

Dal Yong Jin and Nojin Kwak (Eds.), **Communication, Digital Media, and Popular Culture in Korea: Contemporary Research and Future Prospects**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018, 507 pp., \$140.00 (hardcover).

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As a tribute to the 40th anniversary of the Korean American Communication Association (KACA), Dal Yong Jin and Nojin Kwak's edited volume is an ambitious, timely, and resourceful reference that covers a wide variety of ever-expanding scholarship on South Korean (hereafter, Korean) communication, journalism, media, and popular culture, conducted by ethnic Koreans or Korean nationals. With the increasing global success of Korean popular culture, exemplified by BTS's global fandom and the movie, *Parasite's* winning of the *Palme d'Or* at the 72nd Cannes Film Festival in 2019 and four categories (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best International Feature Film) at the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020, **Communication, Digital Media, and Popular Culture in Korea: Contemporary Research and Future Prospects** helps to better understand the global phenomenon from a periphery county in the global system of capitalism. Comprised of 18 chapters that review 18 research areas by KACA's established scholars, the volume receives critical acclaim, evidenced by review articles in the prestigious academic journals *Pacific Affairs* (2019) and *Korean Studies* (2018). Instead of adding another praise, I will critically review the volume, focusing on its weakness in terms of organization, content, and style. However, I find less fault with the volume's limitations and suggest ideas about how to bolster KACA's scholarship.



### Issues of Diversity

In the foreword of *Communication, Digital Media, and Popular Culture in Korea*, Peng Hwa Ang commends KACA's achievement in its "depth and breadth of communication scholars" (p. x) and their promising research. While there are many successful researchers, I am not convinced there is academic richness and diversity in members' scholarship. As many chapters indicate in the volume, their research lacks diversity and is lopsided to a certain epistemology (positivism), methodology (quantitative methods), perspective (methodological individualism), and modality of analysis (description). Furthermore, it is largely confined to functionalist research topics like communication and technology, advertising, PR, health communication, and marketing/branding. What is more troublesome is that most of the KACA scholars produce merely "theory-testing papers . . . to explain variables, to build research models, or to rationalize research ideas" (p. 14) leaving theory-building or modification efforts scarce. This passive scholarship exploits administrative theoretical orientations such as agenda setting, media framing, innovation diffusion, uses and gratification, technology acceptance model, social cognitive theory, reasoned action theory, and attribution theory. Thus, for the maturity and sustainability of the organization's scholarship, Jeong-Nam Kim, Yu Won Oh, and Narae Kim attest that the KACA "should strive to attain better scholarly diversity

through wide distributions of members' interests, research themes, theories, and approaches" (p. 35). In other words, rather than "excessive trend seeking and fast and preponderant diffusion" (p. 36) of mainstream perspectives, they recommend the organization pursue a "normative ideal of the requisite variety, or breadth, of research" (p. 36).

### **Issues of Contextualization/ Historicization**

The volume should have paid extensive attention to contextualizing and historicizing the scholarship so that readers can better understand the unique characteristics of the KACA's scholarship, if any. Despite the editors' efforts, their aim to examine the "significance of the history of each field" (p. xvii) is one thing, and each chapter's capacity to examine whether Korean scholars have paid enough attention to that dimension is quite another. Actually, not every chapter is successful in delineating how the KACA's scholarship reflects Korean communication and media studies' historical situatedness in the nation's dynamic industrial, political, and social transformations. Specifically, chapters under Part II: "Communication Systems" (chapter 4 on political communication, chapter 5 on Korean journalism, and chapter 6 on communication and technology) examine recent issues and phenomena related to the Internet and "newer" media, ignoring traditional media. Chapter 6, which deals with the KACA's most popular research field, is not interested in historicizing and contextualizing the uses of communication technologies but content with individualist, consumption-oriented functionalist approaches. It is contrasted to chapter 10's effort to contextualize people's digital media practices, in terms of the discursive construction of digital media that "has been signified [in a specific set of economic, social, and political factors] and how such signification processes involve particular power relations" (p. 289). In this respect, the authors of Part III: "Public Communication," which deals with strategic applications of communication media, unanimously indicate that the scholarship "should be devoted to developing and relating them in an effort to provide a more complete picture of the ongoing process" (p. 270). Thus, Su Young Choi (2018) asserts that the KACA's scholarship does not produce

critical, interdisciplinary, or interpretive contributions that tackle the issues of inequality and injustice in the rapidly changing Korean society ... [but focuses on] phenomena that have secured the attention of established institutions ... or that are justified by industrial growth. (p. 3)

In other words, by confirming hegemonic approaches, they have sacrificed the unique, alternative perspectives that their nationality, ethnicity, and/or cultural backgrounds would provide.

