles were about the cultural dimensions of IR and/or area studies. This means that an increasing number of scholars have moved from the conventional topics of security and economics to the newer area of culture studies, including such topics as identity, nationalism, and ideational and non-material factors in IR.

Figure 5. Research Target: Research Area (N = 403)

Figure 6. Research Target: Types of Data (N = 407)

Regarding the level of analysis, of the total of 412 published papers 313 targeted special regions, interstate relations, or single nations as their primary research topics. Figure 7 shows that East Asia on a whole has become a source of research at a ratio of 45.8 percent vis-à-vis other regions. In the case of interstate relations, such as analyses of dyads or triads, more than 92 percent of the research (N = 67) treated at least one East Asian country as the main target of research. As the number of research papers reached 198, which was closely related to the biased attention of Korean IR scholars to single-country studies rather than comparative politics or international relations, it becomes apparent that the majority of single case studies focused on South Korea or North Korea (33.8 percent) as their research targets. These were followed by other case studies focusing on China and Taiwan (16.2 percent), the United States (13.1 percent), Russia (6.1 percent) and Japan (5.6 percent). These statistics tell us that IR studies in South Korea have been focused more on regional and state-level analysis than the more prevalent types of IR studies in the West. In particular, for the last ten years, authors have chosen East Asian countries as their single research target at a ratio of almost 66 percent among the total of 198.

Figure 7. Research Target: Regions (N = 48)

Figure 8. Research Target: Relations between States (N = 67)

Figure 9. Research Target: East Asian States (N = 198)

The publication history of the last ten years of the *KJIS* reveals some interesting patterns of research regarding interests and data selection. The Korean community of IR scholars seems to have been a part of the global “division of labor” in academic output as it produced more empirical studies than theoretical ones. At the same time, more studies have been dedicated to applying Western theories or models to East Asian cases, while those papers also showed a concentration on IR and area studies much more than on comparative studies. It seems that IR scholars in South Korea have separated their work into two basic groups in their research orientations: IR and area studies. However, the ratio of area studies has decreased during the last ten years surveyed. In terms of research targets, the surveyed articles were distributed quite evenly among diverse fields, from security to domestic politics. It is noteworthy to see the emergence of cultural factors — beyond the traditional rationalist research programs endemic to security and economics — during the same period. In this context, a biased concentration of papers on East Asia and/or Korean affairs can be interpreted as a symbolic phenomenon that implies a surge of self-reflexivity and a micro-perspective at the level of the state and/or region, while Korean scholars have not produced many theoretical studies.

FILLING THE GAP: SUGGESTIONS FOR MORE ROBUST INDIGENOUS THEORY

When Albert Hirschman criticized a work on Latin America for being under the heavy influence of an academic paradigm, his point was that we should not fall into the trap of having a “compulsion to theorize.” This compulsion tends toward reductionism to one or a very few stereotypes that would throw us off the course of true understanding. That is, our “paradigmatic thinking” makes us concentrate on developing general laws, universal models, and expedient paradigms. According to Hirschman, our interest in the “uniqueness and scientific opaqueness” of large-scale events drives us to move away from generalization. History, he argued, accelerated sometimes suddenly so that it exposed non-repeatable and unpredictable situations that may rebuff any scientific methodological comprehension. The point Hirschman wanted to stress was our passion for what was possible and to seek out an awareness of the uniqueness of social phenomena. Those unique situations defied the “laws of change” and a “reliable blueprint” manifested by human intelligence (Hirschman 1970, 335-343).

Hirschman’s critique of the rationalist/positivist paradigm represented an

extreme position on the full spectrum of research traditions. What he stood for was an "idiographic" approach; one that stressed the importance of different histories and experiences and tried to understand those histories in and of themselves, without any move towards generalization. Social scientists eager to make general statements when they study something, may not be persuaded by Hirschman's logic. However, simultaneously, the field of IR, as well as other fields of political science, has accumulated a lot of counter-examples that fail to obey generalizations. If we call the scholars who dogmatically believe in scientific methods and nomothetic properties of knowledge a "positivist" then we can assume a linear spectrum between an extreme idiographic position and an extreme positivist position. The voices for indigenous theory in South Korea's IR academic community intend to tip the balance between these two extreme approaches in favor of Hirschman's position. Now, since we have found a sizable gap between those voices and the real world of research, let us discuss the next three suggestions to help further the efforts of those voices calling for indigenous theory development.

SCOPE OF THEORY: AN INDIGENOUS THEORY FOR WHAT?

