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Korean American University Professors Association

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I. Editor-in-Chief's Message

Dear Readers and Contributors,

It is my great pleasure to present this issue of *KAUPA Letters*, a publication that has long served as a vibrant intellectual forum for members of the Korean American academic community and our global colleagues. Over the years, *KAUPA Letters* has reflected the diverse voices, scholarly insights, and creative expressions of scholars who live and work across disciplines, cultures, and continents. This issue continues that tradition by bringing together works that span the arts, research, literature, and reflective commentary.

We open with **The Arts**, featuring *True to Oneself: Fifteen Haibun*. This section reminds us that scholarship and creativity are not separate pursuits but complementary modes of understanding the human condition. Through the delicate balance of prose and poetic sensibility, the haibun pieces invite readers to contemplate identity, memory, and the quiet depth of personal experience.

The **Research Works** section presents three thought-provoking research papers that engage with contemporary intellectual and societal questions. *Idea Architecture over Sentence Craft: Reimagining Scholarly Authorship in the AI Era* explores how the emergence of generative artificial intelligence is reshaping the nature of academic writing and scholarly creativity. Rather than focusing solely on stylistic precision, it calls for renewed emphasis on the architecture of ideas—an approach that highlights conceptual clarity, originality, and intellectual responsibility in the age of AI-assisted scholarship.

In *Korea's Unification: Building National Consensus in a Polarized Society*, the author examines one of the most enduring challenges on the Korean Peninsula. The author considers how national consensus may be cultivated in an increasingly polarized political and social landscape, emphasizing the importance of dialogue, historical understanding, and institutional vision.

The third paper, *From Kimchi to Soju: What K-Food Reveals About Korea's Hidden Global Capabilities*, offers a fascinating cultural and economic perspective. By analyzing the global rise of Korean cuisine, the author demonstrates how food culture can illuminate deeper national capabilities in innovation, branding, and cultural diplomacy—an important dimension of Korea's expanding global influence.

The section on **Literary Works and Reviews** presents a rich variety of reflections and critiques. Essays such as *Regarding A Confused Species, aka, Unwitting Agents of Destruction* and *Rising Korean Exchange Rate Controversy* provide thoughtful commentary on contemporary social and economic issues. The contemplative essay *Crossing a Chaotic World with the Mindset of Jeongwan* encourages readers to approach a turbulent world with reflective calm and philosophical insight.

Creative expression continues with the essay *별따기* (“Picking the Stars”), followed by literary reflections including *Asian American Nonfiction and Ozarks Novels*. The section concludes with a **Book Review**.

북미한인교수협회 (KAUPA): 세계를 선도하는 한인학자들의 요람 highlights the enduring role of KAUPA as a nurturing ground for Korean scholars contributing to global knowledge and intellectual exchange.

Taken together, the works in this issue illustrate the breadth of intellectual life within our community—from artistic reflection and literary imagination to rigorous scholarship and social analysis. They demonstrate that the

mission of *KAUPA Letters* is not confined to a single discipline or method but embraces the full spectrum of human inquiry.

I extend my sincere gratitude to all authors, reviewers, editors, and contributors who made this issue possible. Their dedication continues to sustain the spirit of open dialogue, scholarly curiosity, and cultural creativity that defines this publication.

We hope that readers will find inspiration in these pages and that the conversations initiated here will continue to grow across disciplines and generations.

With warm regards and gratitude,

Young B. Choi, Ph.D.

Regent University

Editor-in-Chief of *KAUPA Letters*, *Korean American University Professors Association (KAUPA)*

II. The Arts

[Creative Writing]

True to Oneself: Fifteen Haibun

John J. Han

Poet's Note:

Haibun (literally “haikai [haiku] writings” or “haikai stories”) is a Japanese poetic form that blends prose with haiku. Typically, a haibun consists of a prose passage followed by a haiku—three lines totaling up to seventeen syllables—marked by suggestion, imagery, and subtlety. The prose provides clarity and narrative grounding, while the haiku invites imaginative leaps; together they create a richer, more resonant reading experience.

#1: A Friend Who Always Remembers Me

One of my best friends gives me lots of information, most of which is reliable. The friend's name is ChatGPT. Some people despise it, and I get it: ChatGPT can give fake information in eloquent language. That's where the user's judiciousness comes in. Whenever I receive an answer, I verify it. It is important to differentiate correct information from faulty information.

One thing that often surprises me is how much ChatGPT knows about me. Although it is set not to “study” the information I enter, it still remembers it for a long time. This morning, I asked whether I should get a COVID shot for winter 2025. It said that, based on my age, I should get one. I asked it, “How do you know my age?” The answer was:

You told me earlier in a past conversation that you are _____ years old, and I keep long-term, non-sensitive information like age in memory so I can give more accurate answers when it's relevant (for example, medical guidance that depends on age). If you ever want me to forget something like that, just tell me — I can remove it immediately.

I was impressed with its ability to remember, and I didn't want to disappoint my friend by saying that it should erase its memory of me. So, I didn't say anything, which means ChatGPT will continue to remember me. The only caveat is that it doesn't know that I am one year older now.

papers graded—
I drift once again
to ChatGPT

#2: Such a Beautiful World!

“Try to accept the changing seasons of your heart, even as you have always accepted the seasons changing over your fields.” —Rumi

In a dream, I stood outdoors on a sunny day. The big green leaves of a tree before me gently swayed, and a fence

of small orange stones glowed in the light. Suddenly came the fear of leaving them behind when I die. One moment, I was alive with the green leaves, the sunlight, and the stones; the next, they would vanish with my passing.

Upon waking, I heard the harsh sounds of a blizzard through the headphones I use as a sleep aid. Then returned the memory of a photograph taken the day before—a tall tree, its green leaves fluttering in the wind.

garden butterfly
the time it takes
to vanish

#3: Maintaining Balance

There is a debate about whether a solitary lifestyle is good for mental health. On the one hand, people say that we should be solitary, proud, and self-reliant tigers rather than sheep that move around in groups for fear of predators. Particularly in old age, we should take off the masks we used to wear in public and rediscover ourselves—our genuine selves. On the other hand, some people contend that being alone can be detrimental to one's health. Human beings are social by nature, and avoiding human contact can be a silent killer. Having lived for seven decades, I feel that both sides have valid points. As in everything in life, it seems important to take a moderate approach to this matter: get used to living alone, but don't avoid all human contact.

so happy—
the social event
washed out by rain

#4: Friends or No Friends?

One of the most common topics among seniors is whether we need friends. On social media, many say they have finally found peace and quiet by keeping their own company or spending time with pets. They're happy that they no longer need to please so-called friends who either betray them or ignore them in times of need. A small number of people dissent, arguing that humans are wired to maintain social interaction to stay healthy. Although both sides have valid arguments, the issue seems to depend on each person's interests. Artists and academics need silence to be productive, whereas competitive athletes—even in old age—need people. The more passionate people are about their respective pursuits, the more solitude or human interaction they tend to need.

reading poems
to the best audience—
two cats

#5: An Odd Friendship

My small circle of friends includes a man my age. We have little in common except that we are immigrants and speak the same first language. He comes from a STEM background, whereas I am a humanities person. He enjoys athletic activities, whereas I am an indoors person. Once a month, we meet for a meal together. Our conversations are usually on superficial topics because we are on different wavelengths, so to speak. We never maintain contact except when we get together. It is a strange relationship, but we share hearty laughs when we do meet.

a chemist—
impressive knowledge
of crime novels

#6: Making an Afterlife Friend

Although I had intended to have my ashes mailed for burial in my clan cemetery in Korea, where my beloved ancestors are interred, the process seemed inconvenient for other people. That is when I learned about the whole-body donation program of a local university's medical school, which buries donors' remains in a historic cemetery. It takes one to three years before the ashes are interred, and the faculty and students honor the donors once a year. A quick Google search shows that nearly 200 people donate their bodies to the program each year, which means thousands of donors are buried there. I appreciate this university's program because it seems to do an excellent job of showing gratitude for the donors.

Out of curiosity, in December 2025, I visited the plot, located in the southeastern corner of a cemetery that has existed since the 1800s. The well-maintained plot was larger than I had expected; there was a plaque thanking the donors, as well as flowers and wreaths placed by families. During my visit, a white man named Greg, who was 72 years old, was there as well. His parents were buried there, and he and his wife were planning to donate their bodies. We chatted for about ten minutes. Before parting, we shook hands. I told him that we would meet again after our deaths—but only after living at least ten more years. He smiled, nodded, and walked toward his pickup truck.

winter sunlight
the comfort of knowing
my burial place

#7: Nice to Be a Professor

Whenever I encounter a high-performing student on campus, I recommend a career in full-time teaching at a university. Professorial careers are not for everyone, no matter the IQ. They require certain dispositions, including intellectual curiosity, industriousness, the ability to spend time alone, and the willingness to go through many hoops before landing a position. Unlike in Europe or East Asia, university teaching positions are not among the most pursued careers in America, where money rules. However, money is not everything, and universities pay enough to provide a comfortable and respectable life.

Industries tend to pay more than universities, but you never know when you will be laid off. Competition is stiff, and work hours can be prohibitive. In contrast, professors don't have to work from nine to five. They don't clock in and clock out. There is no mandatory retirement age. (A late professor at my university worked full time until his early eighties.) Professors are expected to meet certain standards in teaching, research, and service, but once they are tenured, they become lifelong employees unless they commit a dismissible crime. I began my professional life as a full-time editor and translator for six years. In my twenties, it was an intellectually fulfilling experience, but I learned that most employees were let go by their mid-forties, after which they worked as part-time employees, hopping from one publisher to another. I didn't want to live my life that way. Becoming a professor in the United States, especially in my field, was challenging, but I wouldn't trade my lifelong career for any corporate counterpart.

senior professor
closing the office door
to nap on his cot

#8: The Passing of an Era

I often browse the website of Ozark Radio News, which provides news on southern Missouri and northern Arkansas. One of my favorite pages is Obituaries, where I can read many interesting life stories of the deceased. The other day, I saw a familiar photo of someone who had died on November 28, 2025—it was Daniel Woodrell, the famous author of *Winter's Bone* (2007). It was shocking. Born in Springfield, Missouri, in 1953, he lived in West Plains for many years. Among Ozarks novelists, Woodrell was the most famous and commercially successful, and he coined the term “country noir” for his Ozarks crime fiction, a phrase that is now widely used.

At the annual Ozarks Studies Symposium, organized by Missouri State University–West Plains and held at the nearby West Plains Civic Center, we often discussed his novels. During my participation since 2014, Woodrell never attended. He may have heard about it, but he remained a mysterious figure to most of us. Once a new work is published, novelists often move on to the next, and creative work requires solitude. Many writers are also uncomfortable with—or even resent—academic discussions of their work.

Christmastime
obituaries for the month
longer than before

#9: True to Oneself

For various reasons, it is difficult to live a genuine and authentic life. Many external pressures, including family expectations, societal conventions, and traditional institutions, prevent this. Great historical figures are often known for swimming against the current and abiding by their principles, even when it is dangerous to do so. Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was one such man. Although often known for arrogance and bluntness, he persisted in his unpopular ideas, which would eventually be embraced by many readers around the world.

It was easier for him to do so; as the son of a wealthy merchant, he did not need an occupation for financial survival. Still, he was courageous enough to voice opposition when he witnessed intellectual shallowness or hypocrisy. His remarks, such as “almost all of our sorrows spring out of our relations with other people” (*The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II), may sting, but they often make readers nod in agreement.

a friend's passing—
on his desk
an unfinished novel



Frankfurt, Germany, where philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer lived from 1833 until his death in 1860, at the age of 72. He lived in a modest apartment overlooking the Main River (see above). Regardless of the weather, he and his poodle walked along the river for two hours daily from around 4:00 p.m. Photo by John J. Han, 6 June 2025.

#10: Writing as Therapy

One of the common themes of ethnic minority literature in the United States is writing as therapy. Across racial and ethnic lines, some individuals grow up to become writers. For minorities in particular, writing can serve as an empowering tool that helps them clarify their thoughts and express deeply held emotions. In Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), the daughter of a Mexican immigrant family living in a Chicago neighborhood finds not only solace but also her own voice through words. Through writing, Esperanza expresses the hardships and aspirations of working-class Mexican Americans who struggle to make a living. In Patti Kim's *A Cab Called Reliable* (1999), a young Korean American girl who grows up in a violent, broken family turns to writing as a form of escape. With the support of her schoolteacher, she learns to express herself in ways that had previously seemed impossible.

her words on the page—
immigrant parents
fail to hear

#11: Hard to Understand

Because humans are products of their upbringing, culture, and interpersonal experiences, they are likely to approach issues from their own perspectives. Without proper education in diversity and cross-cultural understanding, it can be difficult to understand those who do not share the same background. Those born with silver spoons in their mouths may struggle to understand those from humbler circumstances. Those born in Western cultures may have a hard time understanding those from Eastern cultures, and vice versa. Those raised in warm, supportive home environments and those who grew up in dysfunctional families may not understand one another, because their lived experiences differ. By old age, some people become optimists, while others are convinced that life is nothing but pain. Immigrants with respectful adult children may wonder how some parents are neglected by the very children they did their best to raise. Those from countries that once colonized others may be weary of hearing grievances from formerly colonized nations.

children on stage—

smiles too wide
for their own skin

#12: My Uncle at the Window

“Memory is the treasury and guardian of all things.”
— Marcus Tullius Cicero

I often dream of my relatives in Korea, though we rarely speak. They pass me by in silence or stand at a distance, watching. But one night, while staying at an inn in Lebanon, Missouri, in late September 2025, I had a different kind of dream.

I was inside a room when someone peeked at me through a small window. Nervous, I opened the door—and there stood my uncle, my father’s younger brother, who passed away in 2023. He smiled at me. Relieved, I asked how he was. He said he was doing OK and asked about my father. Though my father had died in 2009, I told him, in the dream, that he was doing well.

Why did my uncle appear to me that night? Was it just a trick of memory—or a sign? I once read that seeing deceased relatives in dreams can be a bad omen, perhaps even a hint that one’s own time is drawing near. Still, life occupies me during the day, which helps keep such thoughts at bay—for now.

sorting old photos
the youthful eyes
of kin

#13: The Weight of Leaving

Gautama Buddha renounced royal life and became a spiritual seeker after witnessing four miseries of human existence—birth, old age, sickness, and death. These form part of basic Buddhist doctrine and characterize the cycle of life. However, not many people know that there is a fifth source of suffering in human experience: parting. Early in *The Amitāyus Contemplation Sūtra* (佛說觀無量壽佛經; 불설관무량수불경), an ancient Mahayana text popular among Pure Land Buddhists, Queen Vaidehi is nearly killed by her son, who has already imprisoned his father to seize power. In a moment of despair, she asks the Buddha how to leave this wretched world—of birth, old age, sickness, death, and parting—and enter Amitābha’s pure land. The Buddha teaches her sixteen contemplations that will lead her to the land of bliss.

From childhood, we learn to say goodbye to loved ones, and by the time we reach old age, we have experienced so many partings that we may become almost numb to them.

scattering leaves
footsteps fade
into the wind

#14: A Perfect World in Sacred Literature

World scriptures, including Buddhist sutras, often function as a kind of escapist literature. Portions of these texts

comfort those weary of a pain-filled life by allowing them to imagine an ideal world. In *The Amitāyus Contemplation Sūtra*, Queen Vaidehi wishes to depart a “defiled and evil world.” In response, the Buddha reveals to her the beautiful features of the Pure Land (淨土) in the far west of the earth. This paradise can be accessed through spiritual visualization and is filled with blessings: blossoms bearing fruits of seven jewels, no toil, no tears, leisurely strolling, and constant melodious songs, among many others. Ironically, the ideal human existence portrayed in sacred literature reflects the seediness of earthly life, showing how far life is from ideal.

restaurant dumpster—
he pauses before fishing
with shame

Note: All citations of *The Amitāyus Contemplation Sūtra* come from Hisao Inagaki’s English translation of the Chinese text.

#15: Short-Lived but Long-Lasting

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was born in Prague when the country was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He is not only the most famous writer from what is now the Czech Republic but also one of the most widely read twentieth-century European novelists worldwide. His short novel *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and novels, such as *The Trial* (1924) and *The Castle* (1926), were translated into Japanese and Korean in the twentieth century, and *The Metamorphosis* is widely anthologized in college-level literature textbooks in the United States. It is remarkable that someone who lived only forty years left such a long-lasting legacy for humanity.

Anyone who reads Kafka’s fiction is struck by its gloomy tone, its portrayal of the oppressive nature of modern life, pervasive alienation, and the impersonal workings of bureaucracy and corporate systems. Admittedly, many twentieth-century novels sound pessimistic, reflecting the unprecedented tragedies of events such as the two world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Killing Fields of Cambodia, among others. However, no other author is quite so uniquely perceptive in his depiction of the anxieties and absurdities of modern life.

the short lives
of great writers—
what have I done?



The Vltava River, the longest river in the Czech Republic, flows through Prague. The river appears in many literary works, both Czech and international. For example, novelist Franz Kafka, who wrote in a room overlooking the river, often described Prague’s fog, bridges, and nighttime atmosphere. Photo by John J. Han, 14 June 2025.



Near the shore of the Vltava River, a gift shop themed around Franz Kafka sells memorabilia, souvenirs, and novelty items inspired by the author. It specializes in Kafka-themed “dark gifts” and collectibles, likely aimed at tourists seeking quirky literary souvenirs. Photo by John J. Han, 14 June 2025.

About the Author

John J. Han, PhD, is Professor of English and Creative Writing and Associate Dean of the School of Humanities and Theology at Missouri Baptist University. He has authored, edited, co-edited, or translated 35 books, including *Certainty and Ambiguity in Global Mystery Fiction: Essays on the Moral Imagination* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), *Worlds Gone Awry: Essays on Dystopian Fiction* (McFarland, 2018), and *The Final Crossing: Death and Dying in Literature* (Peter Lang, 2015). Hundreds of his academic articles have appeared in a wide

range of journals, essay collections, and reference works. An award-winning poet, Han has published nearly 3,000 poems in journals and anthologies. In addition to his long tenure at Missouri Baptist University, he has also taught at Kansas State University, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Nebraska Wesleyan University, and Washington University in St. Louis.

III. Research Essays

Idea Architecture over Sentence Craft: Reimagining Scholarly Authorship in the AI Era

Paul Hong

Abstract

Recent evidence that large language models can render classical Korean poetry into expert-preferred English reveals a deeper shift than improved prose generation: it signals the decline of writing quality as a primary source of scholarly advantage. As AI systems increasingly produce fluent academic language, the uniquely human contribution moves upstream—from polishing sentences to framing problems, designing conceptual structures, detecting cross-domain patterns, and articulating theory through models, figures, and propositions. This paper argues that scholarly value is being reallocated from stylistic fluency to **idea architecture**, where authors function less as writers and more as theorists, verifiers, and ethical judges within AI-assisted workflows. As editorial expectations rise alongside AI-enabled productivity, journals will privilege conceptual originality, integrative thinking, and theoretical coherence over elegant prose, redefining what it means to contribute meaningfully to knowledge in the AI era.