Put into broader sociopolitical contexts of contemporary Korean history, KACA's scholarship can be criticized with what Ahmad (1995) characterizes postcolonial intelligentsias as: a "characteristic loss of historical depth and perspective" to "rapid realignments of political [economic] hegemony on the global scale" (p. 16). Therefore, to better examine communication and media phenomena's complex interrelations with many stakeholders in society, researchers should pay critical attention to the "inseparability of politics and economy" (p. 84) along with the state's determining power in its policy-making and -implementation capacities. With Shin Dong Kim's admonition, scholars should reconsider broader structural factors in communication and media phenomena in Korea, which requires a "critical mind and reflexivity" (p. 97).

Consequently, for its refined scholarship, the KACA has to claim particularity as well as universality in its research on Korean communication, media, and popular culture, while trying to overcome hegemonic trends and epistemologies in the discipline. To further solidify a locally grounded, yet globally relevant scholarship, researchers have to reassess sociospatial dimensions of communication and media studies to treat local characteristics "(both material and symbolic) as critical contextual variables" (p. 334). To that end, Yong-Chan Kim suggests the organization should "envision building a 'Seoul School'" (p. 336) that touts characteristic Koreanness in research topics and perspectives.

### **Issues of Discipline's Subfields Organization**

To combat a common problem in an edited volume, thematic coherence, the editors should have provided a rationale on an organization of subfields by five parts: institutionalization of Korean communication, communication systems, public communication, digital media, and cultural studies. It is not because there is an intrinsic problem in the editors' effort but because the discipline itself is diverse and broad to the extent that each chapter deserves a volume by itself. In this respect, an absence of the editors' introduction in each part causes some confusion as to why a certain chapter is included in a part over the others. For example, chapter 13, "Visual Communication: Photojournalism and Beyond" is included in the Part IV: "Digital Media," and examines a range of research on an effect of visual images. Due to a paucity of visual communication in Korean media, the author simply gathers and reviews articles that contain "visual" as a keyword. However, by not discussing any Korean visual communication in digital media, he sacrifices the soundness of his scholarly endeavors. To avoid this problem, the chapter should have been included in a different part of the volume or made a clear argument on how visual communication has evolved in Korean digital media.

I am not sure why chapter 14, "Intercultural Communication," is included in Part V: "Cultural Studies." Not only does it not retain any basic orientation or rationale from the Birmingham School or the Frankfurt School, but the chapter does not examine how intercultural communication takes place within Korean contexts or interrogate how ever-changing Korean society engenders different communicative practices. Rather, the author describes Confucian configurations of Korean culture as an emic feature. While she examines etic dimensions of intercultural communication, the chapter deals with outdated or rudimentary literature that examines different interpersonal communication patterns between Americans and Koreans. Rather than suggesting future research agendas, such as implications and effects of multiculturalism, hybrid identities, Westernization, and so on in the conclusion, the author should have examined these topics in her own review.

### **Suggestion for Future Endeavors**

A single volume cannot contain enough articles from diverse subfields of communication, media, and popular culture. To address this issue and strengthen KACA's academic excellence, I suggest launching a book series, *KACA Series of Communication, Media, and Popular Culture*. This will introduce emerging members' promising scholarship and elaborate on established members' seasoned research in the field. In doing so, KACA will not only be able to publish various edited volumes on a specific research field but also promote monographs that examine the discipline from Korean perspectives. Thus, the series project will

accomplish and elaborate on this volume's aim for "lasting projects to celebrate [KACA's] historical milestone" (p. 469) to date and in coming years. The KACA's book series may be a beginning of the "Seoul School" that will surely reflect a solid reputation of Korean scholars' academic achievement and impact.

### References

Ahmad, A. (1995). The politics of literary postcoloniality. *Race & Class*, 36(3), 1–20.

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doi:10.1353/ks.2018.0021