Whenever social scientists face complex realities, they have further focus on the "otherness" by looking at the differences between themselves and the people outside the boundaries of their system. Scholars in the West have broadened the range of social science inquiry to include others with enriched meanings. Another method for them to better account for complexity was to increase an "actor-centeredness" that concentrates on micro-level motivations, life histories, particular institutions, and subcultures (Hannerz 1986, 365). Although Western social scientists started with their own identities and problem-sets, the development and enlargement of 'their' social sciences were rooted deep in the "universal relevancy" that they established across different locations and time periods. This is why we have to be careful in how we define the term 'theory' when we are seeking 'indigenous' theory development. Now, based on reflexive motivations, non-Western scholars are calling for a more 'indigenous theory' that seems like a contradiction: they want an 'indigenous' approach that concentrates on individual histories and contexts while looking for 'theory' that is an abstract and generalizable statement coming out of those particulars.

What should we do if we want to overcome the contradictions embedded in the call for indigenous theory development? Perhaps we may have to start with the distinction between two different meanings of theory. One is the positivist's notion of theory, which Kenneth Waltz summarized in his book *Theory of International Politics* (1979). The other is the 'critical' notion of theory described

by Robert Cox as an alternative way for developing theories (Cox 1986). As far as the positivist notion is concerned, as Waltz claimed, a theory should have a "bounded realm" or domain, some law-like regularities within the realm, and a way of explaining observations (Waltz 1979, 116). The survey results discussed in the second section of this paper show that IR studies in South Korea did not fulfill all of the positivist's conditions for theory. As Waltz underscored the "deductive" nature of theory that matches our observations of "repeated and enduring patterns" in international politics, the current tendency of IR scholars to concentrate on empirical studies may not satisfy the positivist's specification of what is theory.⁷

On the other hand, at least in terms of Cox's criteria of a theory, the gap between the voices for indigenous theory development and the current research being produced in South Korea is reduced. This is because Cox extended the criteria of theory further away from the positivist's notions of what is theory by including the "critical" elements existing in mainstream theories and by explicating the hierarchical power structures embedded in those theories. This point corresponds well to the postcolonial perspective concentrating on self-reflexivity because it is based on recognizing the implicit power relations upon which knowledge exists. The voices for indigenous theory in South Korea seem to share this notion of "criticality" suggested by Cox (1986, 207-209). Many Korean scholars have searched for a 'critical theory' in IR beyond the "problem-solving theory" that has overshadowed their ontological puzzles and epistemological orientations.

According to 'critical' notions of theory, while we acknowledge the relevancy of the voices calling for indigenous theory, it does not mean that we may accept any and all kinds of progress of real-world research in terms of those voices. Even with almost two-thirds of the research papers in the *KJIR* meeting these criteria, Korean scholars have never had enough opportunities to construct any purely indigenous theory. Only one-third of the research papers-half of which were just empirical applications and tests of existing theories-have revealed their preferences for theory-building or theory-testing. As such, we know that IR scholars should have more chances to develop all kinds of indigenous theories if they would like to satisfy the longings of the IR academic community for its "own" the-

⁷ There is another perspective on the requirements of theory, which emphasizes the provision of "causal mechanisms" to explain the relationship between variables and outcomes (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, 85-87). While this is a more persuasive version for defining theory, this paper does not cover this perspective as it focuses on the alternative, postcolonial notion of theory vis-à-vis the conventional notion of positivist theory.

ory. The more Korean IR scholars are engaged in conducting empirical studies with standardized methods and paradigms, the more they will lose opportunities to solve “fundamentally important international political problems” (Waltz and Fearon 2011, 10).

At the same time, the urge to develop indigenous theory reveals the current straitjacket of an international division of intellectual labor. This was clear in the survey of the *KJIR*, as papers were more empirically-oriented than theory-motivated. As mentioned by Alatas, this is a typical pattern for the international structure of an intellectual division of labor in which less developed countries take part in knowledge production only at the theory-testing or empirical, rather than at the theory-building, levels. The pattern of a stratified and hierarchical division of labor among different geographical locations has been so dominant that scholars do not seem to be able to overcome this situation easily. As many postcolonialists have claimed, “diverse realities” in different places in world politics outside Europe and North America have been integrated into the “standard of civilizations” in the last century. The most serious side-effect of this history, according to those postcolonial scholars, is the habit of having “no geographical referent” of North American or European academic works. Mainstream academic research has compelled all participants to include the geographical referent only when they deal with “other” societies (Baber 2003, 615-616).