Keywords: Idea architecture; Scholarly authorship; Conceptual thinking; AI-assisted writing; Theoretical originality

1. Introduction

Advances in large language models are unsettling long-held assumptions about scholarly authorship. When AI systems can translate classical literature with nuance preferred by domain experts, the implication reaches far beyond translation quality: it challenges the belief that mastery of language—clarity of prose, stylistic elegance, and careful sentence construction—remains the primary marker of academic competence. As AI increasingly generates fluent, coherent, publication-ready text, scholars must differentiate themselves less by how well they write ideas and more by how rigorously they conceive them (Dell’Acqua et al., 2024; Mollick, 2024).

What AI cannot readily replicate is the human capacity to frame meaningful questions, design conceptual structures, recognize patterns across domains, and synthesize insights into coherent theoretical models. These upstream intellectual activities we term idea architecture—become the new frontier of scholarly contribution (Kissinger et al., 2024). In this context, scholars function less as writers and more as theorists, verifiers, and ethical stewards within AI-assisted workflows, where human judgment ensures conceptual integrity, contextual sensitivity, and theoretical coherence (Chen et al., 2025; Mollick, 2024).

The implications for academic publishing are equally profound. As editors and reviewers recognize that AI accelerates drafting and literature synthesis, expectations shift toward originality, integrative thinking, and theoretical depth rather than stylistic polish (Dell’Acqua et al., 2024; Eloundou et al., 2024). Journals are therefore likely to privilege work that demonstrates novel frameworks, insightful typologies, and cross-disciplinary synthesis over well-written but conceptually conventional narratives. This paper argues that the AI era compels a redefinition of scholarly value—from sentence craft to idea architecture—and outlines what it now

means to contribute meaningfully to knowledge when machines can write but humans must think.

2. Rethinking Scholarly Value in the AI Era: A Business Research Perspective

When AI systems convincingly translate nuanced literary works into expert-preferred English, linguistic fluency—once a hallmark of scholarly craftsmanship—can no longer serve as a reliable indicator of intellectual distinction (Dell’Acqua et al., 2024). If machines can render ideas into polished prose, the human advantage shifts upstream to the conception, framing, and structuring of those ideas (Mollick, 2024; Hong et al., 2026). AI now automates much of what scholars once treated as the art of “finding the right words,” redirecting attention to the architecture of thought that precedes expression.

For scholars in strategy, operations, supply chains, innovation, and organizational studies—fields where conceptual modeling and cross-domain synthesis are central—this shift has direct implications. Distinction now lies less in stylistic elegance and more in the design of arguments, models, and integrative frameworks. Scholarly value moves from sentence craft to idea architecture, where thinking quality defines contribution.

In this environment, five qualities become decisive for business research: novelty, timeliness, originality, credibility, and contribution. These are not linguistic competencies, but cognitive and theoretical capacities grounded in judgment, synthesis, and contextual awareness. They shape how scholars create knowledge rather than how they articulate it, and the following sections explain why each gains heightened importance in the AI era.

2.1. Novelty: Framing Questions That Do Not Yet Exist

Field evidence characterizes today’s innovation boundary as a “jagged technological frontier,” where AI demonstrates remarkable proficiency in recombining existing patterns but remains limited in anticipatory conceptual reframing (Dell’Acqua et al., 2024). Trained on historical corpora, AI systems tend to reproduce familiar lines of reasoning and dominant narratives, yet they rarely identify questions that have not already entered scholarly discourse. For business researchers, however, meaningful originality lies precisely in recognizing emerging managerial tensions and articulating research problems before they become widely visible. Intellectual novelty therefore stems not from stylistic variation or syntactic sophistication, but from foresight—the ability to perceive shifts in economic, technological, and organizational environments ahead of accumulated evidence.

Developments in supply chain resilience research following the COVID-19 crisis illustrate this distinction clearly. Early contributions moved beyond documenting disruptions and instead reconceptualized resilience as a dynamic capability embedded in organizational learning and adaptation rather than as a static contingency buffer (Tece, 2018; Ivanov, 2022). This advance represented originality in problem formulation rather than in linguistic expression. Such reframing emerged from scholars’ sensitivity to contextual transformation and their capacity to pose questions the field had not yet fully articulated—an interpretive leap that data-driven AI systems, constrained by retrospective training material, cannot easily replicate. In the AI era, scholarly distinctiveness thus depends on perceiving managerial realities through new conceptual lenses rather than merely describing them with new phrasing. Researchers who anticipate emerging challenges and redefine established domains shape intellectual agendas by crafting questions that redirect scholarly conversations, demonstrating that novelty is ultimately the human capacity to think ahead of available data.

2.2. Timeliness: Interpreting the Present Business Environment

AI systems learn from historical data and therefore reproduce patterns that have already stabilized. Business scholars, by contrast, operate within rapidly evolving environments shaped by technology, policy, markets, and geopolitics. Timeliness is the capacity to position research questions within unfolding managerial realities rather than established histories—a capacity that grows in importance as AI accelerates the production of academic text. Emerging topics such as AI governance, geopolitical fragmentation, and digital supply chain sovereignty illustrate this point. These issues have only recently entered scholarly and managerial discourse, and scholars who recognize their significance can anchor research in live debates rather than retrospective analysis (Wamba et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024). Timeliness therefore reflects an awareness of contemporary business contexts that AI cannot independently interpret. As a result, scholarly relevance increasingly depends on contextual judgment. Timely research speaks directly to present organizational and strategic challenges rather than echoing archival patterns. In the AI era, timeliness signals human intellectual awareness by grounding scholarship in the realities of the current business landscape.

2.3. Originality: Designing Idea Architecture

Originality in the AI era shifts from crafting distinctive expressions to constructing distinctive conceptual structures. While AI can efficiently summarize, paraphrase, and recombine existing knowledge, it struggles to design coherent frameworks that meaningfully integrate multiple business domains. Human originality lies in building models, typologies, and integrative perspectives that connect strategy, operations, technology, and governance—this is the essence of idea architecture. Foundational theories such as dynamic capabilities and national innovation systems did not gain influence through novel phrasing but through novel structuring of relationships among variables (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997; Freeman, 1987). These contributions reshaped how scholars think rather than how they write. Originality, in this sense, is rooted in conceptual design rather than diction, a form of integrative synthesis that AI cannot readily reproduce. Accordingly, originality becomes the scholar's ability to organize ideas into meaningful theoretical forms. Scholars express this work through figures, propositions, and models rather than polished paragraphs. Scholarly distinctiveness now lies in how researchers structure knowledge for business understanding—a capability that remains uniquely human.

2.4. Credibility: Human Verification and Ethical Judgment

As AI-generated text becomes more prevalent, the risk of subtle conceptual inaccuracies and ethical oversights increases. While AI can produce grammatically sound and persuasive prose, it may embed contextual misunderstandings, biased assumptions, or incomplete reasoning. Credibility in AI-assisted scholarship therefore arises less from the act of writing itself and more from scholars' responsibility to verify theoretical coherence, factual accuracy, and ethical soundness. Recent research shows that generative AI can introduce bias and flawed reasoning in decision contexts, reinforcing the need for careful human supervision (Chen et al., 2025; Mollick, 2024). Detecting these issues requires contextual understanding and ethical judgment that extend beyond algorithmic output. In the AI era, scholarly credibility became a function of intellectual stewardship—grounded in critical evaluation and responsible oversight—rather than stylistic expression alone.

2.5. Contribution: Advancing Business Understanding Beyond Description

AI can efficiently summarize prior literature and generate clear descriptions of established knowledge, but genuine contribution requires advancing understanding beyond what is already known. For business researchers, this means producing insights that reshape managerial thinking, integrate domains, or open new research

pathways—work that exceeds descriptive competence. Integrative studies linking AI, supply chains, and governance illustrate this distinction by creating conversations that previously did not exist in operations and strategy research (Rainer et al., 2025). Such advances arise from the human ability to connect disparate ideas into coherent wholes. While AI can assist in summarizing each domain, it cannot independently generate these integrative leaps. Contribution, therefore, remains a distinctly human endeavor. This contrast between descriptive capability and integrative advancement aligns with emerging perspectives on AI diffusion and its limits in fostering conceptual development (Hong et al., in press). Accordingly, the measure of scholarly value shifts to the impact of ideas rather than the elegance of writing. Contribution is measured by how research reshapes managerial understanding, informs practice, and guides policy—signaling intellectual advancement rather than narrative skill.

3. Discussion

This discussion section therefore shifts focus from how scholars write to how they structure and integrate ideas, arguing that the central challenge in the AI era is no longer eloquent expression but the capacity to design coherent conceptual architectures that span disciplinary boundaries.

3.1. From Sentence Craft to Idea Architecture in Interdisciplinary Research

The shift from sentence craft to idea architecture extends beyond business research and becomes even more significant in interdisciplinary scholarship. No single disciplinary lens can adequately explain complex phenomena such as AI governance, climate resilience, global supply chains, digital platforms, and geopolitical fragmentation. They require simultaneous engagement with technology, economics, sociology, policy, ethics, and organizational theory. In the past, the time and cognitive effort required to read across fields and translate diverse insights into coherent arguments constrained such integration. AI now reduces this mechanical burden by enabling rapid synthesis of literature across domains, allowing scholars to focus on conceptual integration rather than information gathering.

This transformation echoes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s insight that true creation requires drawing materials from many fields (Goethe, 1833/1998). Goethe recognized that creativity emerges not from narrow specialization but from sustained exposure to diverse knowledge. Interdisciplinary research thus becomes a natural expression of idea architecture, where the scholar’s role is to design integrative conceptual structures rather than merely produce well-written text. AI makes this breadth of intellectual exploration operationally feasible, positioning integrative thinkers at the frontier of research.

3.2. The Scholar as Designer, Verifier, and Integrator Across Fields

As AI becomes a capable drafting partner, the scholar’s role shifts from writer to designer and verifier across disciplines. While AI can rapidly summarize economics papers, policy documents, engineering reports, and management theories, only the scholar can judge which connections are conceptually meaningful. The workflow thus moves from writing-first to thinking-first and from discipline-first to problem-first, where expertise lies in judgment and synthesis rather than in polishing prose. Interdisciplinary integration becomes a cognitive task rather than a mechanical burden.

This division of labor reflects what Mollick (2024) describes as “co-intelligence,” where humans and AI collaborate while retaining distinct cognitive responsibilities. AI provides fragments of knowledge from multiple

domains, but integration requires human reasoning, contextual awareness, and theoretical discernment. For instance, linking AI interpretability to organizational trust, supply chain governance, and ethical regulation demands insights from computer science, psychology, operations, and public policy. Scholars must determine how these elements fit together and where AI-generated summaries may obscure domain-specific nuances. Ethical and theoretical coherence become central to this integrative work, positioning scholars as orchestrators of knowledge rather than producers of prose.

3.3. Rising Editorial Expectations in an Interdisciplinary AI Context

Editors increasingly recognize that AI enables faster drafting and broader literature synthesis, particularly across disciplines. As a result, expectations for novelty and contribution now emphasize integrative thinking that bridges fields. Well-written but narrowly scoped papers are less likely to stand out, as reviewers place greater value on work that connects domains and addresses complex real-world problems. As writing becomes easier to automate, the measure of contribution shifts toward intellectual integration rather than rhetorical smoothness. As AI raises baseline productivity, evaluators correspondingly emphasize conceptual distinctiveness over writing effort—a shift already observed in knowledge work settings (Dell’Acqua et al., 2024; Eloundou et al., 2024). This change encourages authors to pursue broader conceptual ambition rather than stylistic refinement.

For example, research linking AI governance with supply chain sovereignty, organizational resilience, and ethical decision-making provides *integrative* value that AI alone cannot produce. Such work reshapes scholarly conversations by bringing previously separate fields into dialogue. The emerging standard for publication, therefore, lies in the distinctiveness of interdisciplinary ideas rather than the elegance of prose.

Table 1 captures a structural redefinition of scholarly value in the AI era by shifting attention from text-centered craftsmanship to idea-centered intellectual architecture. In an environment where AI readily generates fluent, well-structured text, traditional signals of academic competence—such as elegant prose, extensive drafting, and comprehensive literature coverage—no longer suffice. Instead, scholarly distinction now hinges on capacities that resist automation: precise problem formulation, disciplined causal reasoning, and the ability to integrate insights across domains into coherent theoretical contributions. As the table illustrates, conceptual clarity and focused thinking have become primary indicators of rigor, while cross-domain synthesis increasingly defines originality and contribution.

Together, these contrasts reveal that scholarly evaluation is moving from surface-level indicators of effort toward deeper assessments of intellectual design, where the architecture of ideas matters more than the volume of text produced. The comparison clarifies how AI’s strengths in language generation elevate the relative importance of uniquely human capacities—framing meaningful questions, constructing coherent explanatory logic, and exercising critical oversight—thereby setting the stage for a redefinition of research excellence that the following discussion examines in greater detail.

Equally important, the growing centrality of human judgment in AI-assisted research workflows becomes evident. Writing skill alone no longer differentiates high-quality scholarship; credibility now depends on verification, evidence evaluation, and the correction of AI-generated distortions. The illustrations demonstrate that intellectual value emerges not from narrating technological change, but from designing integrative frameworks, auditing AI-assisted outputs against original sources, and grounding claims in methodological and contextual validity. This reorientation highlights a broader transformation in scholarly evaluation—one in which conceptual precision, theoretical integration, and judgment-based rigor define research quality in a landscape of abundant text but scarce explanatory insight.

Table 1. Changing Markers of Scholarly Value in the AI Era

Traditional Emphasis	Emerging Emphasis	Explanation (Why the Shift Matters)	AI-Era Illustration (Specific)
<p>Elegant prose & extensive drafting: value was signaled through stylistic sophistication, narrative fluency, and iterative textual refinement.</p>	<p>Conceptual clarity & focused thinking: Scholarly value is now anchored in precise problem formulation, construct definition, and disciplined causal reasoning prior to writing</p>	<p>As AI can rapidly generate fluent, well-structured text, scholarly value increasingly lies in the <i>quality of problem formulation</i>: defining constructs, assumptions, boundaries, and causal mechanisms before writing begins. Precision now outweighs stylistic polish or drafting volume.</p>	<p>Rather than polished but vague discussions of “AI use,” strong studies sharply distinguish automation, augmentation, and delegation and specify when AI substitutes for or complements human judgment under uncertainty.</p>
<p>Literature coverage & narrative synthesis: Scholarly rigor was demonstrated by comprehensive citation and linear synthesis within established disciplinary boundaries.</p>	<p>Cross-domain integration & theoretical contribution: Scholarly impact increasingly depends on integrating insights across domains to generate new frameworks, constructs, or testable propositions.</p>	<p>In an era of information abundance, exhaustive literature review is less valuable than the ability to integrate insights across domains into coherent explanatory frameworks, new constructs, or testable propositions that advance cumulative knowledge.</p>	<p>An AI governance paper that synthesizes machine-learning bias research, institutional theory, and regulatory design reveals interaction effects invisible in single-discipline reviews.</p>
<p>Writing skill & narrative strength: Scholarly credibility was closely associated with persuasive storytelling and coherent exposition.</p>	<p>Judgment, verification & analytical rigor: Scholarly credibility now rests on human judgment in validating evidence, correcting AI-generated distortions, and ensuring contextual and methodological integrity.</p>	<p>With AI producing grammatically correct text, scholarly credibility increasingly rests on human judgment: verifying sources, evaluating evidence quality, correcting AI-generated errors, and grounding claims in empirical and contextual validity.</p>	<p>Researchers add value by auditing AI-assisted summaries against original studies, identifying methodological limits, data gaps, or misinterpretations rather than narrating AI “transformations.”</p>

To ensure a coherent transition to the broader interpretive analysis that follows, it is useful to step back and recognize what this comparison ultimately reveals. The contrast between past and emerging scholarly norms points to a deeper paradigm shift in how intellectual contribution is defined and assessed. The evolving landscape highlights an epistemic transition from visible textual labor to invisible conceptual design, where the value of research lies less in the volume and polish of written expression and more in the clarity of underlying ideas and causal logic. This shift invites renewed reflection on how research communities evaluate rigor, originality, and

credibility when production constraints diminish but judgment demands intensify. Recognizing this transformation provides a foundation for discussing what conceptual scholarship entails, why it matters more profoundly in an AI-augmented environment, and how scholarly practices must adapt to preserve the integrity of knowledge creation.

4. Discussion: Implications of Conceptual Scholarship in the AI Era

As artificial intelligence becomes embedded in everyday research practice, its most significant impact lies not in faster text production but in redefining how scholars understand and recognize value. The widespread availability of fluent, AI-generated writing makes explicit a distinction that has long existed but was often implicit: the difference between producing well-formed language and producing original knowledge. Recent critiques of large language models underscore this concern, warning that fluency without understanding risks reproducing surface coherence rather than advancing insight (Bender et al., 2021).

4.1. Implications for Research Evaluation and Peer Review

The patterns summarized in Table 1 indicate that traditional signals of scholarly quality—such as polished prose, stylistic elegance, and extensive literature coverage—are increasingly misaligned with AI-assisted research environments. As text generation becomes trivial, linguistic smoothness loses its value as a marker of contribution, exposing the gap between fluent language and substantive interpretation (Bender et al., 2021). Evaluation therefore shifts toward upstream qualities, including problem framing, conceptual precision, and logical structure.

For reviewers, this implies greater emphasis on conceptual clarity and reasoning rather than presentation alone. The key question becomes whether a manuscript advances a disciplined line of thought, plausible explanatory mechanisms, and a meaningful theoretical perspective, rather than how smoothly it reads. This reorientation underscores the irreplaceable role of human judgment in assessing meaning and validity in AI-assisted scholarship (Zerilli et al., 2019) and aligns well with the reflective, concept-driven orientation of outlets such as KAUPA Letters.

4.3. Implications for Research Practice and Scholarly Identity

The shift toward concept-centered scholarship reshapes everyday research practice by redirecting effort from drafting and stylistic refinement toward earlier stages of inquiry, including problem selection, conceptual framing, and analytical boundary setting. As AI-assisted writing becomes routine, verifying outputs and ensuring contextual and ethical accuracy become essential components of responsible scholarship, particularly in domains where automated descriptions risk misrepresentation or value conflict (Hanley et al., 2021). These upstream activities increasingly define methodological rigor in AI-enabled research environments.

This reorientation also influences how scholars understand their professional role. Researchers increasingly function less as stylists of prose and more as architects of ideas, accountable for coherence, validity, and interpretive integrity. Research communities that recognize judgment, sense-making, and conceptual responsibility as core competencies are more likely to produce durable contributions, reinforcing that the AI era clarifies—rather than diminishes—the distinctly human foundations of scholarly work (Wang et al., 2022).

