

The Development of Slavic Studies in Korea: Past and Present

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Russian Studies in the Past (before 1945)

Russian Studies in Korea can be traced back to the very final stage of the Yi (Chosun) Dynasty when Chosun was compelled to make an agreement to open its relations with Imperial Japan in 1876. In other words, when the Yi Dynasty was forced to open its foreign relations by Imperial Japan, it started to be interested in other powers including Russia, China, and the US. Finally, there was an agreement of Friendship and Commercial Treaty between the Yi Dynasty and Imperial Russia in May 1884. By the early 20th century Russian studies in Korea could be carried out in order to balance Imperial Japanese influence on the Korean peninsula, in general.

During the Japanese control of the Korean peninsula from 1910 up to 1945, Russian studies in Korea could be described as having the general tendency of a pro-Russian position (e.g. Marxism, Leninism and Soviet party) against Imperial Japan in most ways. Thus, Russian studies in Korea during this period could provide Koreans with a theoretical principle to be independent from the Japanese colonial control of the Korean peninsula. As a result of this, for example, there emerged a Korean Communist party in 1925. Nevertheless, there were obvious severe restrictions to develop Russian studies in Korea under the rule of Imperial Japan.

Slavic Studies during the Cold War Era (1945–1991)

Russian studies in Korea underwent a big change in momentum after the liberation from Japanese rule in 1945. There were two perceptions of the Soviet Union greatly affecting the development of Russian studies in the Korean peninsula during this period. On the one hand, pro-Soviet views had prevailed in the northern part of the Korean peninsula, leading to the establishment of a communist regime by Kim Il-Sung. On the other hand, anti-Soviet perception had been widely accepted by the US in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. In other words, ideological conflict between the US and the USSR since the end of the Second World War greatly affected the development of Russian studies on the Korean peninsula. As a result, Soviet studies in South Korea had been extremely restricted by the government based on ideological reasons, at least until Gorbachev came to power in the middle of the 1980s.

Especially, the Korean War provoked by Kim Il-Sung with the help of the Soviet Union led South Korea to ban entirely Russian studies during the Korean War. But, the perceptions of Russian studies in South Korea had started

to change slowly since the middle of the 1950s because the society realized it needed to know its enemy more to overcome North Korea and other communist countries. As a result, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) for the first time opened a department of Russian language and literature in 1954.

In the 1960s, South Korea's military regime had started to intensify anti-communist and Soviet policy, thus allowing the National Intelligence Bureau and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to focus on Soviet studies. In other words, Russian studies in South Korea during this period were led by the national agency level rather than the institute or university level.

Entering the 1970s, there emerged a new perception of Russian studies in South Korea mainly caused by the detente of West and East and there appeared several young scholars who had been educated in Russian studies in the US. Many of them (they were called the 1st generation of Russian studies in South Korea) came back to Korea and greatly contributed to the development of Soviet studies with a wide range of academic knowledge. They were deeply involved in setting up several university departments and institutes regarding research on Russian studies (e.g. Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Kyungnam University, Korea University, Hanyang University, Seoul National University, Yonsei University etc.). This also led to the establishment of governmental level institutes and non-governmental level institutes for Russian studies with national funding. However, it should be noted that the general perception of anti-Soviet (traditional or conservative) views still prevailed in Russian studies in South Korea until the late 1970s.

By the 1980s there emerged a relatively neutral or revisionist view on Russian studies in South Korea with the changing environment both at the international and domestic levels. In particular, in 1981 the International Olympic Committee's (IOC's) decision to hold the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games provided South Korea with new perceptions and interests in Russian studies in South Korean society. During the 1980s, there also emerged several new scholars and specialists on Soviet studies who had been educated in the various parts of the western world (US, Britain and France) although most of them (they were called the 2nd generation of Russian specialists) were mainly educated in the US. It is noted that in 1985 the Korean Association of Slavic Studies (KASS) was founded. Russian studies in South Korea rapidly became lively when Gorbachev started to reform Soviet society from the middle of the 1980s. By the late 1980s, making diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and other communist countries became one of the most important goals for the South Korean government. Finally, diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union in 1990 had given great incentives to Russian studies in South Korea and made it possible for Koreans to study in the Soviet Union. Indeed, Russian studies in South Korea had started to be diversified and very active due to mainly to new diplomatic relations based on Gorbachev's perestroika and new political thinking by the early 1990s.

Slavic Studies in the Post-Soviet Era (1991-2004)

The collapse of communism and the Soviet Union never appeared to have been reflected in diminishing communist and Slavic studies in South Korea by the early period of the 1990s. Many scholars studying abroad still came back to South Korea from Russia, Great Britain, Germany, France, Japan and the US. Indeed, in many respects, Russian specialists in South Korea had been highly qualified and educated from various countries, enabling the appearance of different views on Russian studies in the 1990s (they were called the 3rd generation of Russian specialists in Korea). In other words, the early 1990s saw the heyday of Russian studies in terms of producing many Russian specialists in South Korea.

However, by the middle of the 1990s Russian studies in South Korea had been rapidly downsized at the both university-level and the institute or agency-level. What was even more depressing was that the university that had built up the greatest concentration of Slavic researchers and resources, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, did not replace Russianists once they retired or left. The most important reason for this arose from the lack of actual fruitful relations between Russia and South Korea after the normalization.

By 2000 there have been changes of regional studies in South Korea. The Korea Research Foundation (KRF) has become an important body playing a key role in developing area studies, including Russian studies. To this point, there are two important projects concerning Russian studies. One is the Research Project for the Globalization in Russia's Regions (RPGRR) at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS). The other is a project for Transformation of Russia's System at Seoul National University (SNU). These two projects funded by the KRF have become the leading groups to develop (or revive) Russian studies in South Korea.

Entering the 21st century it has been continuously suggested by many scholars that there is an urgent need for research and discussion concerning the topic of 'Russia's Globalization, Regionalization and Siberia' in depth. In this respect, the RPGRR of HUFS has played a leading role in South Korea.