So, it is important for non-Western scholars to deconstruct the existing hierarchical relationship of knowledge production that has been prevalent in IR. This is still necessary even if they replace the positivist definition of theory with a critical definition. Without changing their attitudes in dealing with existing theories, non-Western scholars may not have enough opportunity to escape from the straitjacket of those Western-oriented, dominant paradigms. Then, the voices calling for indigenous theory would be of no avail. We have to ask why? and for what reasons? do we need our own ‘indigenous’ theory. With no answers to these questions, any attempt to develop such IR theories will be futile. The survey of the second section clearly shows these implications.

NOT SHOUTING BUT FIGHTING: A PROPOSAL FOR PRACTICAL POST-COLONIAL THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Whereas the voices calling for indigenous theory stand for an alternative to existing theories, we may have to be cautious when determining the speed and range of the mission. Postcolonialism has become a radical and progressive project for many writers, scholars and politicians throughout the world. While there are advantages to these postcolonial projects in diverse situations, it has been estimated that those projects have failed to address the right implications of histori-

cal moments and conditions. Postcolonial movements, according to various critics, should be preceded by the project of “decolonization,” in which many questions proposed would be resolved by existing “colonial” responses. This would set the real “conditions” for postcolonial theory development based on greater autonomy and independence (Goss 1996, 248).

The same can be said of the case of postcolonial IR communities where the passion for indigenous theory development has become enflamed. While the demand for autonomous and independent theory makes these IR communities unique in their ontological motivations and puzzles, strategically it would be more efficient for those scholars not to uncritically embrace alternative frameworks. As we observed in the case of the analysis of *KJIR* articles, the pure increase in the number of research papers does not confirm any substantive development of IR theories. In the context where the majority of papers still are empirical works without distinct theoretical motivations, the best strategy for postcolonial scholars might be an ‘interim’ approach rather than a sudden turn away from existing theories. Any interim work might include cross-comparisons between existing theories and critical alternatives, theory testing using non-Western cases, a revision and/or enlargement of existing theories, and a meta-theoretical discourse involving competing paradigms.

In this context, Eun and Pieczara’s suggestion for “active engagement” in existing scholarship is desirable for achieving this goal of employing an interim strategy. According to these authors, IR scholars have been socialized by a pressure to publish so that they are playing the “same game” as Western scholars. This has made them less motivated to work on their own indigenous theories. In order to increase their prospects for more dialogue and mutual learning, the voices calling for indigenous theory development should be accompanied by learning with a “responsive posture towards existing IR theories” (Eun and Pieczara 2013, 371-372). It is not that, to make any progress one should start from scratch, but rather that progress will originate from a mixture of past research techniques, data accumulation, and theory development. As such, the recent rise in the trends of testing and applying theories that we observed in the survey of the *KJIR* is promising, even though their percentage currently is not large (less than twenty percent collectively).

It is intriguing, in this sense, that Kyung-Man Kim warned against the kind of imprudent postcolonialism that has dominated social sciences in South Korea, similar to what other countries in the Third World have experienced. According to Kim, those postcolonial scholars, including Kang Jung In and others who have declared a holy war against Eurocentrism, have committed the same mistakes in presenting their proposals within the established fields of global knowledge with-

out any effort to implement meaningful alternative research. This critique may be applied to the field of IR, too, because the voices calling for indigenous theories coming from a postcolonial perspective have not been sufficiently represented by real-world research published in the *KJIR*. In a situation where most scholars are conducting their empirical research without theoretical frameworks to guide them, or just importing Western-generated theories for testing new cases, the first thing to do for indigenous theory development is to return to the existing playground and fight mainstream theories with an eye to winning victories over them (Kim 2015, 89-92).

Kim's critique provides us with the valuable advice that we have to be cautious in challenging the dominant knowledge paradigms and theoretical perspectives. What we have to do first is not to "shout" louder in our calls for indigenous theory, but rather to "fight" against those existing imported theories. Only after surviving and winning those fights will it be possible for non-Western scholars to begin their work in earnest to develop indigenous theories. In this context, it is strange that so many Korean scholars shout for indigenous theory development even though there have been so many studies on their "own" country. What is missed in this contradictory situation is the "conceptual resources" that are required for developing indigenous theories (Kim 2015, 93-94). The same can be said of the field of IR, in which louder voices have called for anti-Eurocentrism and postcolonialism. The impending job in this critical perspective should not be more raised voices, but rather more practical approaches.