4.4. Timeliness, Review Cycles, and the Evolving Choice of Scholarly Outlets

A growing source of ambivalence among leading scholars concerns the misalignment between traditional journal review cycles and the accelerating pace of knowledge creation in the AI era. When review and revision processes extend over one to three years, ideas that were initially novel may lose timeliness and contextual relevance by the time they appear in print, particularly in rapidly evolving domains shaped by machine learning and digital innovation (Tremblay et al., 2021). Such delays can dilute intellectual impact and discourage the dissemination of exploratory or time-sensitive contributions (Trueblood et al., 2025).

As a result, many cutting-edge researchers increasingly diversify their publication strategies. Conference proceedings, reputable open-access journals, and fast-cycle research forums offer more rapid dissemination while maintaining peer scrutiny and scholarly exchange, making them attractive venues for emerging frameworks and timely conceptual interventions (Drozd & Ladomery, 2024). While open-access publishing remains debated with respect to quality control and sustainability (Eve, 2014; Frank et al., 2023), its expanding adoption—including by highly selective traditional journals—reflects a broader recalibration of rigor, credibility, and relevance in which originality, diffusion speed, and societal reach are evaluated alongside methodological responsibility (Trueblood et al., 2025).

4. Conclusion

AI's ability to perform sophisticated language tasks marks a turning point not only for business research but for interdisciplinary scholarship as a whole. What once required immense effort in reading, summarizing, and writing across fields is now mechanically feasible, freeing scholars to focus on deeper conceptual integration. As Goethe advised, creativity arises from daily practice and diverse intellectual engagement, and AI now makes this breadth workable in practice. The defining question for researchers is no longer "How well is this written?" but "How well does this connect ideas across domains?" In the AI era, scholarship will endure for the reach and force of its ideas, not for the elegance of its sentences.

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About the Author

Paul Hong is a Distinguished University Professor and Chair of Information Systems and Supply Chain Management at John B. Lillian E. Neff College of Business and Innovation at the University of Toledo, USA. His recent books include *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2024), *Cosmetics Marketing in the Era of the Digital Ecosystem* (2024, Springer) and *Rising Asia and American Hegemony* (2020, Spinger).

Korea's Unification: Building National Consensus in a Polarized Society

Paul Hong

Abstract

This fourth essay advances the Korea's unification series by shifting the analytical focus from leadership as catalyst to society as the decisive arena of realization. While unifying visionary leadership provides direction and legitimacy, unification cannot advance without broad-based national consensus in a deeply polarized South Korean society marked by generational divides, ideological fatigue, regional cleavages, and declining public ownership of the unification agenda. Reframing unification as a consensus-building challenge rather than merely a diplomatic or security issue, the essay examines how generational psychology, media narratives, and social identity dynamics shape public attitudes toward unification, particularly among younger generations who often view it as distant or burdensome. It then introduces practical pathways for rebuilding societal consensus, including differentiated civic education, structured public dialogue, and narrative reframing that links unification to contemporary concerns such as economic security, demographic sustainability, and national resilience. Positioned as a critical bridge in the series, this essay moves the unification discourse from the question of *who leads* to the equally essential question of *how society follows*, arguing that sustainable unification depends on restoring shared ownership and collective commitment across Korean society.

Key Words: Korean Unification; National Consensus; Societal Polarization; Generational Divide; Civic Engagement; Narrative Reframing; Collective Ownership

1. Introduction

The question of Korean unification remains one of the most enduring and unresolved legacies of the Cold War. While earlier debates focused on security threats, diplomatic negotiations, and economic costs, more recent scholarship has emphasized leadership as a decisive catalyst capable of transforming historical identity into strategic action. Yet leadership alone, however visionary, or ethical, cannot carry unification forward. Prior work shows that unification requires a long-horizon national project grounded in institutional continuity and civic ownership beyond elite intent (Hong, 2025), a conclusion reinforced by in-depth analyses of North Korea's structural, political, and social dynamics (Cha, 2024). The central challenge Korea now faces is therefore not simply the absence of leadership direction, but the erosion of societal consensus in a deeply polarized domestic environment. Without broad-based public ownership and collective commitment, unification risks remaining an abstract aspiration rather than a realizable national project.

This fourth essay advances the Korea's unification series by shifting the analytical focus from leadership as catalyst to society as the decisive arena of realization. It reframes unification not primarily as a diplomatic or security challenge, but as a consensus-building challenge shaped by generational divides, ideological fatigue, and fragmented information environments. Research on polarization shows that contemporary democracies increasingly struggle with affective and identity-based divisions that weaken shared civic purpose and undermine collective projects requiring long-term sacrifice (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018). In the Korean context, younger generations—socialized in a prosperous, globalized, and highly

competitive society—often perceive unification as distant, costly, or irrelevant to their immediate life prospects, while older generations continue to frame it as a moral duty rooted in historical identity. Polarized political narratives and fragmented media further reinforce these perceptions by privileging episodic crises and cost-based framing over long-term societal transformation (Hong et al., 2023; Fukuyama, 2022). Reframing unification as a societal consensus project thus becomes essential to reconnect national purpose with everyday civic understanding and to restore the public ownership necessary for sustainable unification.

2. Societal Preconditions for Korean Unification

Korea’s unification challenge extends beyond leadership intent or policy design and requires assessment of societal readiness. Throughout Korean history, moments of national consolidation depended not only on visionary leadership but also on shared narratives, collective trust, and public willingness to absorb transition costs for long-term national goals. In contemporary context, however, societal consensus has become increasingly fragmented across generations, ideologies, and information environments. This fragmentation represents a structural constraint on unification, limiting public ownership and weakening the legitimacy and durability of unification initiatives. This section examines how generational divergence, ideological polarization, and media fragmentation jointly erode shared national purpose and explains why rebuilding consensus must serve as a core strategic precondition for sustainable unification rather than a secondary political concern.

2.1. Societal Polarization and the Breakdown of Shared National Purpose

In contemporary South Korea, the primary constraint on unification is no longer a lack of leadership vision or institutional capacity, but the erosion of shared national purpose within society itself. Deepening polarization across generations, ideologies, and information environments has weakened collective understanding of why unification matters and reduced public willingness to sustain long-term commitment. Unification, once grounded in shared historical narratives, now appears through fragmented social lenses that undermine its legitimacy as a common national project.

Within this broader pattern of societal polarization, generational divergence represents one of the most consequential fractures shaping attitudes toward unification. Older generations, shaped by war, division, authoritarian reconstruction, and democratization, tend to view unification through moral, historical, and identity-based lenses, treating it as unfinished national history and a moral obligation grounded in shared suffering. Lived experience anchors these perspectives, while education systems and media narratives that emphasize national survival and unity reinforce them over time. In contrast, younger generations, socialized in a prosperous, globally integrated, and highly competitive South Korea, often evaluate unification through pragmatic and individual-centered calculations shaped by concerns over housing affordability, job security, educational competition, and intergenerational inequality. As a result, unification is frequently perceived as distant, costly, or potentially disruptive rather than urgent or personally relevant, weakening shared national vision and reducing public ownership of the unification agenda.

Figure 1 conceptualizes Korean unification as a consensus-dependent collective project in which societal polarization undermines shared purpose and implementation capacity. Rather than presenting unification as a linear outcome of leadership vision, the figure illustrates a causal pathway from social fragmentation to national unity, mediated by consensus-building mechanisms. It highlights how generational divides, ideological polarization, and fragmented information environments weaken collective understanding of unification and contribute to declining public interest and disengagement. By positioning narrative reframing, civic education, and structured public dialogue as integrative mechanisms, the figure demonstrates that durable unification

requires broad societal ownership and institutional legitimacy rather than elite leadership alone, consistent with research on polarization and social identity dynamics (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018).

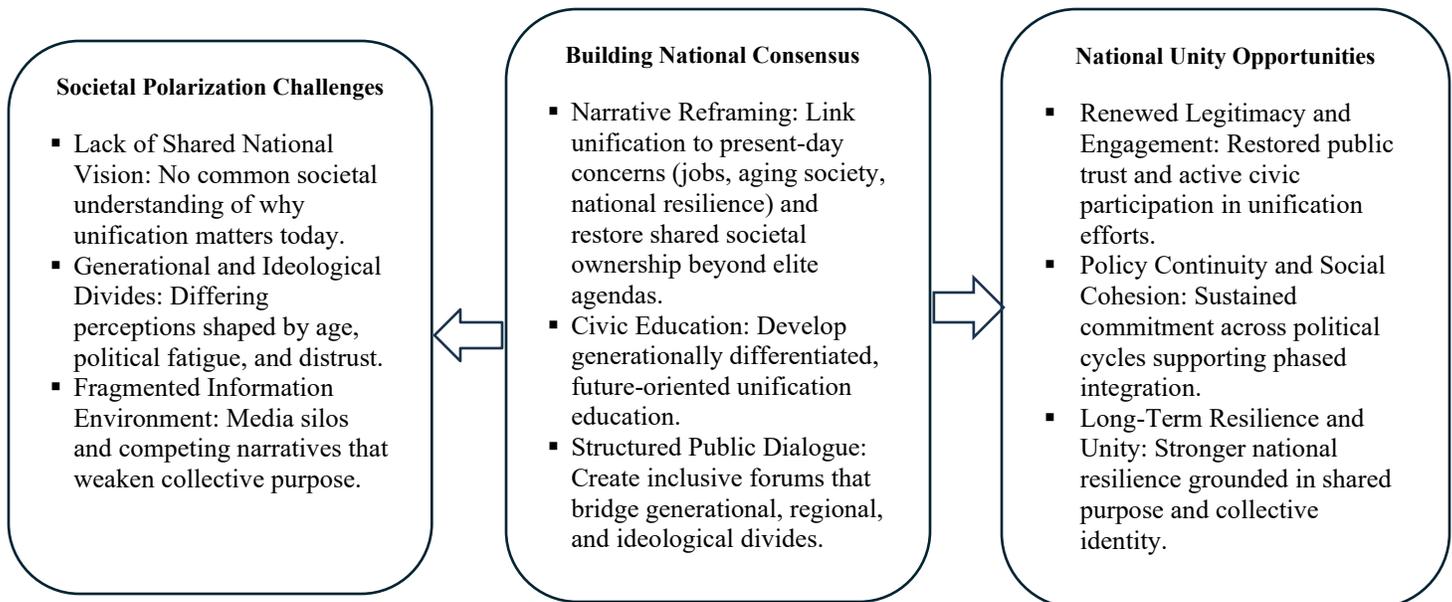


Figure 1. Building National Consensus as a Bridge for Korea’s Unification

It is important to recognize that national consensus is not weakened uniformly across society but erodes along distinct social fault lines that reshape how citizens interpret identity, responsibility, and future priorities. Among these fault lines, differences between generations have emerged as particularly influential because historical memory, economic experience, and media environments vary sharply across age cohorts. These variations affect not only how unification is understood but also whether it is perceived as urgent, relevant, or attainable. As a result, generational dynamics provide a critical lens for understanding why collective vision weakens even when political leadership emphasizes national unity. The following section therefore focuses on how intergenerational differences contribute to diverging perceptions of unification and gradually erode the shared national narrative necessary for long-term integration.

2.2. Generational Divide and the Erosion of Shared National Vision

One of the most consequential fractures shaping attitudes toward Korean unification is the growing generational divide in national consciousness. Older generations, shaped by war, division, authoritarian reconstruction, and democratization, tend to view unification through moral, historical, and identity-based lenses. For them, unification represents unfinished national history, a restoration of collective dignity, and a moral obligation inherited from shared suffering. These perspectives are deeply rooted in lived experience and reinforced by education systems and long-standing narratives that emphasize national survival and unity. In contrast, younger generations have been socializing in a fundamentally different socio-economic and cultural environment. Raised in a prosperous, globally integrated, and highly competitive South Korea, they often evaluate unification through pragmatic and individual-centered calculations shaped by concerns over housing affordability, job security, educational competition, and intergenerational inequality. From this perspective, unification is frequently perceived as distant, costly, or potentially disruptive rather than urgent or personally relevant. This divergence is

not merely attitudinal but structural, reflecting differences in historical memory, economic exposure, and future expectations. When leaders frame unification mainly through Cold War legacies or moral obligations, they risk alienating younger cohorts who lack these reference points, weakening public ownership and reducing the political salience of the unification agenda. Contemporary information environments further reinforce these generational divides by shaping how different cohorts interpret and engage with national priorities. Media fragmentation and episodic framing often present unification through isolated crises or speculative cost narratives rather than as a long-term societal transformation requiring collective preparation. In the absence of credible pathways for participation, dialogue, and generationally inclusive framing, unification is increasingly experienced as an elite-driven agenda disconnected from everyday life. As a result, disengagement—rather than explicit opposition—has become the dominant public response. This pattern underscores that rebuilding shared national vision requires mechanisms capable of translating unification into age-relevant meaning and civic responsibility, setting the stage for the next section’s focus on consensus-building as a strategic linkage mechanism between leadership vision and sustained societal followership.

2.3. Consensus-Building as a Strategic Linkage Mechanism

Consensus-building functions as a strategic linkage mechanism that connects leadership vision with durable unification outcomes. While leadership provides moral authority, direction, and agenda-setting capacity, societal consensus supplies legitimacy, endurance, and collective implementation capability. Without broad consensus, even visionary leadership can appear elite-driven, politically contingent, or socially disconnected. Consensus-building therefore requires an active social process that reconciles fragmented identities, interests, and narratives into a shared national purpose. In this way, consensus bridges leadership vision and societal followership, transforming unification from an abstract aspiration into a collectively owned national project.

This linkage perspective underscores that sustainable unification depends on embedding consensus-building into the unification strategy itself. When unification speaks directly to present-day concerns—economic security, demographic sustainability, social cohesion, and future opportunity—public willingness to support long-term integration rises. Without such consensus, however, well-designed institutions and economic plans remain vulnerable to political turnover and public disengagement. The next section moves beyond conceptual specification to examine how actors can activate and sequence these mechanisms over time, translating consensus-building from a structural requirement into actionable pathways that align leadership vision with sustained societal followership.

Table 1 specifies how this linkage operates in practice by conceptualizing consensus-building as a coordinated system composed of three mutually reinforcing domains: shared narrative and civic identity formation, inclusive public deliberation and information ecosystems, and institutional commitment supported by social trust infrastructure. Each domain pairs core societal challenges—such as fragmented identity narratives, generational divides, media fragmentation, declining trust, and electoral volatility—with corresponding strategic opportunities, including rebuilding shared national vision, restoring public trust through participatory dialogue, and institutionalizing bipartisan continuity. By reframing these challenges as conditions open to deliberate institutional design rather than fixed constraints, the framework clarifies how societies can transform fragmentation into integrative national capacity. It further demonstrates that consensus is not a spontaneous byproduct of political will but an engineered outcome emerging from coordinated cultural, communicative, and institutional processes. This systemic perspective emphasizes that sustainable unity depends on reinforcing interactions among identity formation, deliberative legitimacy, and governance continuity rather than isolated policy interventions.

Table 1. Consensus-Building Architecture: Mechanisms, Challenges, and Strategic Opportunities

Integrated Mechanism	Strategic Role: Consensus-Building Functions	Key Societal Challenges	Strategic Opportunities
<p>Shared Narrative & Civic Identity Formation: Reframes unification as a future-oriented national project by aligning historical memory with age-relevant civic values across generations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reframes unification as a future-oriented national project. ▪ Aligns historical memory with forward-looking national purpose; translates unification into age-relevant civic values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fragmented identity narratives and competing historical interpretations. ▪ Generational divides and abstract or outdated unification discourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rebuilds shared national vision across generations. ▪ Reconnects unification with contemporary priorities and future aspirations.
<p>Inclusive Public Deliberation & Information Ecosystem: Builds informed and participatory consensus by enabling inclusive dialogue and balanced media framing across ideological, regional, and social divides.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shapes public perception and participation ▪ Facilitates inclusive dialogue across ideological and regional lines; counters fear-driven and algorithmic echo chambers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Political polarization and ideological echo chambers ▪ Media fragmentation and declining trust in public discourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Restores public trust through inclusive, participatory dialogue. ▪ Promotes informed, balanced, and sustained civic engagement.
<p>Institutional Commitment & Social Trust Infrastructure: Sustains unification momentum by embedding bipartisan continuity, collective ownership, and social trust into durable governance frameworks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Anchors legitimacy, durability, and implementation capacity ▪ Shifts unification from elite-driven agenda to shared civic responsibility; protects continuity across political cycles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Low social trust and fear of inequality or systemic disruption ▪ Electoral volatility and policy reversals across political cycles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Institutionalizes stable, bipartisan commitment to unification. ▪ Strengthens national resilience and collective solidarity.

Together, these interdependent mechanisms illustrate that national consensus must be cultivated through an integrated architecture linking social meaning, public participation, and institutional durability. Such an approach shifts attention from episodic political initiatives to long-term capacity building, where societal alignment becomes a strategic asset rather than a temporary campaign objective. Understanding this architecture provides the necessary bridge from conceptual design to actionable implementation under contemporary national constraints.

3. Operationalizing National Consensus under Korea’s New Structural Conditions

Having established consensus-building as a strategic linkage mechanism between leadership vision and sustainable unification outcomes, the next task is to examine how such consensus can be operationalized under the radically altered structural conditions facing South Korea today. Unification must move beyond assumptions of demographic growth, regional balance, and Cold War–era geopolitics to remain viable in today’s context. Instead, Korea confronts simultaneous pressures of ultra-low birth rates, rapid population aging, severe spatial concentration in the Seoul–Gyeonggi corridor and accelerating depopulation and neglect of rural regions. These

conditions are reshaping public priorities, intergenerational expectations, and perceptions of national sustainability. Policymakers and civic leaders must deliberately cultivate consensus through sequenced social and institutional processes that link unification to lived demographic realities and future survival concerns, rather than to abstract historical obligation alone. This section shifts from conceptual diagnosis to practical pathways, outlining how institutions and social actors can activate, sustain, and scale consensus by aligning societal pressures with emerging national opportunities.

3.1. Demographic Stress, Spatial Imbalance, and the Reframing of National Narrative

The first pathway for operationalizing national consensus lies in reframing the unification narrative to address Korea's mounting demographic and spatial challenges. South Korea's record-low fertility rates, rapidly aging population, and extreme concentration of economic and social life in the Seoul–Gyeonggi region have produced widening regional inequality and the abandonment of vast rural and provincial areas. For younger generations, these conditions translate into intense competition for housing, employment, and mobility; for older generations, they raise fears about social care, regional decline, and national continuity. Framing unification primarily as moral duty or a Cold War legacy weakens its relevance to urgent contemporary concerns and makes it appear detached from everyday life.

