



Review of “Is Commanding Korean a Source of Competitiveness?: An Analysis of Publications in English by Korean Economics Professors Affiliated with Korean Universities”

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Economists define globalization as the integration of markets through international trade, migration, and investment. Globalization leads to the equalization of prices and the division of labor. Products are evaluated at international prices, and countries specialize in areas where they have a comparative advantage.

The same occurs in the market of ideas. When a discipline becomes globalized, scholars are evaluated by a single measure—their contribution to the common problems of world academia. The methodological approach of economics makes this possible. Economists concentrate and are sometimes obsessed with scientific hypothesis testing. In economics, every question is required to be presented in a verifiable form. There is also the division of labor. Economists at top-tier institutions set the agenda in economic research and come to a consensus regarding what questions are to be solved. As English-speaking countries, especially the United States, lead economics and all social sciences, this tendency has only intensified. Therefore, writing academic papers in English means much more than a choice of language. It means that the research topic is selected to appeal to an international audience.

Reading “Is Commanding Korean a Source of Competitiveness?: An Analysis of Publications in English by Korean Economics Professors

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Affiliated with Korean Universities,” one can understand how Korea experienced similar changes. Authors Duol Kim and Hann Kim explore how and why over the last two decades an increasing number of economics papers by Korea-based scholars have been written in English, even as a decreasing number of these papers address topics related primarily to the Korean economy. Utilizing the conventional supply-and-demand framework and econometric methods, the authors provide a good overview of the globalization of economics research in Korea and make useful policy suggestions, primarily a call for more data availability.

Examining the comprehensive data from the Korean Researcher Information, the authors first demonstrate that the share of English-language articles has increased significantly over the past two decades. The authors then focus their analysis on empirical papers to investigate how language choice is associated with topic choice. After showing how the share of articles addressing Korean subjects has steadily increased, they demonstrate how this phenomenon was largely driven by Korean-language publications. They posit that a scholar’s expertise in Korean subjects or facility with Korean did not increase their “competitiveness” in global competition. To lend more credibility to this conjecture, the authors then undertake a regression analysis. This analysis focuses on separating the time trend and subject-related factors in explaining the increase in international publications. They find that papers are less likely to be published in English when they address subjects related to the Korean economy. Further, they find that such a tendency has only intensified over the last two decades, indicating that Korean economists choose non-Korean subjects when they target international journals.

What makes Korean economists hesitate to write in English about their own economy? The authors find a primary reason to be poor data availability, though they do not explain why it is difficult to obtain data commonly used in economic research or compare such challenges in Korea with other countries. Because the authors believe this lack of data access is a crucial factor, they call for policy interventions to encourage Korea-related empirical studies in international journals, such as providing more financial support and opening more government-produced data to

scholars. They suggest that making historical microdata public could be the first step. Taking the example of the United States population census, they demonstrate how privacy-related issues can be resolved and how the provision of more data might advance academic research and bring forth new policy insights.

This paper delivers a meaningful message. The authors think that the Korean economy and its economic miracle can still attract much research attention. This implies that the incentives for researching and writing about the Korean economy in English are never small. However, the lack of data access, the authors argue, lowers the quality of such research and therefore the likelihood of being published in international journals. Labor economics would be a subfield that illustrates this argument. Many empirical studies in English by Korean economists deal with education because there exist abundant data, including test scores, type of schools, and student and teacher characteristics.

By contrast, traditional topics, such as the labor supply of individuals and the employment behavior of firms, have suffered from a lack of consistent data. In this regard, the Korea Labor Institute contributed much by launching several panel data series for individuals (Korea Labor and Income Panel Study) and firms (Workplace Panel Survey). Because these surveys follow the same subjects over time, economists are able to control for pre-existing conditions and examine the causal effects of policies or external shocks. This kind of improvement could have occurred more broadly if the government had systematically opened up more data, though this may never be an easy task. The authors make a practical suggestion here by calling for lifting barriers on historical data, where privacy is a less sensitive issue and the costs associated are not high, which then might prove a touchstone for more possibilities regarding more contemporary data.

This paper offers an excellent overview of recent developments in the field of economics in Korea and makes a compelling suggestion. However, several points require elaboration and more supporting evidence. First, readers will want to learn more about the drivers behind the growth in studies in international publications by Korean-based scholars of the results of their economics research. In Tables 6, the authors attribute much of this

to a "time trend," but this is only a technical term. I believe they attempt to elaborate this with a supply-and-demand framework. They attribute the growing number of English-language publications on Korean subjects to the rising knowledge demand for Korea. They also interpret the stagnating share of non-Korean subjects as possibly reflecting a supply-side factor: self-selection of non-Korean topics by talented Korean economists.

I think the authors could have provided more explanation here. While the authors think that there is consistent demand for understanding the Korean development experience, they do not provide supporting evidence of this demand. Economists try to answer universal questions and hunt for the best examples that might help answer them. Is Korea still the best case study when China, a bigger country, also achieved rapid economic development? And if so, what makes Korea an interesting subject? There could be several reasons: the importance of initial institutional setting after independence, the role of market mechanisms and policy deliberation during the 1960s and 1970s, and the effect of democratization on the economy. But how can one say these topics actually gain attention within the society of economists? Any proof will require more qualitative and quantitative evidence.

The same might be said about supply. Are talented Korean economists reluctant to deal with Korean issues because it lowers the likelihood of being published in international journals? There is a lack of explanation to support this claim, such as the testimony of a prominent economist. There are other possibilities as well. As is well known to Korean scholars, the Korean government and universities promoted the increase in international publications—so-called SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) publications—over several decades. The problem is this policy drive focused on quantity over quality. Because Korea has a different institutional background from other developed countries, Korean economists should make greater efforts at explaining and proving the meanings of their research topics to foreign economists. By contrast, there is much available data and proven methodologies for the United States and Europe. Naturally, more Korean scholars will tap into topics that promise publication in a short period of time.

So whither economics in Korea? This may be another topic on which

readers would want to hear from the authors. I began this discussion with the analogy of economic globalization. International trade improves the welfare of participating countries by allowing them to import cheaper and better goods. However, it can also force developing countries to concentrate on their current comparative advantage and thus lose the opportunity to develop more advanced industries in the long run. The globalization of academic research can pose the same risk to the Korean economics community. If Korean economists are reluctant to deal with Korean subjects, the country's economic problems will remain in the realm of specificity, and socioeconomic problems will become more difficult to solve.

Recent economics studies have suggested a new perspective on long-term economic capacity-building beyond the static view focusing on comparative advantage. This view argues that unlike the West, in countries with weak institutional bases, market imperfections exist, and ordinary economic policies are more likely to cause distortions than efficiency. Therefore, strategic and well-designed policies can utilize externalities and the spillover effects between sectors, helping improve economic capabilities across the board. From these arguments, I find another analogy to the development of Korean social sciences. The most important lesson will be that encouraging individual scholars to pursue short-term profits will not secure global competitiveness over the long run. For Korean themes and contexts to have universal appeal, collective efforts are needed from a long-term perspective.

The first step would be to identify upstream academic areas that reflect the Korean institutional characteristics and deserve strategic investment. An example is universal social insurance coverage and the comprehensive data it generates. If the data is provided to the academic community in the appropriate form, it will open up new research possibilities on many fronts, from income distribution to socioeconomic mobility and labor market dynamics. However, the disclosure of the data itself does not mean that this possibility becomes a reality. It will be necessary to form a group of scholars who pursue a common goal: finding universality from particularity with the applications of modern social science methodology, and thus helping to solve social problems through evidence-based policies.