The progression of our search for knowledge depends more on rigorous theories than on empirical tests. The social sciences, including the field of IR, are most useful not when researchers and practitioners use their empirical details, but when they identify the "causal forces" that drive human behavior and shape their societies (Frieden and Lake 2005, 137). Those causal forces can be found in many empirical cases, which should be arranged within proper theories, and vice versa. The caveat is that we should be careful not to immerse ourselves in indigenous theorization without detailed implementation plans. It is recommended that we find an interim way to join with existing theories before developing alternatives. We have to shift emphasis from what makes us "distinct" as scholars to what makes us "common." This is because the progress and accumulation of our knowledge does not come from theological paradigms or voices, but from our genuine motivations and the interesting questions we ask (Lake 2011, 473-474).

LOOKING FOR A TRADING ZONE

As we have discussed an interim strategy for any successful postcolonial project of indigenous theorization, the final mission should be focused on the method for

managing multiple theories in the field of IR. The notion of a “trading zone” may be a good starting point in setting a space for the “contours” of intellectual exchange (Tickner 2003, 324). This space would provide flexible and multidisciplinary opportunities for comprehending a range of subcultures. Also, the zone will create a new language of academic exchange that can facilitate communications among different perspectives.⁸ This trend would deconstruct postcolonial intellectuals’ professions of “hybridity” between the postcolonial and the colonial (Dirlik 1994, 342). That is, the trading zone is necessary for any indigenous theorization as a forum for diverse voices from diverse paradigms to communicate with many diverse audiences. The emergence of alternatives would lead to a bottom-up path for indigenous theory development.

The place of trading zone signifies our efforts to move out of the so-called “House of IR” that has been established and maintained by the “founding fathers” of the field, such as the West’s neorealists.⁹ The “House of IR” distinguishes between people who are “in,” those who are “out,” and those who are “on the border.” In this way, it hierarchically divides space according to the house members’ participation in, and complicity with, the dominant mode of production and the uneven distribution of resources and wealth across the world. Many Korean scholars have acknowledged this tyranny of the “House of IR,” but they could not extricate themselves from being trapped by it. This critical understanding leads us to support an alternative framework of “worldism,” which allows collective and relational premises among participants in multiple worlds of politics. People can ask new questions about themselves and what they are looking for instead of merely continuing to support the power structures of the “House of IR” (Agathangelou and Ling 2004, 21-23).

As we move from the “House of IR” to the trading zone of hybridity, we have to look at a more effective way of theorizing that can be found in the development of mid-level theories. Almost thirty years have passed since the Third Debate was summarized by Yosef Lapid, and yet discussions of epistemic diversity do not seem to be relevant these days. Since that epistemic turn, commensurability seems no longer to be possible among diverse paradigms in the social sciences. In this hard time of incommensurability, an efficient strategy is likely to be found in

⁸ Arlene Tickner lists three elements of post-Cold War IR theorization — culture, hybridity, and everyday life — from a Third World perspective (2003, 302-308).

⁹ The notion of a “colonial household” originated from Ann Laura Stoler who studied the colonial rule of the Dutch and French in Indonesia and Indochina. Her interests included the emergence of racial categories of identity and the processes of naturalization for colonial governance (Stoler 2010, 41-78).

an alternative approach that seeks to develop mid-level or eclectic IR theories. The possibility of mid-level theory development can be evaluated based on the following criteria: (1) mid-level theories should not defend any single set of assumptions because they are developed to address specific 'problems' in global politics; (2) mid-level theories may violate the level-of-analysis rule in IR because they sustain different levels based on differing — and constantly changing — contexts; (3) mid-level theories mix and match assumptions, issue areas, units, interests, making this sort of theorizing 'eclectic'; and (4) mid-level theories should have explicit micro-foundations of "causal mechanisms" that connect individual motivations and activities to their outcomes in a coherent manner (Lake 2015, 572-573).¹⁰

Even though our colonial heritage cannot hold those current voices against it, the postcolonial voices are also likely to be constrained by their own histories. That is, without any dominating structure that they want to destroy, their voices calling for indigenous theory development would be limited to a very narrow space and time. Then, at some point in theory development, scholars may have to ask themselves about the applicability of their own indigenous theories. This returns our discussion back to the choice between idiographic and nomothetic approaches in producing knowledge. What is the best option on the spectrum to take between these two extremes, since we cannot expect to find the "holy grail" of a universal theory of IR? Perhaps the second-best choice for us is to find a "lexicon for translating otherwise incommensurable theories" and making them mutually intelligible (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 466). This would be the most promising alternative, a so-called "analytic eclecticism" to push through the current roadblock in our path to indigenous theory development.