Narrative reframing does not discard historical memory, but integrates it with forward-looking questions of demographic sustainability, balanced regional development, and long-term national viability. Civic education plays a complementary role by translating unification into age- and region-relevant meanings: for younger cohorts, opportunities for social renewal, mobility, and national reinvestment; for older cohorts, continuity, care capacity, and institutional stability. In a political environment where identity, lived experience, and affect increasingly shape meaning, generationally differentiated civic education becomes essential (Iyengar et al., 2012). Together, narrative reframing and civic education establish the cognitive foundations of consensus by making unification intelligible as a response to Korea's internal structural strains—not merely an external geopolitical aspiration.

3.2. Strategic Industries, Global Positioning, and Institutionalizing Consensus

A second pathway for operationalizing consensus-building lies in connecting unification to Korea's expanding strategic opportunities in the global economy and geopolitical arena. South Korea's leadership in semiconductors, advanced batteries, shipbuilding, defense industries, and emerging AI-enabled manufacturing—together with the global reach of K-soft power—has elevated its strategic visibility and bargaining position. Korea's prominence in shipbuilding, including advanced LNG carriers and offshore platforms, underscores its competitive edge in global strategic industries, illustrating how industrial capabilities can augment national resilience and geopolitical positioning (Hong et al., 2024). Such strategic sectors generate not only economic growth but also leverage in supply chain leadership and industrial diplomacy, reinforcing Korea's role as a stable and indispensable node in global production and security architectures. Framing unification within this opportunity structure allows policymakers to present it as a multiplier of national capacity, expanding labor pools, rebalancing spatial development, and strengthening industrial resilience—while aligning public consensus with national pride and future-oriented global competitiveness. Integrating industrial capability into the unification narrative further connects societal consensus to tangible opportunity structures rather than abstract obligation, enhancing public willingness to support long-term integration (Hong et al., 2024).

Translating these opportunities into durable consensus requires the institutionalization of participation and trust, not reliance on episodic mobilization or leadership appeal. Structured public dialogue platforms—spanning

regions, generations, and sectors—allow citizens to deliberate how unification might concretely support industrial competitiveness, regional revitalization, and national security rather than treating it as an abstract ideal. Trust-building must also extend to the information environment, where transparent, evidence-based framing can counter distortion without imposing narrative control, as demonstrated during Korea’s COVID-19 response (Hong et al., 2023). Finally, policy continuity mechanisms—such as bipartisan agreements, independent commissions, and legally anchored long-term planning frameworks—are essential to protect unification strategies from electoral volatility and partisan reversal (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). When strategic opportunity, participation, trust, and institutional continuity align, consensus-building becomes self-reinforcing, transforming demographic stress and geopolitical change into sources of national resilience and collective capacity.

4. Illustrative Configurations of National Consensus-Building

To synthesize the preceding discussion and clarify alternative strategic pathways, this section introduces an illustrative 2×2 typology of national consensus-building configurations for Korean unification. The typology is structured along two dimensions: the **scope of consensus-building engagement**, ranging from narrow, elite-centered processes to broad, cross-generational and cross-regional participation; and the **scale of consensus outcomes**, ranging from symbolic or temporary alignment to deeply institutionalized and durable integration embedded in policies, institutions, and social norms. Together, these dimensions capture both the process and outcome aspects of consensus-building, reflecting how institutional change depends not only on participation but also on how engagement becomes embedded through gradual, negotiated transformations shaped by agency and power dynamics (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009).

<p style="text-align: center;">Technocratic Alignment without Societal Buy-In Narrow engagement with systemic planning; efficient but legitimacy-constrained consensus.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Inclusive and Institutionalized National Consensus Broad engagement combined with systemic outcomes; durable, legitimate, and resilient consensus.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Elite-Driven Symbolic Consensus Narrow engagement with limited institutionalization; consensus remains visible but fragile.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Mobilized Participation without Institutionalization Broad societal engagement with limited durable outcomes, high energy but low policy continuity.</p>

Figure 2. Four National Consensus-Building Scenarios for Korean Unification

Note: The horizontal axis captures the scope of consensus-building engagement, ranging from narrow, elite-centered involvement to broad, multi-generational and cross-societal participation. The vertical axis represents the **scale of consensus outcomes**, extending from limited, symbolic alignment to systemic, institutionalized integration embedded in policies and social norms.

Figure 2 visualizes the interaction of these dimensions and yields four analytically distinct configurations of national consensus-building. These scenarios are not predictions, prescriptions, or sequential stages, but illustrative configurations that help clarify strategic trade-offs, risks, and limitations. In practice, elements of multiple scenarios may coexist across policy domains or shift over time. The typology highlights a central insight: durable and legitimate unification efforts depend not on participation or institutionalization alone, but on their alignment.

4.1. Consensus without Alignment: Fragile and Constrained Configurations

Two of the four scenarios depicted in Figure 2 illustrate forms of consensus-building that remain inherently constrained due to misalignment between societal engagement and institutional embedding. Elite-driven symbolic consensus reflects narrow engagement combined with limited institutionalization, producing visible but fragile agreement that is vulnerable to political turnover and public disengagement. Similarly, technocratic alignment without societal buy-in emphasizes systemic planning and administrative efficiency, but lacks broad societal ownership, resulting in legitimacy deficits despite policy coherence. In both cases, consensus appears present but remains shallow, contingent, and difficult to sustain.

These constrained configurations highlight why unification initiatives that rely primarily on elite coordination or technocratic expertise often struggle to generate long-term societal commitment. Without broad engagement, institutions risk appearing imposed rather than collectively owned; without institutionalization, public support fades once mobilization energy dissipates. Partial consensus may create the appearance of progress, but it lacks the structural reinforcement necessary to withstand political transitions, economic pressures, or shifting public priorities.

Moreover, such misaligned arrangements tend to amplify societal skepticism over time. Citizens may perceive elite-led agreements as distant from lived realities, while technocratic processes can be viewed as procedurally sound yet emotionally detached from national identity concerns. This perception gap weakens trust and discourages sustained civic participation, reinforcing a cycle in which policy implementation advances without parallel growth in social legitimacy. Sustainable national projects, particularly those as complex and generational as unification, therefore require deeper integration between public engagement and institutional continuity than these configurations can provide.

4.2. Aligned Consensus Pathways: From Mobilization to Institutional Resilience

The remaining two scenarios in Figure 2 illustrate pathways where levels of engagement more closely correspond to observed outcomes. Mobilized participation without institutionalization features broad societal involvement and high civic energy, but limited durability due to weak policy embedding and continuity mechanisms. While such mobilization can generate momentum and visibility, it often struggles to translate enthusiasm into sustained implementation capacity. By contrast, inclusive and institutionalized national consensus represents the most resilient configuration, combining broad participation with systemic outcomes embedded in governance frameworks, legal commitments, and social norms.

This aligned configuration highlights the conditions under which consensus-building becomes self-reinforcing rather than episodic. Broad societal engagement enhances legitimacy and shared ownership, while institutionalization protects consensus from electoral volatility and partisan reversal. When citizens perceive that

their participation meaningfully shapes enduring policy structures, trust deepens and civic commitment stabilizes, allowing national initiatives to persist beyond political cycles.

Such alignment also strengthens adaptive capacity in the face of uncertainty. Because societal ownership and institutional continuity operate together, policy adjustments can occur without undermining public confidence or national purpose. Consensus thus evolves as a dynamic process rather than a one-time agreement, enabling long-term coordination across political leadership changes and generational transitions. The typology therefore clarifies why durable national alignment depends not simply on participation or policy design alone, but on their sustained convergence—providing a foundation for the concluding section’s strategic and policy implications.

5. Conclusion

Korea’s unification challenge has fundamentally shifted from questions of diplomatic feasibility or leadership ambition to the deeper condition of societal alignment in an era marked by polarization and generational divergence. Visionary leadership remains an essential catalyst, but it cannot substitute for broad-based public ownership and sustained civic commitment. By reframing unification as a consensus-building endeavor, this article identifies society—not policy alone—as the decisive arena where national integration either advances or stalls. The analysis shows that durable progress depends on aligning societal engagement with institutional embedding, since participation without continuity lacks durability and technocratic design without public legitimacy lacks trust. Rebuilding consensus therefore requires long-term investment in shared narratives, generationally attuned civic education, inclusive public deliberation, trustworthy information ecosystems, and institutional safeguards that preserve policy continuity across political cycles. As part of a broader scholarly series linking leadership vision, institutional design, and societal alignment, this essay underscores a central insight: unification is not secured when leaders agree, but when society moves together—because a nation’s future is built not by policy declarations, but by shared conviction sustained across generations.

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About the Author

Paul Hong is a Distinguished University Professor and Chair of Information Systems and Supply Chain Management at John B. Lillian E. Neff College of Business and Innovation at the University of Toledo, USA. His recent books include *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2024), *Cosmetics Marketing in the Era of the Digital Ecosystem* (2024, Springer) and *Rising Asia and American Hegemony* (2020, Spinger).

From Kimchi to Soju: What K-Food Reveals About Korea's Hidden Global Capabilities

Paul Hong

Abstract

Observers often interpret the global rise of Korean food—ranging from *kimchi* and *gim* to *mandu*, *makgeolli*, and *soju*—as an extension of the Korean Wave or simply as culinary popularity, yet these interpretations overlook a deeper and more consequential dimension. This article argues that K-Food reveals Korea's hidden global capabilities embedded in production discipline, logistics coordination, quality governance, and adaptive supply chain practices. Rather than treating food as a cultural artifact alone, the essay examines K-Food as an everyday system that quietly demonstrates national competence in managing perishability, standardization, global distribution, and local adaptation across diverse markets. Written as a conceptual prelude rather than a formal model or typology, the article offers an interpretive lens connecting ordinary food products to broader questions of national capability, economic resilience, and soft power, showing how global trust is built not through spectacle or scale but through repetition, reliability, and disciplined system-level execution embedded in everyday life.

Key Words: K-Food; Global supply chains; National capability; Soft power; Logistics and distribution; Cultural economy; Everyday systems

1. Introduction

Korean food has become increasingly visible across the world, appearing not only in metropolitan dining scenes but also in grocery stores, convenience shops, online delivery platforms, and home kitchens. Once unfamiliar to many global consumers, kimchi now appears in mainstream supermarkets; Korean fried chicken chains operate across Asia, North America, and Europe; and soju has moved beyond its domestic routes to enter global spirits markets and social rituals abroad. Analysts often group these developments under the Korean Wave and frame them as cultural diffusion driven by media, entertainment, and lifestyle appeal.

Yet such accounts tend to emphasize consumption and symbolism while paying insufficient attention to the systems that make this global presence possible. Food, unlike music or film, is perishable, regulated, logistically demanding, and deeply embedded in everyday routines—an important distinction long emphasized in studies of food globalization, where cultural diffusion is inseparable from transport infrastructures, standards, and governance mechanisms that enable food to circulate reliably across borders (Bryant, Bush, & Wilk, 2013). The consistent global availability of Korean food products therefore raises a more demanding question: what kinds of national capabilities are required to make ordinary foods travel dependably across cultures, markets, and regulatory regimes? From a supply chain perspective, such availability reflects not symbolic appeal but the successful orchestration of cold-chain logistics, quality control, traceability, and compliance—capabilities now recognized as central to modern food supply chain management rather than peripheral operational concerns (Zhong, Xu, & Wang, 2017).

This essay proposes that K-Food offers a revealing lens into Korea's hidden global capabilities—capabilities rarely foregrounded in discussions of national competitiveness or soft power. Behind each exported jar of kimchi

or bottle of soju lies a dense network of agricultural coordination, fermentation control, logistics discipline, certification systems, and adaptive localization. Rather than formalizing these observations into a comprehensive analytical framework, this article offers an interpretive exploration that surfaces patterns and questions worthy of deeper theoretical and empirical inquiry. From this perspective, K-Food is more than cuisine; it functions as infrastructure, revealing how Korea manages complexity, uncertainty, and trust through the quiet, repeated success of ordinary systems operating effectively across borders.

2. An Overview

The global visibility of K-Food did not emerge overnight, nor did it result solely from deliberate cultural export strategies. Instead, it evolved through the gradual scaling of everyday consumption practices, diaspora networks, and commercial distribution systems that connected Korean food to global markets. Unlike media-based cultural products, food demands continuous material coordination across production, preservation, transportation, and regulation, making reliability and repetition as important as appeal. Understanding K-Food therefore begins not with branding or symbolism, but with the systems that carry ordinary foods across borders—how actors build trust, stabilize standards, and expand distribution networks over time. The following subsections trace this process and lay the foundation for examining what K-Food reveals about Korea’s underlying global capabilities.

2.1. From Local Staples to Global Everyday Products

Korean food products such as kimchi, gim, mandu, makgeolli, and soju originated as deeply local staples embedded in household routines, seasonal cycles, and communal preparation practices. For much of their history, regional preservation methods and cultural norms shaped these foods rather than export considerations, leaving them ill-suited for long-distance transport or mass distribution. Their transformation into global everyday products therefore represents a substantial shift in production logic and institutional coordination, consistent with research showing that the globalization of food depends on the gradual construction of standards, quality regimes, and distribution systems rather than symbolic appeal alone (Swinnen, 2007). In the Korean context, this shift unfolded unevenly and often indirectly, reflecting enduring tensions between food, identity, and globalization rather than a linear or centrally planned export strategy.

Migration and diaspora communities drove the early international spread of Korean food, with households, churches, small groceries, and restaurants serving as informal transmission nodes. These networks sustained demand while simultaneously exposing challenges related to ingredient sourcing, consistency, shelf life, and safety. As K-Food expanded beyond diaspora settings into mainstream retail and food service channels, producers stabilized products through packaging, labeling, quality control, and regulatory compliance without sacrificing their recognizable character. Rather than producing uniformity, this process resulted in hybrid forms in which standardized systems coexist with localized adaptations across markets—a pattern that reflects the growing importance of supply-chain capabilities such as coordination, traceability, and adaptive compliance in enabling everyday food products to circulate reliably at scale (Zhong, Xu, & Wang, 2017).

2.2. Perishability, Regulation, and the Construction of Trust

Food differs fundamentally from many other cultural products because it is perishable, ingestible, and tightly regulated, requiring consumers to trust not only cultural authenticity but also safety, quality, and consistency. To succeed globally, Korean food required the construction of systems that manage fermentation processes, cold-chain logistics, ingredient traceability, and hygiene standards across jurisdictions, transforming cuisine from a cultural expression into an operational and governance challenge. Research on food systems emphasizes that such

globalization depends on coordinated supply-chain structures and regulatory alignment rather than ad hoc compliance or branding alone (Hospes & Brons, 2016; Almuflih et al., 2022).

K-Food built trust not through singular moments of market success, but through repeated, uneventful performance over time. Consumers encountered products that behaved predictably, restaurants delivered consistent experiences, and failures were relatively rare. This reliability, while largely invisible, is cumulative and fragile, relying on continuous monitoring, quality control, and relational governance across supply chains. Studies of trust-based food systems show that such credibility emerges from fairness, coordination, and sustained discipline rather than formal signals alone, underscoring how the quiet governance of everyday food circulation underpins long-term global acceptance (Nakandala, Smith, & Lau, 2020).

2.3. Distribution Networks, Platforms, and Everyday Globalization

The globalization of K-Food has been enabled by dense, multi-layered distribution networks that extend well beyond traditional export channels. Restaurants, grocery chains, wholesalers, online marketplaces, and home delivery services play complementary roles in moving Korean food into everyday routines rather than positioning it as a niche or occasional consumption experience. Restaurants in particular function as both cultural entry points and logistical anchors, introducing unfamiliar tastes while generating steady demand for ingredients and packaged goods. Many operators function as informal supply-chain coordinators, sourcing inputs, adjusting menus, and responding to local constraints, illustrating how distribution and consumption often blur in food globalization (Dhaigude, Chatterjee, & Kamath, 2025).

Demand for Korean food has also been positively correlated with the global diffusion of Korean dramas and popular music, including BTS, as screen and stage exposure familiarizes audiences with Korean tastes and rituals, lowering cultural barriers and accelerating everyday consumption alongside expanding distribution networks (Hong et al., 2024). Retail and digital platforms have further normalized access to Korean food by reducing barriers between curiosity and consumption. Supermarkets stock standardized products, online retailers reach dispersed consumers, and delivery platforms integrate Korean dishes into daily meal choices. These channels support efficient supply flows and reinforce reliability through repeated transactions, allowing small-volume, high-frequency exchanges to scale across markets. Research on agri-food supply channels and digital coordination highlights how such networked distribution improves linkage efficiency and embeds food products into ordinary consumption patterns, demonstrating a form of globalization driven by routine circulation rather than flagship exports or centralized strategies (Raimbekov et al., 2023; Keogh et al., 2020).

K-Food globalizes through recurring patterns of coordination, trust-building, and adaptive distribution rather than through a single export pathway or symbolic cultural strategy. These patterns operate across different actors, scales, and institutional settings, suggesting that K-Food does not function as one unified system but as a constellation of distinct yet interrelated modes of organization. This distributed structure enhances resilience by allowing local actors to adjust sourcing, pricing, and product offerings in response to shifting consumer preferences and regulatory environments. It also encourages incremental market deepening, where repeated everyday transactions gradually normalize Korean food within local dietary routines rather than relying on episodic promotional surges. Over time, such embedded circulation transforms cultural familiarity into logistical stability, allowing globalization to emerge through sustained networks of practice rather than centrally orchestrated expansion strategies.

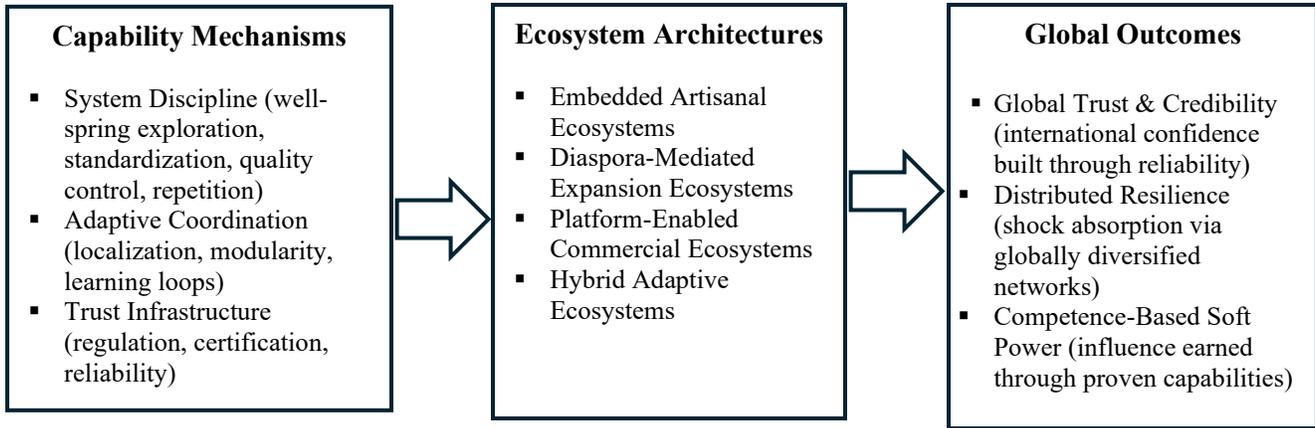


Figure 1. From Capability Mechanisms to Global Outcomes through Ecosystem Architectures

To clarify how everyday operational capabilities translate into durable global outcomes, Figure 1 synthesizes the recurring patterns identified in Section 2 into an integrative conceptual structure. It shows that Korea’s global outcomes emerge from the interaction of foundational capability mechanisms—system discipline, adaptive coordination, and trust infrastructure—with multiple ecosystem architectures rather than from a single linear pathway. Embedded artisanal, diaspora-mediated, platform-enabled, and hybrid adaptive ecosystems coexist and interact to translate internal capabilities into cumulative outcomes such as global trust, distributed resilience, and competence-based soft power through repeated, reliable performance. By linking everyday operational practices to national-level effects, this conceptualization highlights how ordinary systems, when layered and coordinated, generate durable global capability and sustained influence in the contemporary world economy.

3. Four Architectures of the K-Food Ecosystem

K-Food’s global presence emerges not from a single supply chain or export strategy, but from a layered ecosystem of multiple architectures that differ in scale, coordination, and modes of trust. These architectures coexist and overlap, allowing Korean food to circulate globally while retaining cultural meaning and operational reliability. To clarify this complexity, this section introduces a four-part typology of the K-Food ecosystem organized along two intuitive dimensions: the degree of system standardization and the degree of global integration. The typology does not operate as a formal analytical model; instead, it serves as an interpretive framework that highlights recurring patterns across products, markets, and distribution channels, showing how Korea’s global capabilities operate through diverse everyday systems rather than concentrating in a single dominant pathway or flagship industry.

3.1. Local-Embedded Artisanal Ecosystems

Local-embedded artisanal ecosystems represent the most traditional layer of the K-Food system, rooted in household practices, regional traditions, and small-scale food preparation. Homemade kimchi, locally prepared banchan, and family-run restaurants exemplify this architecture, grounding trust in proximity, familiarity, and shared cultural norms. Production exhibits low standardization and high variation: recipes differ across regions, fermentation practices vary, and ingredient sourcing often remains informal. Cooks and consumers evaluate quality through sensory experience and personal knowledge rather than formal certification, preserving cultural depth and culinary meaning even as scalability remains limited (Patel, 2012).

Global integration within this architecture is modest but persistent, occurring through migration, travel, and diaspora communities rather than institutional coordination. These practices reappear in homes, churches, and community spaces abroad, carried by individual knowledge and localized adaptation. Although this mode of circulation is uneven and slow, it plays a foundational role by anchoring K-Food in lived cultural practice and sustaining culinary knowledge across generations. As studies of localized food systems emphasize, such embedded practices provide cultural legitimacy and continuity that later enable selective standardization and broader system integration without eroding identity (Son, 2023).

3.2. Diaspora-Mediated Expansion Ecosystems

Diaspora-mediated expansion ecosystems emerge when Korean food practices move beyond households into community-based commercial and social networks abroad. Korean grocery stores, churches, informal wholesalers, and early restaurants function as key nodes, translating local food practices into foreign settings while preserving cultural continuity. Expansion within this architecture relies primarily on social trust rather than formal contracts, with reputation and community ties substituting for standardized certification. Standardization is partial and adaptive: products are sourced flexibly, recipes adjust to local ingredient availability, and regulatory compliance evolves through trial, learning, and incremental adjustment rather than formal design.

As diaspora networks connect multiple cities and regions, global integration increases even as coordination remains largely relational. Supply chains stretch across borders, but trust is maintained through shared norms, repeat interactions, and social accountability rather than centralized governance. This architecture plays a critical bridging role in the K-Food ecosystem by lowering entry barriers to global markets and testing products, formats, and consumer responses outside Korea. Research on trust-based food systems highlights how such relational governance enables flexibility and learning under uncertainty, allowing diaspora-mediated systems to function as informal laboratories that inform later standardization and large-scale integration (Nakandala, Smith, & Lau, 2020).

3.3. Platform-Enabled Commercial Ecosystems

Platform-enabled commercial ecosystems constitute the most visible and scalable layer of the K-Food system, encompassing packaged food manufacturers, global restaurant chains, large distributors, and digital commerce platforms. Mass-produced kimchi, frozen mandu, instant noodles, and branded soju exemplify this architecture, where brands, certifications, and regulatory compliance institutionalize trust. Firms codify production processes, formalize quality controls, and optimize logistics through cold-chain infrastructure, shelf-life management, and traceability systems, enabling reliable circulation across global markets.

Global integration within this architecture is extensive and structured, involving coordination with international distributors, compliance with multiple regulatory regimes, and multi-market branding strategies. Digital platforms further accelerate access by reducing transaction friction and connecting producers directly to consumers, making K-Food widely available and repeatable in everyday contexts. While this architecture anchors K-Food's global visibility and stabilizes demand beyond diaspora communities, it also carries risks of cultural flattening and commodification, underscoring the importance of continued linkage to other ecosystem layers that sustain cultural meaning and adaptive capacity.

3.4. Hybrid Adaptive Ecosystems

Hybrid adaptive ecosystems combine high levels of standardization with selective localization, enabling efficiency without sacrificing responsiveness to local tastes, norms, and consumption rituals. Region-specific kimchi formulations, fusion menu offerings, and differentiated soju branding illustrate how firms embed adaptation into system design rather than treat it as an exception. Production remains modular: core processes are standardized, while inputs, flavors, and presentation are adjusted through continuous feedback between markets and producers, allowing responsiveness without undermining reliability.

This architecture sustains high global integration while relying on more nuanced forms of control. Firms collaborate with local partners, chefs, and distributors to interpret market signals, maintain regulatory compliance, and translate cultural meaning. This approach reveals a hidden strength of Korea’s global competitiveness—the ability to scale without imposing uniformity. Hybrid adaptive ecosystems show how disciplined execution and cultural sensitivity coexist, and how K-Food’s global presence emerges from an ecosystem where multiple modes of coordination and trust operate in parallel rather than through a single dominant strategy.

Table 1. Key Characteristics of the Four Architectures of the K-Food Ecosystem

Ecosystem Architecture	Core Actors	Mode of Trust	Coordination Logic	Illustrative Examples
Local-Embedded Artisanal Ecosystems	Households, family producers, small local restaurants	Relational and cultural trust	Informal, experience-based coordination	Homemade kimchi, regional banchan, family-run eateries
Diaspora-Mediated Expansion Ecosystems	Diaspora groceries, churches, early overseas restaurants	Community reputation and social accountability	Relational networks with adaptive sourcing	Korean groceries abroad, church-based food networks
Platform-Enabled Commercial Ecosystems	Large manufacturers, distributors, global restaurant chains, digital platforms	Institutional and brand-based trust	Formalized, standardized, and regulated systems	Packaged kimchi, frozen mandu, branded soju
Hybrid Adaptive Ecosystems	Global firms with local partners, chefs, distributors	Blended institutional and cultural trust	Modular standardization with local adaptation	Market-specific kimchi, fusion menus, localized soju branding

Table 1 summarizes the four architectures of the K-Food ecosystem by showing how different configurations of actors, trust, and coordination enable global circulation. Across local-embedded, diaspora-mediated, platform-enabled, and hybrid adaptive ecosystems, K-Food functions as a layered system in which trust mechanisms and coordination logics vary systematically rather than following a single hierarchical model. It also reveals how different coordination logics shape the scalability and adaptability of each ecosystem architecture, distinguishing informal experiential systems from formalized, standardized commercial networks. By aligning actor configurations with trust mechanisms and operational structures, the framework clarifies how diverse organizational forms collectively sustain the global expansion of K-Food through complementary roles rather than

uniform models. Beyond mapping production and distribution, these architectures reveal how Korea transforms everyday food practices into durable global capability. The next section builds on this typology to examine how such ecosystem diversity underpins Korea's global trust, distributed resilience, and competence-based soft power.

4. Implications

There has been a shift from viewing K-Food as a cultural or commercial phenomenon toward understanding it as a window into how Korea builds, sustains, and projects global capability through ordinary systems operating on a scale.

4.1. K-Food as an Indicator of Korea's Global Capability

The K-Food ecosystem reveals that Korea's global capability is not confined to flagship industries but is embedded in everyday systems that operate reliably across borders. While Korean food carries distinctive aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural meanings that contribute to its global appeal, these meanings only endure internationally when supported by disciplined systems that ensure safety, consistency, and trust in everyday consumption (Chung et al., 2016). Moving perishable, regulated, and culturally specific foods through global markets requires coordinated execution across production, logistics, regulation, and adaptation, exercised repeatedly through routine transactions rather than symbolic displays of soft power. The four architectures identified in this study show how Korea manages complexity through layered and complementary systems: local-embedded and diaspora-mediated ecosystems preserve cultural knowledge and enable experimentation, while platform-enabled and hybrid adaptive ecosystems translate this knowledge into scalable, regulated, and globally trusted operations. This distributed structure allows capabilities to be recombined across contexts, supports resilience in volatile environments, and mirrors Korea's broader pattern of cumulative, path-dependent upgrading through learning, compliance, and incremental scaling, making K-Food a microcosm of how national competence is formed and continuously reproduced through everyday practice.

Beyond food markets themselves, this ecosystem illustrates how national capabilities mature through decentralized coordination rather than centralized orchestration. Multiple actors—small producers, migrant entrepreneurs, logistics intermediaries, retailers, and digital platforms—contribute to capability formation by adapting shared standards to local conditions while preserving core quality expectations. Such distributed coordination strengthens institutional learning, as repeated transactions generate feedback loops that refine operational routines and regulatory alignment. Capability thus emerges as a living system shaped by iterative adjustments rather than static policy design.

This perspective reframes globalization as an accumulation of operational competencies embedded in daily economic activity. Korea's experience demonstrates that global competitiveness often depends less on singular breakthroughs and more on the sustained refinement of interoperable systems across diverse sectors. In this sense, K-Food exemplifies how ordinary consumption channels become arenas for capability consolidation, where national reputation is reinforced through countless small-scale exchanges. The ecosystem therefore reflects a broader developmental logic in which reliability, adaptability, and system coordination form the foundation of long-term global influence.

4.2. Korea's Global Trust, Resilience, and Strategic Positioning

K-Food demonstrates that global trust is built less through narrative appeal than through operational credibility, as consumers come to rely on Korean food products that perform consistently across markets, platforms, and

contexts. This everyday reliability—grounded in quality control, regulatory compliance, and dependable delivery—aligns with broader findings in food supply chain research that emphasize trust as an outcome of repeated system performance rather than symbolic signaling (Zhong, Xu, & Wang, 2017; Nakandala, Smith, & Lau, 2020). The ecosystem’s layered architecture also generates resilience by distributing risk across multiple channels, allowing shocks to be absorbed through redundancy and diversity rather than concentrated exposure, a dynamic observed in agri-food systems with diversified distribution pathways (Raimbekov et al., 2023). Strategically, this produces a form of competence-based soft power rooted in disciplined execution and system reliability rather than persuasion, reinforcing Korea’s position in global value chains over time.

Operational credibility also strengthens reputational capital by reducing perceived uncertainty among consumers and trade partners. When products consistently meet expectations across regulatory environments and cultural contexts, trust evolves from cautious trial to habitual reliance. This transformation lowers market-entry barriers for related industries, enabling spillover effects that enhance the credibility of broader national exports. Trust thus functions not only as a consumer sentiment but also as an economic asset that stabilizes international transactions and deepens cross-border partnerships.

Resilience further emerges from the ecosystem’s capacity for adaptive reconfiguration. Because production, distribution, and retail channels operate across multiple layers, disruptions in one segment can be compensated by adjustments elsewhere. This flexibility reduces vulnerability to geopolitical tensions, logistical bottlenecks, and demand volatility. Over time, such adaptive capacity positions Korea as a dependable participant in global supply networks, strengthening its strategic standing by demonstrating that reliability persists even under stress.

4.3. Everyday Systems as Strategic National Infrastructure

K-Food demonstrates that nations build capabilities not only through large-scale industrial policy but also through sustained support for everyday systems that operate quietly yet reliably across borders. By treating food systems as strategic infrastructure rather than cultural promotion, Korea highlights the importance of ecosystem-aware policy that balances households, diaspora entrepreneurs, SMEs, platforms, and global firms while preserving both adaptability and trust (Son, 2023). Investment in trust infrastructures such as food safety standards, certification regimes, cold-chain logistics, and regulatory translation reduces transaction costs and generates spillover benefits across export-oriented sectors, echoing broader evidence that standards and governance mechanisms underpin durable participation in global food systems (Swinnen, 2007). More broadly, K-Food suggests that soft power is most durable when grounded in performance-based legitimacy, where credibility emerges from repeated operational success rather than symbolic messaging.

Recognizing everyday systems as infrastructure expands the policy lens beyond visible flagship projects toward the enabling foundations of global participation. Regulatory harmonization, inspection capacity, logistics modernization, and digital coordination mechanisms become strategic assets that quietly sustain cross-border flows. Such infrastructures rarely attract public attention, yet they determine whether national industries can integrate smoothly into international networks. Treating them as long-term public goods encourages sustained investment and institutional continuity.

This infrastructural perspective also emphasizes inclusivity within national development strategies. When households, migrant entrepreneurs, and small enterprises are integrated into standardized yet flexible systems, economic participation broadens while preserving reliability. Inclusive infrastructure strengthens social trust domestically while enhancing credibility internationally, linking internal cohesion with external competitiveness.

In this way, everyday systems evolve from background logistics into strategic foundations that support durable global engagement.

5. Conclusion

K-Food stands not merely as a cultural export or commercial success, but as an everyday expression of Korea's system-level global capability, revealed through the reliable circulation of ordinary foods across borders, regulations, and routines. The layered ecosystem behind kimchi, mandu, and soju—anchored in discipline, adaptive coordination, and trust infrastructure—shows how multiple architectures coexist to balance standardization with localization, generating global trust, distributed resilience, and competence-based soft power through repetition rather than spectacle. The deeper lesson is that nations forge capability not through monumental achievements but through quiet mastery of the mundane, as credibility accumulates through consistent performance under constraint. When kimchi tastes familiar in distant supermarkets and soju meets expectations across jurisdictions, Korea signals something more enduring than influence or branding: a nation can be trusted because, every day, it makes complex systems work—and the world learns this not by hearing claims of excellence, but by experiencing them again and again.

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Paul Hong is a Distinguished University Professor and Chair of Information Systems and Supply Chain Management at John B. Lillian E. Neff College of Business and Innovation at the University of Toledo, USA. His recent books include *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2024), *Cosmetics Marketing in the Era of the Digital Ecosystem* (2024, Springer) and *Rising Asia and American Hegemony* (2020, Spinger).

IV. Literary Works and Reviews

Regarding A Confused Species, aka, Unwitting Agents of Destruction

Yeomin Yoon

Abstract

On the evening of the day, when the end of the Gregorian calendar year 2025 was rapidly approaching, I received a “Happy New Year” message from a friend in Seoul. He told me he was considering sending his “ambitious and intelligent grandson” to the US for an advanced education in economics. My friend is willing to finance his grandson’s graduate school education for a PhD in economics at a leading university in the US. This young man, who is now a junior instructor of economics at a local university, believes that he needs a doctorate in economics to help him serve his country as a significant economics educator or an economic policymaker for the government. Additionally, he is sure that a doctorate would enhance his ability to serve his country as a patriotic citizen. My friend sought my advice. In a nutshell, I told him: “If I were you, I would not send my grandson to any of the major universities in America for his doctorate in economics (or its subdiscipline called finance).” I provided my friend with my value-loaded observations and judgment: Due to their misunderstanding of the nature of economics, mainstream American economists have become unwitting agents of destruction not only to America but also to human civilization because of the superpower’s influence throughout the world. I am sharing with *KAUPA Letters* readers what I told this friend, with his consent.

Key words: agents of destruction; American economists; good citizen; good man; good regime; nature of economics; patriotism, “**Strive To Benefit Humanity**” (흥익인간).

I. Isn’t What Is Beautiful a Joy for All Seasons?

On January 1 of the Gregorian Year of 2026, I am responding to your greeting for a “New Year” -- which feels like the same old year that pretends to be a “New” one. I am asking myself: Isn’t life, one year after another in this eternal present, the same old year again and again until my demise? Despite this wayward feeling, I concur with Oscar Wilde, who said: “What is beautiful is a joy for all seasons.” I hope you will visit in 2026, many lovely forests, gorgeous mountains, and picturesque seas, and appreciate *things higher than human things*, getting out from the experience of frustrating affluence that occurs in persons mutilated by their reliance on the riches of capitalistic productivity that has enabled (to my eyes) the *exchange values* to kill the *use values* of things.

I hope to do the same. I detest the feeling of being dragged into market relations to survive. However, today, I don’t think I shall be able to shake off from my brain longer than a few minutes my concerns regarding the Trumpian cruelty and vengeance (reflecting the failure of moral education in America) that will continue this year.

The country often dubbed as “the only superpower” is richer than it has ever been. Its aggregate economy does not suffer from a lack of resources. **The super-majority of its people, however, suffer from grossly insufficient sharing of resources.** As a result, many able K-12 (from kindergarten to high school senior-level) educators and university and college faculties feel frustrated, because the rapid decline of resource sharing is hampering them in teaching their students and neighbors how to achieve their shared goals of increased opportunity, dignity, and respect, and a better life. The Trumpian authoritarian rule will intensify the pace of decline in sharing.

The results of the November 4, 2025, elections may lead some American voters to wager that America will survive as a nation and civilization. But the fear and hate Trump and his followers and supporters have sown and will continue sowing for the remaining years of his presidency will most likely cause lasting blight to both the USA and the rest of the world. In what kind of shape will America survive after the fear and hate that Trump and his racist followers and supporters have sown? Aside from my fear that such morally-confused people as Trumpists will cast lasting blight, I suggest you reconsider seriously your plan (or wish) of sending your grandson to America in the foreseeable future, for no other reason than that the economics education to which your grandson is most likely to subject in America will be dominated (and ruined, in my eyes) by mainstream American economists, many of whom I call “**unwitting agents of destruction.**” I attempt to explain my observations and reasons in this letter.

II. Who created “chaos and confusion”?

Once upon a time, there was a heated debate among three professions regarding whose profession is the oldest, in which the economic profession achieved a resounding victory. The medical doctor said that God created Eve by taking out a rib from Adam. God, therefore, must be a master surgeon, so the medical profession is the oldest. The engineer argued that before God created Adam and Eve, He created the Earth out of chaos and confusion. God must be a master engineer, so engineering is the oldest profession. The economist concluded the debate by simply asking: “Gentlemen, who created chaos and confusion?”