For the time being, we may not need to directly proceed to the goal of indigenous theorization. We may have to negotiate within the division of labor between different paradigms, regions, and peoples (Sil 2000, 515). We may have to bypass our relativistic pessimism over the unity of theories, while avoiding the trap of grand theories in IR. Indigenous theory development does not seem to provide any practical, effective way to achieving the ultimate goal of a postcolonial research program at the moment. The mixed strategy of mid-level theory development is likely to be a desirable alternative for making up for the pathologies of current IR studies (Sil 2000, 519). As academic communities have maintained

¹⁰ According to David Lake, there are two cases of mid-level theory progressing within a research program: one is open economy politics and the other is democratic peace theory (2015, 574-577).

the contradictory processes of “domination-subordination” dynamics for so long, their negative effects have become severe in “silencing” many others in the postcolonial world. Therefore, an “intellectual infrastructure” that allows for the complexity of voices with their own identities and epistemologies must be created (Vessuri 2014, 308). Only under these conditions would it be possible to build a foundation for these diverse and reflexive theories to co-exist.

The motivations for cultivating local, indigenous knowledge have been neither unilateral nor exclusive. This is because many scholars in the postcolonial movement have tried to follow the ‘scientific’ way of building their ‘own’ knowledge bases. They have wanted to make local knowledge compatible as much as possible with Western mainstream thinking (Briggs and Sharp 2004, 666-667). We can find here an optimistic solution for the academic impasse in postcolonial attempts, as they show the possibility of collaboration between incommensurable paradigms. This is also the most desirable academic work among those that have been attempted by East Asian scholars who have tried to find relevant places within mainstream theories (Acharya and Buzan 2010, 14). Many difficulties and obstacles are expected along the path towards indigenous theorization, but principles should evolve as they have done so up until now.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The voices calling for indigenous theory have been so persistent and passionate in the IR community of scholars in South Korea during the last 10 years. This paper reviews the implications of these raised voices and tests the gap between calls to action and the real-world research they have produced. The voices have followed the trend for a postcolonial paradigm, while also being influenced by an anti-Eurocentrism that has been prevalent in social science communities outside of Europe and North America. The movement for indigenous theory represents a meaningful search for theoretical identity and academic autonomy based on the self-reflexive re-evaluations of the theoretical works produced thus far. Considering the past history of importing and testing Western theories for more than a half century, now is the right time for South Korea’s IR community to look back on the past to find an alternative path forward. Like other social science fields, IR in South Korea has proposed enough motivations for undertaking its own theorizing.

However, the survey of the *KJIR* shows a discrepant result from the ambitious mission for indigenous theory development. For the period surveyed, the pub-

lished articles were mostly of empirical studies with few theoretical connections. Most articles seemed to be satisfied with producing a “descriptive” level while ignoring the relevancy of their contents to other regions. In this type of research, the bias towards area studies in South Korea marks another feature in the study of IR. This demonstrates the restricted range of IR literature centering on individual states rather than on structural or systemic dimensions. At the same time, many scholars of IR in South Korea have concentrated on analyzing state-level data rather than regional or international data. This also confirms that the academic efforts of Korean scholars have not yet achieved a general ‘theory’ for comprehending the behavior or historical trajectories of other regions or other states. This point is also confirmed by the bias inherent in those articles towards study of the two Koreas and East Asian countries as their primary research targets.

All of these observations show a gap between the voices for indigenous theory and the real-world patterns of research of Korea’s IR community of academics. In consideration of this, the paper discussed three points regarding further possibilities for developing indigenous theory. First, we may have to think in more diverse ways about how to define and evaluate theory. This may include overcoming conventional notions of theory, but we have to be careful in proposing a ‘critical’ way for replacing existing paradigms. Second, we should evaluate existing theories before reflexively calling for alternatives. That is because we do not have any direct or obvious pathway forward for indigenous theory development. A second-best option may be found in a mixed strategy that seeks mid-level theory development as an “interim” solution between the current mainstream theories and the indigenous cases to test those theories. While no solution yet seems perfect, there is no better answer than this available to break the deadlock thus far.