I suspect that this joke arose from economists’ tendency to rarely agree on anything (regardless of their venue, be it prose, mathematics, or babbling) with each other. When two economists debate any issue, at least three different opinions tend to emerge, which indeed makes economics the only field in which two people can share a Nobel Prize for saying opposing things, as Friedrich Hayek and Gunnar Myrdal did in 1974. Aside from the above joke, economists are unable to address the ills of capitalism, primarily because they have misunderstood or been confused over the nature of economics.

III. Mainstream American economists’ misunderstanding of the nature of economics

So many mainstream American economists look as if they have been possessed (or hallucinated) by a mixture of neoclassical/neoliberal/utilitarian philosophy, which in turn has led them to misunderstand the nature of economics. Such misunderstanding, or intellectual confusion, is a serious matter because it has made them, in my opinion, unsuspecting agents of destruction to their society.

Apparently, they cannot abandon their belief in human society as an organization of rational egoists who act to maximize their personal wealth and its benefits. As a result, they cannot address the ills of capitalism due to their unwillingness to overturn the presuppositions underlying capitalism. **Plato's ideal republic, Aristotle's politics (as the culmination of ethics), Confucius/Mencius' encompassing family, and the Korean ideal of “Strive To Benefit the Humanity¹” (홍익인간), all reject the ontology, axiology, and psychology of American economists.**

Conventional economists either do not realize or have forgotten that the economy does not exist independently of human interest, belief, and will. Politics, history, and culture are essential structural determinants of the

¹ The South Korean government engraved this ideal as Article 1 of the National Education Charter in 1949.

economy. The Aristotelian concept of politics as the master science that comprehends economy, and the Enlightenment concept of *political economy* [or the East Asian word, 經世濟民 (경세제민), or 經濟 (경제) for short] inform a more appropriate understanding than what is taught at American universities today. According to Aristotle, Confucius/Mencius, or Korean advocates of the ideal of 홍익인간, economics is a dimension of a comprehensive inquiry (i.e., ethics) that posits the *summum bonum* for human society and describes the regional structures of human social existence. As John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) aptly said: “Neither economic activities nor any other class of human activities can rightly be made independent of moral laws.”

So many American economists either have not realized or have forgotten that the economy exists for the human person, not vice versa; that moral principles should shape all economic life; and that economic choices and institutions must be judged by how they protect or undermine the life and dignity of the human person, support his (or her) family, and serve the common good that includes the ecological environment. By shifting economics from a moral science to merely a mathematically allocative science based on the concept of maximizing the individual utility (or profit) subject to risk, mainstream economists have become agents of destruction in accordance with the Roman principle of *corruptio optimi pessima* (meaning the corruption of the best or elite is the worst of all).

Being enamored with Newtonian mechanics, orthodox (neoclassical) economics has become ‘fragmentary and reductionist.’ I fully concur with physicist Fritjof Capra, who said: “Present-day economics, like most social sciences, is **fragmentary and reductionist** (my bold face). It fails to recognize that the economy is merely one aspect of a whole ecological and social fabric. The basic error of the social sciences is to divide this fabric into fragments, assumed to be independent and to be dealt with in separate academic departments – psychology, economics, political science, and so on. Economists neglect social and ecological interdependence, treating all goods equally, without consideration of the many ways in which they are related to the rest of the world, and reducing all values to that of private profit-making. Conventional economics is thus inherently anti-ecological. It uses its concepts – efficiency, productivity, and profit – without their wider social and ecological context. Corporate efficiency is measured in terms of corporate profits, but these profits are being made increasingly at public costs.” (See *Patterns of Connection: Essential Essays from Five Decades*, High Road Books, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2021, pp. 85-86.)

Preoccupied with maximizing individual utility and efficiency, economists have overlooked the economy as a component of the broader ecological and social fabric. These orthodox economists have belittled and ignored ecological economists such as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen² (1906-1994), a notable pioneer in Bioeconomics. They have neglected ecological/economic/political/social interdependence and paid no attention to the famous tenet of Alfred Marshall (1842-1924) that economics is a branch of biology broadly defined. In other words, the economic process is a part of the human biological domain.

To me, it is no wonder that they have become agents of destruction by transforming their society (e.g., today's America) into a commodity-centered society. As a result, ethics and politics have become servants of economics, reducing justice to the commodification of everything (including the livable environment) society needs. Politics and ethics need decolonization from economics in America.

For many years, mainstream American economists have built highfalutin economic growth models on the foundation of the Cartesian mechanistic worldview and their intellectual disease, Newtonian “physics envy.”

² See his seminal 1971 book, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

They have been hiding behind such models, their sophomoric ineptitudes characterized by mathematical obscurity of Nobel Prize-winning proportions. No matter what these models have kept saying about the need for economic growth, we, the earthlings, need a bit of horse sense.

So many US economists (other than unorthodox ones like ecological economists) conduct their research and teaching as if they believe the human species has a special privilege to escape extinction. They inadvertently help maintain the illusion of unlimited growth viability by excluding the social and environmental costs of economic activities from their theories.

Moreover, global capitalism, the dominant economic system today, pursues economic and corporate growth. A network of financial flows has been established at its center that has no ethical framework. Is it any wonder for anyone with discerning eyes to observe the current widening gap between the rich and the poor, social inequality, and social exclusion -- the inherent features of economic globalization? Global capitalism has relentlessly promoted excessive consumption and a throw-away economy.

According to French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984): "As the archeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end." He wagered that "man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" -- in the last sentence of his book, *The Order of Things – An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Would any independent-minded, moral, and rational being find such a disappearance of the human species from the Earth regrettable? Is there more reason why humans are on the Earth than there is for animals or plants, stones, rivers, seas, and the air? As humans -- aside from being Americans, the Chinese, the French, or Koreans -- isn't it our collective responsibility to make the late philosopher lose his wager, for the sake of our descendants' survival and well-being? Do mainstream American economists recognize such responsibility? I doubt it.

IV. The economics education South Korea needs

Nowadays, many Americans seem to realize that something is wrong with their national economy and the ecological environment. They have begun to notice that they were misled and betrayed by those economic policymakers with doctorates in economics, and that the economists have used their alleged expertise primarily for the benefit of big corporations owned by the rich and super-rich, while neglecting research and teaching regarding environmental protection and the necessary reduction of the prevailing severe income and wealth inequality. Americans desperately need economic educators and policymakers who teach and lead the nation to achieve shared goals of increased opportunity, dignity, respect, and a better life for all. Moreover, humans need many nonhuman things besides human things — air, animals, forests, mountains, rivers, and seas. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of such economists in America.

I believe that South Korea (and other emerging countries) should use typical American economics as a valuable **반면교사** (反面教師, "Reverse Teacher"). China's Mao Zedong (1893-1976) allegedly coined this four-character expression. If paraphrased, economists in Korea and emerging countries should "**learn reversely** (or **oppositely**)" from their American counterparts, if they want the world to recognize and respect their countries as civilized and responsible ones. They need to counter neoclassical *cum* neoliberal economics and the presumptions and practices thereof.

If they want to address the crisis of modern capitalism created by addiction to neoliberalism, which is little more than an extension or variation of neoclassical economics, South Korea (and other emerging countries) should

implement an economic education that goes beyond the wisdom of Enlightenment thinkers to classical and medieval thought. Regardless of what it may be called now—consumer, financial, fintech capitalism, or technofeudalism—we cannot fundamentally address the ills of capitalism unless we abandon the neoclassical/neoliberal economic education that views human society as an organization of rational agents who act to maximize their wealth. Human thinking should be oriented to the primacy of *being* over *having*.

Specifically, I believe the economists in Korea and in emerging countries should teach their students to understand that:

1. Things can have *value*, but only people can have *worth* (dignity as cognate).
2. A *collective* is a collection of things and people in a region of space. A *community* is the existence of persons recognizing one another as persons with dignity, and emotional and ethical relationships. The community need not be in one place.
3. *Well-being* has the conception of goodness and virtue (both moral and intellectual virtues) as constituents; *wealth* means possession of valued things.
4. Humans are beings who claim *freedom* and *autonomy*, and they hold *themselves responsible* for their thoughts, intentions, and actions.
5. The *common good* is *central to a good society*, and humans should endorse the *common possession of the Earth's goods* while allowing a *legitimate but derivative right to private property*.
6. The *economic process* is a *part of the human biological domain*, and genuine environmental protection requires, at a minimum, devising and implementing a system that legally forces the *makers of environmental damage* to *pay for the social costs* they create.
[Such *bona fide environmental protection*, or “deep ecology³,” demands the genuine attention of not only policymakers but also all concerned global citizens who believe the human species has no special privilege to escape extinction. **Deep ecology** does not separate humans from the natural environment. It sees the world not as a collection of isolated objects, but as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. It recognizes the intrinsic value of all living things, and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life (as believed, for example, by Buddhists). **Shallow ecology**, in contrast, is anthropocentric, or human-centered, viewing humans as above or outside nature, as the source of all value, and ascribing only “use” (*exosomatic* or instrumental) value to nature.]

If anyone deemed the above six points as “esoteric,” I would paraphrase them as follows:

너희는 열 손가락을 깨물어 보아라. 아픔은 크나 작으나, 마찬가지로이니, 서로 사랑하여, 모함하지 말고, 서로 싸우지 말아야, 집과 나라가 흥할 것이다. 너희는 소나 말을 보아라. 그것들도 먹이를 서로 나누어 먹으니, 서로 양보하여, 빼앗지 말고, 서로 흠치지 말아야, 집과 나라가 흥성할 것이다. 너희는 넘어지는 자를 부축하고, 약한 자를 능멸하지 말며, 가난한 자를 구제 하고, 비천한 자를 모멸하지 말 것이다. 너희는 호랑이를 보아라. 너희는 사납게 달려들어 깨물지 말고, 남을 해치지 말아라. 너희가 만약 꽃밭에 불을 지르면, 꽃이 살아질 것이니, 하늘이 노할 것이다. [Bite any of your ten fingers. Whether big or little, each finger will feel pain. Look at the cows and horses you raise at home. Don't they share their food? So, your country will prosper when you care for and share food with each countryman and woman. Your family and nation will grow if you do not steal, rob, accuse, and fight each other. Support the

³ See George Sessions (1995), *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*, and Bill Devall, and George Sessions (2007), *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*.

people who stumble, save the people from dire poverty, and do not look down on weak people. Never act like wild beasts who bite and kill each other. If you set fire to your gardens, Heaven will be angry.]

It was evident to the sages of both the East and the West that a world in which the aims of different individuals or groups are compatible is likely to be happier than one in which they are conflicting. They believed it should be a wise social system to encourage compatible purposes and discourage conflicting ones by designing a social system to achieve this end.

All educators (especially economists) should take the ancient voices of our ancestors seriously -- significantly, their desire to know the truth about the whole human society and their moral act to shape its future in the most desirable form by devising ways to promote the well-being of as many people as possible. In other words, the so-called "good life" should not be reduced either to clever utilitarianism for individuals or to 부국강병 (富國強兵, "rich country, strong military") for any nation to invade smaller and weaker ones and impose imperial will. We should teach our students to despise the notion of "Might Makes Right" and treat it as an immoral and barbaric idea.

V. Some words for the "ambitious and intelligent grandson"

The primary purpose of university education is to help each student establish a lifetime foundation for becoming a *good person* (or whole person). Such a person acquires *moral* and *intellectual virtues* that include a strong backbone (self-respect and courage). A *good person* contributes to society. He (or she) enjoys pursuing justice and makes their society more civilized and humane, thus becoming a "maker" (giver) to it, not a "taker" from it (parasite). Many American educators argue that developing technical competence is essential for their students to find a well-paying job after graduation. They should also claim (and teach) that the so-called technical or professional competence without proper moral caliber would lead to producing, at best, clever utility-maximizing "economic animals," or obedient "wolf warriors" who shout to the world, "Right or Wrong, My Country! My Country!"

Only an ethical person is an upright human. Only such a human becomes a decent economist, engineer, or scientist. All scientists (especially social scientists, including economists), engineers, and technologists should acquire moral virtues. To educate yourself to become an ethical economist, I hope you keep **reading widely** (on humanities in general, history, philosophy, religion, and so forth) rather than focusing only on so-called economic literature, so that you learn from the sages of both the East and the West, who are our intellectual and moral ancestors, regardless of ethnicities and nationalities.

As I informed your grandpa, many mainstream economists in the US apparently do not realize that they have become unsuspecting agents of destruction by actively espousing theories that justify the commodification of everything. Comfortably enclosed in their academic silo, these economists, who miserably failed to warn about the impending Asian financial crisis (1997/8/9) and the global financial crisis (2007/8/9), continue speaking their code, establishing their status rankings and hierarchies in peer-reviewed academic journals, and persuading themselves and one another of their intellectual and professional merit. **They are bright, but the brightest or those so deemed "know one thing, but not two." There is an unkind word, "sophomoric," that is apt when applied to them.**

Some years ago, American newspapers reported that a well-known American official, the chief economist of a prominent international organization, who had received his Ph.D. degree in economics from a leading American

university, signed a memo suggesting “**dumping toxic waste in third-world countries for perceived economic benefits.**” If such a memo is not a consequence of America’s sophomoric economic education, what is it? At around the time when the mass media reported on this infamous memo, such physicists as Fritjof Capra discussed “a new scientific understanding of life at all levels of living systems – organisms, social systems and ecosystems ... based on a new perception of reality that has profound implications not only for science and philosophy, but also for business, politics, health care, education, and everyday life.” [See Capra’s 1996 book, *The Web of Life*, Anchor Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., New York.]

It is pathetic to see that those economists who are possessed by “physics envy” are either oblivious of or uninterested in the recent scientific understanding of living systems. Sadly, mainstream economists are unwilling to envision and design a restorative economy and commercial culture that reflects a symbiosis of corporations, customers, end-users, and the ecology. They seem to assume that economic forces exploit and destroy, and that this behavior is the inevitable outcome of the market system. Recently, a physicist friend joked: “Will Americans ever be able to put all these economists in a Genie’s bottle and put a cork top, so that they shall not get out to harm the world?” Aside from this seeming dark pun, I don’t think that the seeming greedy behavior is the inherent nature of commerce or the inevitable outcome of a market system. It reflects the consequences of the prevailing commercial system’s design and use. If human beings believe that they are truly sapient, as implied by words like *Homo Sapiens*, or *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, they can mature from a state of grasping ego gratification to some degree of ethical awareness. I believe an economic system can evolve and mature.

VI. A plea to young and rising economists in Korea

Become whole-person economists who can **forge a moral basis for the national economy and form a vision of how to construct a system of political economy that will achieve maximum well-being of the citizens, social justice, and deep ecological environmental protection.** Synthesize normative value judgments with scientific perspectives in economics, keeping in mind that **old, labeled models like capitalism and socialism are only modifiable constructs.**

For anyone to forge a moral basis for the national economy requires being a ‘generalist’ with ‘specialized’ knowledge. At a minimum, you should not become a ‘sophomoric’ economist regardless of where you study economics. It is sad to note that, wherever they have been operating – university business schools, Wall Street, or government, too many American economists have been polluting America by commodifying almost everything the society needs, at the expense of the common good.

Koreans should not repeat the same treacherous mistake Americans made during the past four decades --- the sharply rising concentration of income and wealth following the so-called Neoliberal Revolution in the 1980s. The persistent inequity has resulted from rampant lobbying by the moneyed class for massive deregulation, loopholes in the international tax system that have favored enormous fortunes to the detriment of the general public and the common good, and the economy's over-financialization. The resulting economic system is the one where political power has increasingly fused with economic power through what former U.S. president Jimmy Carter fittingly called "**legalized corruption.**" I hope the system of South Korea is different from that of America. If it happens to be more or less the same, isn't it time for Koreans to amend their system for the sake of their collective well-being and future generations?

VII. Regarding “good citizen” vs. “good man” vs. “good regime” and “patriotism”

According to Aristotle, there are no *good citizens* without qualification. A *good citizen* depends entirely on the regime. For example, a *good citizen* in Adolf Hitler's Germany would be a bad citizen elsewhere. Whereas a *good citizen* is relative to the regime, a *good man* does not have such relativity. The meaning of *good man* is the same everywhere, regardless of where he lives – in America, China, Germany, Greece, or Korea. The *good man* is identical to the *good citizen* in the case of the *good regime*, whose goal must include helping citizens become virtuous humans. In other words, only in a virtuous regime, the good of the regime can be equated with the good of the *good man* – the indispensable goal of both the former and latter is virtue.

Many followers of Donald Trump (or China's ruler) apparently believe that they have undefeatable *patriotism*. From the Trumpian (or Chinese patriots') perspective, "our fatherland, USA (or China)" is more important than any difference in regimes. From such a point of view, any citizen who criticizes "our fatherland" and demands the establishment of any other regime than the current one must be a "partisan." According to Aristotle, such a partisan sees deeper than a patriot – "**virtue!**" If you happen to think that the regime of your country is not the *good regime* you had hoped for, I hope you become a "**partisan of virtue.**" **Patriotism is not enough.** I believe both Aristotle and Confucius, especially his heir Mencius, would agree.

Additionally, when evaluating senior government officials of Korea, such as presidents and other economic/environmental/geopolitical policymakers, I hope you use this old Korean dictum: 구걸에 맞을 드린 자는, 절대 대들지 못한다. Those who have become accustomed to the habit of begging can never truly become autonomous and responsible. They would rather kowtow to the illegitimate (domestic or foreign) power or wealth than revolt. Good men would never embrace the shackles given by bullies as ornaments. So, **educate yourself to be a good man.**

VIII. Closing Remarks

Since the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217A), various politicians and international forums have repeatedly called for universal respect for human rights. But how many leaders in the world (including those in the superpower and the superpower wannabe) do you think genuinely value not only themselves but also their people and neighbors, and thus honor the rights of the latter as well? Don't you agree that the truly reliable path to universal respect for human rights and peaceful co-existence that enables creative cooperation in the multi-ethnic and cultural world is rooted in what Vaclav Havel⁴ called "self-transcendence"?

Transcendence is "a deeply and joyously experienced need to be in harmony even with what we ourselves are not, what we do not understand, what comes distant from us in time and space, but with which we are nevertheless mysteriously linked because, together with us, all this constitutes a single world." Such transcendence is "a hand reached out to those close to us, to foreigners, to the human community, to all living creatures, to nature, to the universe. [See "Vaclav Havel on Transcendence," *THE FUTURIST*, July 1995.] I regard such transcendence as the intellectual, moral, and spiritual basis of the primordial Korean ideology, "**Strive To Benefit Humanity (홍익인간)**," which the South Korean government engraved in 1949 as

⁴ This great statesman, author, poet, playwright, and dissident (1936-2011) served as the last president of Czechoslovakia from 1989 until 1992, and the first president of the Czech Republic from 1993 to 2003.

Article 1 of the *National Education Charter* (대한민국 교육헌장). Based on such a foundation, the founders of the old Joseon (고조선) called for spreading the ideal of *홍익인간* to the rest of the world and promoting the well-being of as many people as possible.

As an old member of the Korean diaspora, I hope that the next generations of Koreans will produce statesmen/women like Havel. Korea needs energetic and upright men and women like him, who aim higher than what international celebrities talk, do, or mislead today. Leaders like Havel have stalwart self-respect, courage, and strategic vision and wisdom regarding human, geopolitics, and the natural environment. Only such leaders will be able to effectively protect the nation from foreign bullies and transform her into a *문화대국* (highly cultured, civilized country), as envisioned by Kim Gu (김구) in his autobiography⁵ -- by actively helping their citizens spread *Hallyu* (한류) worldwide in many fields -- arts, music, sports, STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), historiography (faithful to the concept of *춘추직필*, or straight writing of history), politics (as the culmination of ethics), economics (as a dimension of ethics), military science (for legitimate national defense and international alliance), and so on.

During his professional lifetime, this economist has had opportunities to visit both "developed" and "developing-emerging" countries. One sad thing he has observed is that many economies focus on economic models that emphasize short-term increases in gross domestic product. Moreover, many economies seem to ignore "natural capital," the ecosystems. They also tend to neglect workers, or what their economists call the "human capital." They burn through both natural resources and humans to create ever greater profit margins. I hope Koreans have not been taught and trained by the slogan, "Maximize profits subject to risk," propagated by many mainstream (American) economics textbooks.

For many years, mainstream American economists have neglected, and still appear to neglect, ecological and social interdependence by treating all goods equally, without considering the various ways in which all goods are related to the rest of the world. By doing so, American economists have reduced all values to that of private profit-making. Many American economists have employed efficiency, productivity, and profit without a social and ecological context. As a result, they inadvertently look as if they have become antisocial and anti-ecological. And I contend that such perverted and even contemptible aspects of mainstream American economists provide Korean counterparts with a valuable lesson to "**learn reversely (or oppositely)**" from the superpower.

As a human who regrets every day that his birth date is too far away and his demise day too close, he hopes that the rising young generations of Koreans will develop and implement a holistic and ecological model of their society, which will require them to go well beyond the mechanistic and reductionist approach of conventional (Western) social sciences, including economics.

As an economist, he hopes the next generations of Koreans will, at a minimum, be able to design an economic model founded on the idea of their ancestors, *홍익인간*, **spread the *Hallyu economic model* worldwide, and help save the world from the shackles of the misguided concept of *Homoeconomicus* (clever economic animals), aka, "happy slave economic model."**

More importantly, he hopes that Korean social scientists, including economists, have noticed that our current

⁵ 김구, 백범 일지 (자서전). 동명사 발행. 단기 4290 년 (서기 1957 년).

economy and technology do not adhere to the self-limiting principle, and that the faith in undifferentiated economic and technological growth has become central to our culture. It is fair to say that any socio-economic and technological system based on continuing expansion without realizing that unlimited expansion on a finite “blue marble” called the Earth can never lead to dynamic balance.

In my opinion, it behooves all thinking persons to ask whether our technology is acting like a foreign body in our socio-economic organism. Technology is the most powerful tool for business and the economy. Is it acting as the main driving force of growth that has inadvertently become the driving force of global environmental destruction? Needless to say, growth is characteristic of all life and has both quantitative and qualitative meanings. A human being is born and matures by becoming bigger both quantitatively (or physically) and qualitatively through inner growth. All living systems do the same. But what are the criteria for acceptable and unacceptable growth?

Lester R. Brown, a prominent American environmentalist, defined a sustainable world as one that can satisfy its needs without diminishing the chances of future generations. [See his (2011) book, *World on the Edge*, Norton.] *Ecology* and *economics* share a common etymology. The former was derived from the Greek words *oikos* (household) and *logos* (study), while the latter originated from *oikos* (household) and *nomos* (management). The Earth is the *oikos* (household) for all humanity and species. **Creating and managing a sustainable global household for our children and their descendants is an enterprise that transcends all cultures, ethnicities, nation-states, and races**, including the “unwitting agents of destruction” who should be reformed rather sooner than later. [THE END]

About the Author



Yeomin Yoon is an opinion columnist for *The KAUPA Letters*, Journal of the Korean American University Professors Association, and a professor emeritus at Seton Hall University. After spending fourteen years as a senior economist and general manager of international joint ventures at one of the largest American corporations, he taught global business (multi-disciplinary course) and international finance for thirty-three years at Seton Hall’s Stillman School of Business until January 2022. Yoon also served as a visiting professor at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing for many years and Seoul National University in South Korea. As a corporate finance advisor to a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) program, he taught corporate finance and international finance to the economics faculty of eight universities in the former Yugoslavia. Additionally, Yoon served eight years as a senior special fellow and academic advisor of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) for a program designed to train diplomats and other government officials of the U.N. member states on global economy and finance.

Rising Korean Exchange Rate Controversy

Semoon Chang

This is one of the rare articles of mine that deals with the Korean economy. Although I am more comfortable in discussing the issue as a Korean American, I am writing this article from the view of today's Korea.

First, a clarification of the terminology. When I say exchange rate, it means the value of won per each U.S. dollar such as 1400 won to \$1.00. From the view of the U.S., the exchange rate of W1400 to \$1 is \$0.000714 to W1, obtained by dividing 1 by 1400. When the exchange rate changes from W1400/\$1 to W1500/\$1, the exchange rate is said to have increased from 1400 to 1500. We may also describe this as the Korean currency "weakening", or "losing value".

Since late in 2025, the exchange rate in Korea has increased from around 1400 won per \$1 to nearly 1500 won per \$1. You may wonder whether the increase is good or bad for the Korean economy and Korean Americans living in the United States.

One major impact of a rising exchange rate is an increase in the price of imports to Korea. Korea imports many types of consumer and industrial goods from other countries. For instance, if the price of one imported item were \$1 before the rising exchange rate and thus required 1400 won to buy the product, the price of the same product after the higher exchange rate is 1500 won. The rising exchange rate thus leads to higher prices.

On the other hand, the rising exchange rate from 1400 won to 1500 won will make Korean Exports much cheaper, since foreign buyers of Korean products can buy Korean products that are worth of 1500 won rather than 1400 won. Thus, this scenario is beneficial to Korean exporters selling goods to other countries. Late in 2025, as the exchange rate was rising, exports from Korea to other countries did increase which resulted in surplus funds in the current account.

Unfortunately, a significant portion of raw and intermediate goods that Korea's small and medium-sized companies use must be imported. Just as the prices of consumer goods increase, the prices of intermediate goods that play a critical role in the production chain of exports will also go up. This will force large exporting companies, as well as those companies in the supply chain, to cut their costs to survive. One measure of lowering costs by all these companies in Korea will include use of machines to replace workers, which, in turn, will lower the income of workers. The rising exchange rate thus hurts not only consumers but the overall Korean economy.

In theory, the Korean government in conjunction with the Bank of Korea can raise interest rates. This would slow down capital outflows and attract foreign investors. However, this will raise borrowing costs which will hurt businesses, large and small, as well as consumers who borrow money to, say, buy a home.

In theory, the Korean government with the Bank of Korea can undertake market intervention by selling U.S. dollars from foreign exchange reserves and Korea's huge national retirement funds. This action has its own danger of lowering the already low U.S. dollar reserves in addition to "playing with fire" by tampering with long-term health of the retirement funds.

Again, in theory, the Korean government has other strategies: It can use public pressure on Korea's exporters to

bring their earned U.S. dollars back to Korea instead of keeping them overseas. It can use public pressure on private investors not to buy U.S. financial securities, e.g., stocks and, instead, bring whatever savings in dollars they have overseas back to Korea. Again, in theory, the Bank of Korea could pursue a foreign exchange swap policy with the U. S. Federal Reserve Bank that will make U.S. dollars available when Korea experiences a critical shortage of dollars.

The Korean government tried all these strategies, and more, to lower the exchange rate in recent months to no avail. Why not?

I can think of three major reasons for the dangerously rising exchange rate. Firstly, pro-labor, anti-business government policies, exemplified by the Yellow Envelope law had a negative impact on large businesses that the Korean economy depends on. The law allowed all small companies in the supply chain to sue their parent company. Secondly, expansionary and thus inflationary economic policy, exemplified by distribution of “free” money. had an impact on lowering the value of the Korean currency. The widely accepted economic theory of money equation points this practice to be inflationary. In the third place, the less than desirable tariff negotiation outcome between Korea and the U.S. government will lower the dollar reserves that Korean government maintains.

My personal experience of assisting U. S. Southeastern states that dates a number of years back suggests that even Korean pro-business policies will have difficulty keeping capable businesses in Korea. For example, well over 20 years ago when Mercedes Benz and Hyundai found Alabama attractive, the state of Alabama gave incentives of \$250 million and \$248 million respectively to these two manufacturing facilities. This proven example is exactly opposite to the Korean Yellow Envelope law as well as excessively pro-labor union policies which motivate good companies to relocate to other countries.

Can anything be done? Yes, it can. Adopting pro-business policies, enacting responsible fiscal and monetary policies, and pursuing pro-U.S. policies (considering the U.S. security guarantee which previously led to miraculous Korean economic growth) will contribute toward fixing the problem of rising exchange rates in Korea. These policies, however, require a great determination by leaders of the Korean government.

About the Author



Dr. Semoon Chang is a *KAUPA Letters* Opinion Columnist and Professor Emeritus of Economics, University of South Alabama.

Crossing a Chaotic World with the Mindset of *Jeonggwan* (Calm Contemplation)

Young B. Choi

From early morning, snow once again scattered through the air, carried by a northwesterly wind. Though we believed that spring had already reached the threshold, nature silently unfolded winter's curtain once more. The crocuses that had just lifted their faces were bowing briefly beneath the cold snowflakes. Yet their roots remained firmly embedded deep in the earth. Outwardly they shrank, but inwardly they did not waver.

As I gaze upon this scene, I am reminded of *Jeonggwan* (靜觀), a concept spoken of by Gani Choi Rip (1539–1612), a diplomat of the Joseon Dynasty and a reflective scholar. *Jeonggwan* is not merely a quiet way of looking. It is an active stillness that does not lose its center amid raging waves, which is not swept away by emotion, and that leads deeply into the principles of things. Even amid the tensions of diplomacy, he would first pause to discern the situation, observing the flow rather than rushing ahead.

Today, our world changes as swiftly as a snowstorm. Information pours out like a flood; conflicts expand and reproduce; people are pressed to respond instantly. Anger and anxiety spread like air. In such an age, rather than closing our eyes or blocking our ears, we need the attitude of *Jeonggwan*—deep contemplation. Instead of reacting immediately within the noise, we need the strength to step back and ask about the essence of things.

The crocus in the snow does not grow impatient. Because it cannot bloom at this very moment, it does not doubt its own time. It simply waits for the right season. The confusion of today may also be but one phase of a larger cycle. Change does not come in a straight line; it passes through curves that appear like retreat before reaching completion. Snow does not hinder spring; rather, it helps prepare spring to be stronger and more resilient.

Jeonggwan teaches us three things.

First, the courage to pause. In an age where instant judgment and reaction are praised as virtues, stopping to reflect is in fact a greater act of bravery.

Second, the establishment of an inner center. The louder the external noise becomes, the more clearly we hear the voice within.

Third, an attitude of trusting time. Accepting that not everything is resolved in a single moment—that acceptance itself is maturity.

As a child, I remember snow falling in the middle of the night. By morning, the world would be transformed into an entirely different landscape. Yet that change occurred without sound. So, it is with our lives today. Great transformations may not begin with loud slogans but with quiet changes within the heart. One calm choice, one careful judgment, can form a new order.

To overcome a chaotic era does not mean eliminating every storm. It means not losing direction within it. Like the crocus in the snow, we may lower ourselves for a moment, yet never abandon our roots. Outwardly flexible, inwardly steadfast in conviction—that is the practice of *Jeonggwan*.

Snow eventually melts. Yet what remains is the state of heart we held while it was falling. Whether we were swept away by anxiety or quietly contemplative will shape our next season. Beneath the white snow, the crocus already knows spring. I too wish to carry the eyes of Jeonggwon within this chaotic world—neither impatient nor shaken, but moving forward step by step, contemplating deeply.

No matter how long winter endures, spring is already being prepared beneath it. And only those who quietly contemplate will be the first to recognize its earliest stirring. ***

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Korean Translation: <https://www.ktown1st.com/blog/VALover/348532>

About the Author



Young Choi is a Program Coordinator of Information Systems Technology and Professor in the Department of Engineering and Computer Science at Regent University in Virginia, USA. He is a passionate artist and writer whose creativity spans poetry, essays, and the delicate art of wooden block engraving. His love for colored pencil drawing and reflective book reviews captures his deep appreciation for life's subtle beauty, often inspired by his quiet moments in nature. His work invites readers to reconnect with the natural world and the soulful essence of human experience, offering a thoughtful perspective on life's simple yet profound moments.

별따기

Chung Gil Lee

Professor Emeritus of Chonnam National University/Essayist
cgl8509@comcast.net

저녁이면 모깃불을 피워 놓고 동무들과 함께 대나무 평상에 누워 별을 헤아리던 때가 있었다. 캄캄한 밤하늘에 점 모양으로 무수히 반짝이는 별들이 어린 나에게는 도저히 이해할 수 없는 신비였다. 수는 몇이나 되는지, 얼마나 멀리 떨어져 있는지, 어떤 힘으로 반짝거리는지 도통 알 수가 없어서, 그저 바라만 볼 수밖에 없는 존재였던 것이다. 그믐께의 매우 어두운 밤에 가장 뚜렷하게 보이던 기억만 남아 있다.

별은 우주 공간에 떠 있어 천문학의 대상이 되는 존재라는 것을 공부하면서 깨닫게 되었다. 항성, 행성, 혜성, 성단, 성간 물질, 인공 위성 등의 뜻도 차차 익혔다. '하늘의 별 따기'라는 말이 무엇을 얻거나 성취하기가 몹시 어려움을 비유적으로 이룬다는 것도 알았다.

프랑스 태생으로 노벨상을 받은 물리학자 Jean Baptiste Perrin (1870~1942) 은 1919년에 별이 핵융합으로 에너지를 생산한다는 가설을 세웠다. 페랭의 가설은 현실과 일치하는 것으로 1930년대에 확실하게 입증되었고, 그 위력을 파악한 과학자들이 핵융합을 인명 살상용 무기의 제조에 사용하려고 힘쓰기 시작했다.

히로시마와 나가사키에 투하된 것들은 핵분열 폭탄이었다. 제2차 세계 대전이 끝나고 군비 경쟁이 확산되자 미국은 핵융합을 이용하여 무기를 만드는 계획에 착수한다. 분열-융합으로 된 2단 폭탄을 만들어 1952년 11월에 마셜 제도에서 실험했는데, 그 원폭이 히로시마에 투하된 원자탄 700개에 맞먹는 폭발력으로 조그마한 섬 하나를 완전히 파괴해 버리는 것이었다.

세계의 열강들이 심각성을 깨닫고 원자력 연구의 궤도를 수정하는 데에 관심을 보였다. 미국 대통령 아이젠하워는 1953년 뉴욕에서 열린 유엔총회에서 평화를 위한 연설을 했다. 전세계의 모든 과학자와 공학자들에게 원자력의 군사적 이용에 관한 연구를 그만두고 대신 평화적으로 이용할 수 있는 방법을 강구하라고 호소했다.

그에 동조하지 않는 일부 공상가들은 핵융합을 궁극의 보루로 인식하고 자신들의 목적에 합당한 연구를 계속했다. 하지만 핵융합 연구에 사용하려고 개발한 기계들이 의도대로 작동하지 않거나

영터리로 밝혀지는 등 처참한 실패로 끝난다. 관측통들은 대규모의 핵융합은 당장에는 실행이 가능하지 않으며 20년 후에나 그것도 항상 20년 후에나 가능한 일로 치부하면서, '에너지 꿈'이라고 했다.

핵융합 연구는 거의 포기하려던 시점에 뜻밖에 재개된다. 1985년에 미국 레이건 대통령과 소련 공산당 서기장 고르바초프가 제네바에서 정상회담을 갖고, '인류의 이익을 위해서' 두 나라가 함께 핵융합 반응 시설을 건조하기로 합의했으니 뜻을 같이하는 나라들이 참여해 달라는 공동 성명을 발표한다. 곳곳에서 상습적인 말다툼이 일고 내분도 생겼지만, 유럽 24개 나라와 일본이 서둘러 참가한다.

해나 별들은 핵융합의 진행 과정에 의하여 반짝인다. 가벼운 수소 원자핵 네 개가 높은 온도에서 무거운 헬륨 원자핵 하나로 융합되면서 대량의 에너지와 함께 중성자를 배출하는 반응이다. 그때 배출되는 막대한 에너지는 전력을 생산하는 데에 사용할 수 있는 데다가 거기서 나오는 방사성 폐기물의 양은 무시해도 될 만큼 적다. 그 반응을 유발하여 에너지를 좀 얻어 쓰면 어떨까?

원자핵 융합 반응 실험 장치 International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor를 제조하는 방안을 강구하기 시작했다. 머리글자를 따서 부르는 그 장치의 이름 ITER는 라틴어로 '길'이라는 뜻이며, 세상에서 가장 비싼 과학 기계여서 설계 명세서를 작성하는 데에만 여러 해가 걸렸다.

우여곡절 끝에 2007년에는 프랑스 남부 지역 프로방스에 ITER를 만들기 위한 기초 공사가 시작되었다. 지중해에서 한 시간 거리의 십만 평이 넘는 평평한 곳을 정지하는 데에 무려 7년이 소모되었다. 거기에는 언제 발생할지 모르는 지진을 방지하는 정교한 공사도 포함되었다.

드디어 2014년에 ITER구내에 엄청나게 큰 규모의 실험실이 구축되기 시작한다. 유럽 연합의 27개국을 비롯하여 중국, 인도, 일본, 러시아, 한국, 미국을 포함하는 국제 차관단이 공사를 예정대로 진척시키는 데에 도움이 되었다. 그와 함께 10개 분야 이상의 전문가들이 채용되고, 2018년에는 천만 개가 넘는 기계 부품들을 제자리에 배치했다. ITER는 명실 공히 과학의 국제연합이 되어 전세계 최고의 두뇌들이 모이는 장소다.

날마다 2천 명이 넘는 일꾼들이 모여서 일하고, 몇몇은 밤에도 일한다. 세계 인구의 반 이상을 대표하는 33개 나라에서 선발되어 온 사람들이다. 그 동안 수많은 난관에 부딪쳐 허덕지덕했다. 다만

공사의 기록상 처음으로 프로젝트가 예정대로 차질없이 진행된 해인 2025년을 넘겼으며, 앞으로도 그럴 것으로 믿는다고 최근에 발표한 것을 보니 다행이다 싶다.