REFERENCES

- Agathangelou, Anna M. and L. H. M. Ling. 2004. “The House of IR: From Family Power Politics to the Poisies of Worldism.” *International Studies Review* 6, 21-49.
- Alatas, Syed Farid. 2003. “Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labor in the Social Sciences.” *Current Sociology* 51(6), 599-613.
- Archarya, Amitav and Barry Buzan. 2010. “Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory?” In Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and*

- Beyond Asia*. London: Routledge, 1-25.
- Baber, Zaheer. 2003. "Provincial Universalism: The Landscape of Knowledge Production in an Era of Globalization." *Current Sociology* 51(6), 615-623.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckman. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Briggs, John and Joanne Sharp. 2004. "Indigenous Knowledges and Development: A Postcolonial Caution." *Third World Quarterly* 25(4), 661-676.
- Connell, Raewyn. 2007. *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cox, Robert W. 1986. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." In Robert O. Keohane ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Darby, Phillip and A. J. Paolini. 1994. "Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism." *Alternatives* 19, 371-397.
- Dirlik, Arif. 1994. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism." *Critical Inquiry* 20, 328-356.
- Eun, Yong-Soo and Kamila Pieczara. 2013. "Getting Asia Right and Advancing the Field of IR." *Political Studies Review* 11, 369-377.
- Fahim, Hussein and Katherine Helmer. 1980. "Indigenous Anthropology in Non-Western Countries: A Further Elaboration." *Current Anthropology* 21(5), 644-663.
- Frieden, Jeffrey A. and David Lake. 2005. "International Relations as a Social Science: Rigor and Relevance." *Annals, AAPSS* 600, 136-156.
- Goss, Jasper. 1996. "Postcolonialism: Subverting Whose Empire?" *Third World Quarterly* 17(2), 239-250.
- Hannerz, Ulf. 1986. "Theory in Anthropology: Small Is Beautiful? The Problem of Complex Cultures." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28(2), 362-367.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1970. "The Search for Paradigms as a Hindrance to Understanding." *World Politics* 22(3), 329-343.
- Hoffmann, Stanley. 1977. "An American Social Science: International Relations." *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 106(3), 41-60.
- Honneth, Axel. 2008. *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kang, Jung In. 2004. *Beyond the Shadow of Eurocentrism* [In Korean]. Seoul: Acanet.
- King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Kim, Kyung-Man. 2015. *Global Knowledge Fields and Symbolic Violence: A Critical Reflection on Social Science in Korea* [In Korean]. Seoul: Munhak-Dongne.
- Kim, Yong-gu. 2003. "The History of IR Studies." In the Korean Political Science Association ed., *The Fifty-Year History of the Korean Political Science Association: 1953-2003* [In Korean]. Seoul, KPSA.
- Lake, David A. 2011. "Why 'isms' Are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments to Understanding and Progress." *International Studies Quarterly* 55, 465-480.
- Lake, David A. 2015. "Theory Is Dead, Long Live Theory: The End of the Great Debates and the Rise of Eclecticism in International Relations." *European Journal of International Relations* 19(3), 567-587.
- Lapid, Yosef. 1989. "The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positive Era." *International Studies Quarterly* 33(3), 235-254.
- McClintock, Anne. 1992. "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'." *Social Text* 31/32, 84-98.
- Min, Byoung Won. 2007. "International Relations Theories and Korea: A Critical Review and Some Suggestions." *Korean Journal of International Relations* 46 [In Korean] 37-66.
- Mohan, Giles and Kristian Stokke. 2000. "Participatory Development and Empowerment: The Dangers of Localism." *Third World Quarterly* 21(2), 247-268.
- Neufeld, Mark. 1993. "Reflexivity and International Relations Theory." *Millennium* 22(1), 53-76.
- _____. 1995. *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1995. "Objectification." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24(4), 249-291.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 1984. "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26(1), 126-166.
- Sil, Rudra. 2000. "The Division of Labor in Social Science Research: Unified Methodology or 'Organic Solidarity'?" *Polity* 32(4), 499-531.
- Sil, Rudra and Peter J. Katzenstein. 2010. "Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms across Research Traditions." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2), 411-431.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2010. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tickner, Arlene. 2003. "Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World." *Millennium* 32(2), 295-324.

- Vessuri, Hebe. 2014. "Global Social Science Discourse: A Southern Perspective on the World." *Current Sociology Monograph* 63(2), 297-313.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. and James Fearon. 2011. "A Conversation with Kenneth Waltz." *Annual Review of Political Science* 15, 1-12.

[Received October 24, 2016; Revised November 23, 2016; Accepted December 1, 2016]