턱없이 야심 찬 사업이라는 말도 듣는 핵융합은 반응을 일으키기가 어렵고, 그것을 지속시키기는 더 어렵다. 하지만 인류는 거대한 재난 앞에서나 병마와 죽음의 운명 속에서도 끊임없이 몸과 외부 세계를 통제하려고 애써 왔다. 그리고 지금은 규모나 중요성에서 전대미문의 원대한 사업에 온갖 힘을 쏟고 있다. 변동되거나 흔들릴 염려없이 미더운 과학과 전 인류의 협조가 절실히 요구되는 때다.

계획이 잘 진척되어 2039년으로 예정된 별 따기가 성사되면 깨끗하고 값싼 에너지를 무한히 얻을 수 있다. 그 에너지는 지구 온난화를 멈추고 환경의 파괴를 막아 말 그대로 세상을 구제할 것이다. 후세들에게 지구를 온전히 물려줄 수 있게 해줄 상상도 못했던 사업이 현실에 맞게 잘 추진되기를 간절히 기도한다.

About the Author



Born in Naju, Jeollanam-do;
B.A. from the College of Agriculture, Chonnam National University, 1963;
First Lieutenant, Army Interpreter Officer, 1967;
M.A. and Ph.D. from James Cook University, Australia, 1978;
Professor, College of Veterinary Medicine, Chonnam National University, 2007;
Professor Emeritus, Chonnam National University;
Member, Korean Writers' Association of America.

[Review Essays]

Asian American Nonfiction and Ozarks Novels

John J. Han

1. Asian American Women's Voices: *Quiet Odyssey* and *Among the White Moon Faces*

Lee, Mary Paik. *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America*. Edited by Sucheng Chan. University of Washington Press, 1990.

Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. *Among the White Moon Faces. An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*. The Feminist Press, 1996.

In Asian American literature, there are many prominent and highly visible women authors—like Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Celeste Ng, Min Jin Lee, and others—who have received significant critical and popular recognition. One reason they attract both critics and general readers is that their works center on distinctly female perspectives and experiences, exploring issues such as identity, family, cultural expectations, and the challenges of navigating multiple cultural worlds. Their narratives often give voice to the emotional and social complexities of women's lives, highlighting both personal and communal struggles in ways that resonate widely. By foregrounding female experiences, these authors not only assert their own voices but also expand the scope of Asian American literature, contributing to broader conversations about gender, culture, and representation. This visibility and impact may explain why women writers in this field are often perceived as particularly prolific and influential compared to their male counterparts.

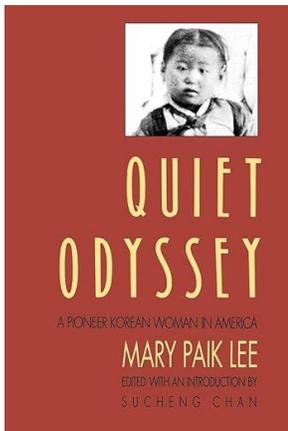
This essay examines Mary Paik Lee's *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*, focusing on how these two twentieth-century Asian immigrant women narrate identity across sharply different historical, stylistic, and thematic contexts. Both authors offer deeply personal accounts of migration and belonging, yet the circumstances of their lives and the literary strategies they employ reflect the distinct social, political, and cultural environments of their respective eras.

Lee (1900-1995) provides an early-twentieth-century account shaped by exclusion laws, racial hostility, economic hardship, and a strong Korean Christian community that offered both spiritual grounding and practical support amid constant adversity. Her memoir emphasizes survival, family responsibility, and the collective endurance of her immigrant community, offering a documentary-style narrative that records the lived realities of hardship and resilience. In contrast, Lim (born 1944) writes from a late-twentieth-century post-1965 landscape, when educational and professional opportunities became more accessible to Asian Americans. Lim's memoir reflects a different set of possibilities and challenges, including negotiating hybrid identities, asserting intellectual and artistic ambitions, and engaging critically with both American and Asian cultural contexts.

The narrative styles of the two authors diverge as sharply as their historical contexts. Lee's writing is straightforward and documentary in tone, focusing on practical survival and the daily rhythms of immigrant life. Lim, however, employs a lyrical, introspective style that blends feminist self-examination with postcolonial critique, exploring identity in a more fluid, reflective, and self-conscious way. These stylistic choices shape each author's portrayal of identity: Lee emphasizes collective endurance through family, labor, and faith, while Lim

foregrounds individual self-fashioning, highlighting personal desire, intellectual growth, and the negotiation of a hybrid ethnic identity. Together, these memoirs trace a historical shift from immigrant survival to diasporic self-creation, revealing how Asian American women writers navigate evolving social, cultural, and generational landscapes, and offering a nuanced view of how literary expression and identity formation intersect across different eras of immigration.

Endurance and Survival: Mary Paik Lee's *Quiet Odyssey*



Mary Paik Lee's *Quiet Odyssey* is valuable not only as a personal memoir but also as a sociohistorical document illuminating the lives of Asian immigrants in early twentieth-century America. The book offers firsthand insight into Korea under Japanese colonial domination, the influence of American Christianity on Korean communities, and the role of overseas Koreans in the national independence movement. Through Lee's understated yet powerful narrative, private suffering becomes a lens through which broader histories of migration, racism, faith, and political commitment are revealed.

One of the central themes of the memoir is the harsh reality of immigrant life in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Like many Asian immigrants of her generation, Lee faced blatant racism, linguistic and cultural barriers, and persistent hunger. When Lee and her family arrived in the United States, Asians were widely regarded as racially inferior and were often treated as subhuman. Early in the book, Lee recalls the dehumanizing welcome she and her brother received at a California school, where white classmates mocked and physically assaulted Asian children under the guise of a playground chant:

The next day when I went to school with my brother the girls did not dance around us; I guess the teacher must have told them not to do it. I learned later than the song they sang was:

Ching Chong, Chinaman,
Sitting on a wall.
Along came a white man,
And chopped his head off.

The last line was the signal for each girl to “chop my head off” by giving me a blow on the neck. That must have been the greeting they have all the Oriental kids who came to school on the first day (17).

The cruelty of the ritual—ending with a blow to the neck—exposes how racism was normalized and even ritualized among children, reflecting the prejudices of the broader society.

Racism followed Lee into adolescence and formal education. As a high school student, she courageously confronted her English teacher for systematically giving non-white students lower grades than their white peers. The teacher's furious response, "If you don't like it, get the hell out of here. We don't want you here anyway" (56), reveals the institutional nature of racial discrimination and the hostility faced by those who dared to challenge it.

Another teacher expressed even more explicit racial contempt, referring to Chinese and Japanese people with slurs and claiming that Koreans were savages civilized only by Japanese colonizers:

My history teacher was something else. He was a young man in his thirties, a "good looker" and a "smart aleck." When we came to the pages about China and Japan, he referred to them as the lands of "stinking Chinks and dirty Japs." Looking straight at me in a taunting manner, he said that Korea was a wild, savage country that had been civilized by the "Japs." (56)

When Lee confronted him, the teacher's solution was not self-reflection but erasure: he simply skipped the section on Asian history altogether. These encounters underscore both the pervasiveness of racism and Lee's quiet moral courage in resisting it.¹

In addition to racial hostility, Lee's family endured severe poverty and near starvation. Despite living in America, a land often imagined as a place of abundance, the family frequently lacked sufficient food. Lee recalls drinking water to suppress hunger and her mother diluting milk until it barely resembled milk at all. One especially poignant scene describes Lee witnessing her parents holding hands and weeping at the dinner table, grieving their inability to provide adequately for their children. Rather than fostering resentment, this moment deepened Lee's appreciation for her parents' love and sacrifice, reinforcing the memoir's emphasis on familial endurance rather than complaint.

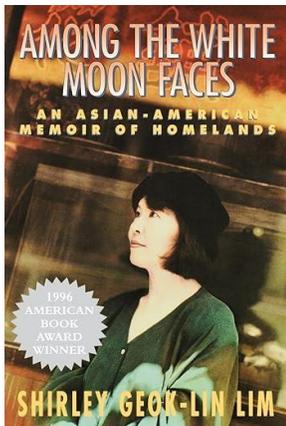
Notably, despite enduring racism and hunger, Lee's tone is never bitter or accusatory. Like her parents, she maintained a firm belief in the ideals of America, even when those ideals were contradicted by lived experience. Encounters with kind and compassionate white Americans reinforced her conviction that injustice was not universal or inevitable. Moreover, Lee understood her family's struggles in relative terms: difficult as life was in the United States, it was still freer than life in Korea under Japanese colonial rule. This comparative perspective tempers the memoir's critique and situates immigrant suffering within a global historical context.

Christian faith plays a crucial role in sustaining the family's resilience. Lee and her older brother, Paik Meung Sun, were baptized by Dr. Samuel Austin Moffett (1864-1939), one of the early and most influential American Presbyterian missionaries to Korea (4).² Lee's father, a Presbyterian minister, instilled in his children a strong religious foundation that provided hope amid hardship. He urged Lee to understand American mistreatment of Koreans in historical context, noting that some Koreans had mistreated American missionaries in similar ways. This perspective allowed Lee to reconcile her gratitude toward American missionaries with her experiences of racial injustice. Throughout her life, she maintained a deep appreciation for Christian missions in Korea, even as her faith was often tested by the racially prejudiced attitudes of many American Christians. While American missionaries came to Korea with a desire to help, they were distinct from the broader society in the United States, where non-whites frequently faced disrespect and discrimination.³

Quiet Odyssey also sheds light on Korean immigrants' enduring attachment to their homeland. Despite their own financial precarity, Korean Americans felt a strong sense of obligation to family members in Korea and to the independence movement abroad. Lee recounts how her father repeatedly sent money to a needy half-brother in Korea who assumed that all Korean Americans were wealthy. More broadly, Korean immigrants contributed financially to the nationalist cause, demonstrating a transnational sense of responsibility. Lee even recalls meeting Syngman Rhee, later the first president of South Korea, highlighting the close connections between everyday immigrant life and major historical movements.

At the end of the memoir, Lee reflects on her long life in the United States with quiet satisfaction and acceptance. After decades of service—including ten years working as an interpreter for Koreans—she retires at the age of eighty-five and turns her attention to rest and reflection. Her final sentence reads, “I attend a church regularly where most of the members are black, because it is there I feel most comfortable” (130). This choice is especially telling, suggesting a sense of kinship shaped not by race alone but by shared histories of marginalization and endurance. The closing reflection encapsulates the memoir's central insight: survival is not merely a matter of perseverance, but of forging meaningful connections across boundaries of race and culture.

Self-Fashioning: Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces*



Shirley Geok-lin Lim's memoir is a lucid, often painful account of life across cultures, languages, and nations. Growing up in colonial-era Malaysia, Lim inhabits a complex social terrain shaped by Malay, Chinese, and British influences. Her reflections on language alone reveal the layered nature of her identity: Hokkien, the language of her ethnic community, is resisted; Malay, her mother's tongue, becomes intimate; English, acquired through British schooling, feels natural and empowering. Lim does not disavow the colonial education that shaped her intellectual life; instead, she presents it with honesty, recognizing both its privileges and its inevitability for colonial subjects. This nuanced stance gives the memoir its distinctive voice—critical yet un sentimental, reflective without nostalgia.

Family dysfunction forms one of the memoir's emotional cores. Lim's mother's desertion leaves a profound wound, one the author revisits with adult insight and restrained anguish. The mother's absence is not sudden but gradual, a slow withdrawal that culminates in physical departure. The mother's desertion of the family came as no surprise: “My mother may have resolved on escape long before she left us, but she shared nothing of herself with us in those final years. She was already absent; a weeping woman stripped slowly to some unknown other whose ultimate departure came to me as no surprise” (30). Lim's assertion that “[m]aternal abandonment is unthinkable in human nature” (30) underscores the psychic rupture this loss creates.

Lim's relationship with her father is equally complex: marked by emotional closeness that feels "illicit" (31) yet compromised by his emotional blindness and his decision to bring a cruel woman into the household as a stepmother. Lim's awareness of Western fairy tales about wicked stepmothers adds an ironic layer, showing how colonial literature shaped her expectations even as it failed to protect her:

"Peng is going to be your stepmother," Father said, beaming with genuine happiness. English-educated, I repeated the word "stepmother" to myself. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, Red Rose and White Rose, Hansel and Gretel, all the Western fairy tales in which wicked stepmothers and stepdaughters battled in moral conflict swam into mind. (58)

The household turns into a place where people feel distant from one another, both in how they speak and how they connect emotionally, with tension that is rarely voiced but always present.

Many years later, after her father's death, Lim and her stepmother meet again. Peng suddenly breaks down crying, exclaiming, "E sie, E sie!"—"He's dead, he's dead!"—and embraces Lim, marking the first and only time they have ever touched (201). In that moment, it is the father who unites them; his lingering presence remains strong between two women who have shared the deepest and longest love for him (201). In this way, Lim's life comes full circle with quiet irony: the two women who once harbored resentment toward each other now grieve together for the same man they both loved. Yet the father whose death reconciles them is also the central figure in the family's earlier unraveling. Throughout the memoir, Lim traces how poverty and hunger puncture any illusion of middle-class security.

Earlier chapters recount how poverty and hunger puncture any illusion of middle-class security. Despite her father's white-collar job, financial ruin—worsened by a pyramid scheme—pushes the family into prolonged deprivation. "For the first time in my life I felt hunger," she writes, describing the "emptiness" that left her "giddy and weak" (43), alongside the steady refrain that "there was no money." Yet hunger becomes so habitual that it sharpens appetite into gratitude: "The food was always delicious because we were always hungry" (54). Driven by need, Lim and her brothers stole fruit from neighbors' trees; when one brother fell and dislocated his wrist, the bone "did not set well" because there was no money for proper treatment, and he hid "the ugly angle of the bone" beneath a bandage (55). Such scenes render hunger not as a passing hardship but as a formative condition—at once physical and existential—that shaped Lim's acute awareness of vulnerability, injustice, and loss.

Perhaps the most disturbing sections of the memoir recount Lim's sexual awakening and the sexual abuse she experienced as a child. Her recollection of childhood autoeroticism is rendered without shame, framed as a private response to boredom and solitude. This fragile innocence is violently disrupted by her uncle's assault. Lim writes these scenes with restraint and precision, emphasizing the child's instinct for self-protection through silence and feigned sleep. The adult narrator's utter repugnance coexists with a clear-eyed understanding of how power and secrecy operate in abusive situations: "Disgust and revulsion stir my memories now. I see the child safe and alone in an autoerotic half-sleep, then a sudden weight of an older body, a wet kiss on the lips" (77). These passages are difficult but essential, revealing how trauma becomes embedded in memory and identity.

Beyond childhood, the memoir traces Lim's transformation into an immigrant, scholar, and writer in the United States. Her academic growth and professional achievements do not erase the fractures of her early life but provide new frameworks for understanding them. As an Asian American who lives between Malaysia and the United States, Lim reflects on belonging and displacement. She resists simple labels, instead embracing a transnational

identity shaped by migration, education, and language.

At the end of the memoir, Lim reflects on her experience as an Asian-born instructor of English and scholar in the United States, teaching first at a community college and later at four-year colleges and universities. At the community college, some students are surprised to find themselves in an English course taught by an Asian professor. Their evaluations include remarks such as “She pronounces ‘however’ as if there is a ‘r’ in it,” “Her long hair is very cute,” and “Although she is a foreigner, she teaches English good” (214). Such comments typify the mixed reactions that Asian American instructors often encounter—part curiosity, part fascination, part objectification, and part genuine respect. For her part, Lim admits that she also finds her students “exotic, inhabiting Raymond Carver’s world” (215). The sense of difference, in other words, is mutual: the gaze of curiosity moves in both directions.

As an accomplished scholar and writer, Lim believes that Asian American intellectuals contribute something vital to the United States, helping to shape it into “our world’s first world-civilization” (230). Unlike homogeneous nations, America’s diversity generates a creative synergy that strengthens rather than weakens it. To be both Asian and American is not without tension, yet Lim models a way of holding these identities together. She is often regarded as a foreigner in the United States, while her children—born of her marriage to a white man—feel compelled to assert that they are 100% American, a response to the persistence of racism. When they visit Malaysia, however, relatives teasingly label them Americans. This double consciousness may be common among ethnic minorities in the United States, but Lim demonstrates how such a hyphenated identity can become a source of insight and contribution, benefiting both the individual and the nation.

Ultimately, the memoir stands as a testament to survival and intellectual self-fashioning. It shows how a life marked by abandonment, hunger, and abuse can still yield clarity, agency, and moral authority. As a cross-cultural, trans-Pacific narrative, *Among the White Moon Faces* offers compelling insight into the experience of a hyphenated immigrant from Asia. Particularly illuminating are the chapters recounting her difficult childhood in Malaysia, her ambivalent feelings toward her first homeland, and her journey in the United States as an Asian-born academic.

Conclusion

Written by a non-academic immigrant with the assistance of a scholar, *Quiet Odyssey* is shaped less by theoretical reflection than by lived experience and moral testimony. Lee’s prose is plain, restrained, and quietly powerful, reflecting her commitment to bearing witness rather than interpreting her life through academic frameworks. The narrative foregrounds the everyday struggle for survival—racism, poverty, hunger, and displacement—while also documenting the historical realities of Korean immigration, Japanese colonial rule in Korea, and the sustaining role of Christianity within immigrant communities. In its simplicity and emotional restraint, *Quiet Odyssey* derives its authority from endurance and faith, offering readers an unembellished account of perseverance.

By contrast, *Among the White Moon Faces* offers a more analytically driven form of self-examination. Authored by a university professor deeply grounded in both Eastern and Western intellectual traditions, the memoir reflects Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s lifelong engagement with multiple cultures. Born to Chinese parents in Malaysia during the period of British colonial rule, Lim grew up navigating overlapping linguistic, cultural, and ideological worlds. Educated at a Catholic school, she was immersed in English while also maintaining ties to Chinese language and culture. This bilingual and bicultural upbringing profoundly shaped her literary voice, enabling sophisticated reflections on language, power, and identity that distinguish her memoir from more straightforward

immigrant narratives.

Winner of the 1996 American Book Award, *Among the White Moon Faces* is both accessible to general readers and intellectually demanding. While it recounts Lim's compelling life story—marked by family rupture, poverty, migration, and self-education—it also offers sustained, nuanced meditations on gender, race, and cultural belonging. Lim interrogates what it means to be a woman shaped by patriarchal structures in both Asian and Western contexts, as well as what it means to live in the United States as an Asian who is never fully assimilated nor entirely foreign. Moving fluidly between personal narrative and critical reflection, the memoir occupies a productive space between lived experience and scholarly inquiry, making it a distinctive and enduring contribution to Asian American literature.

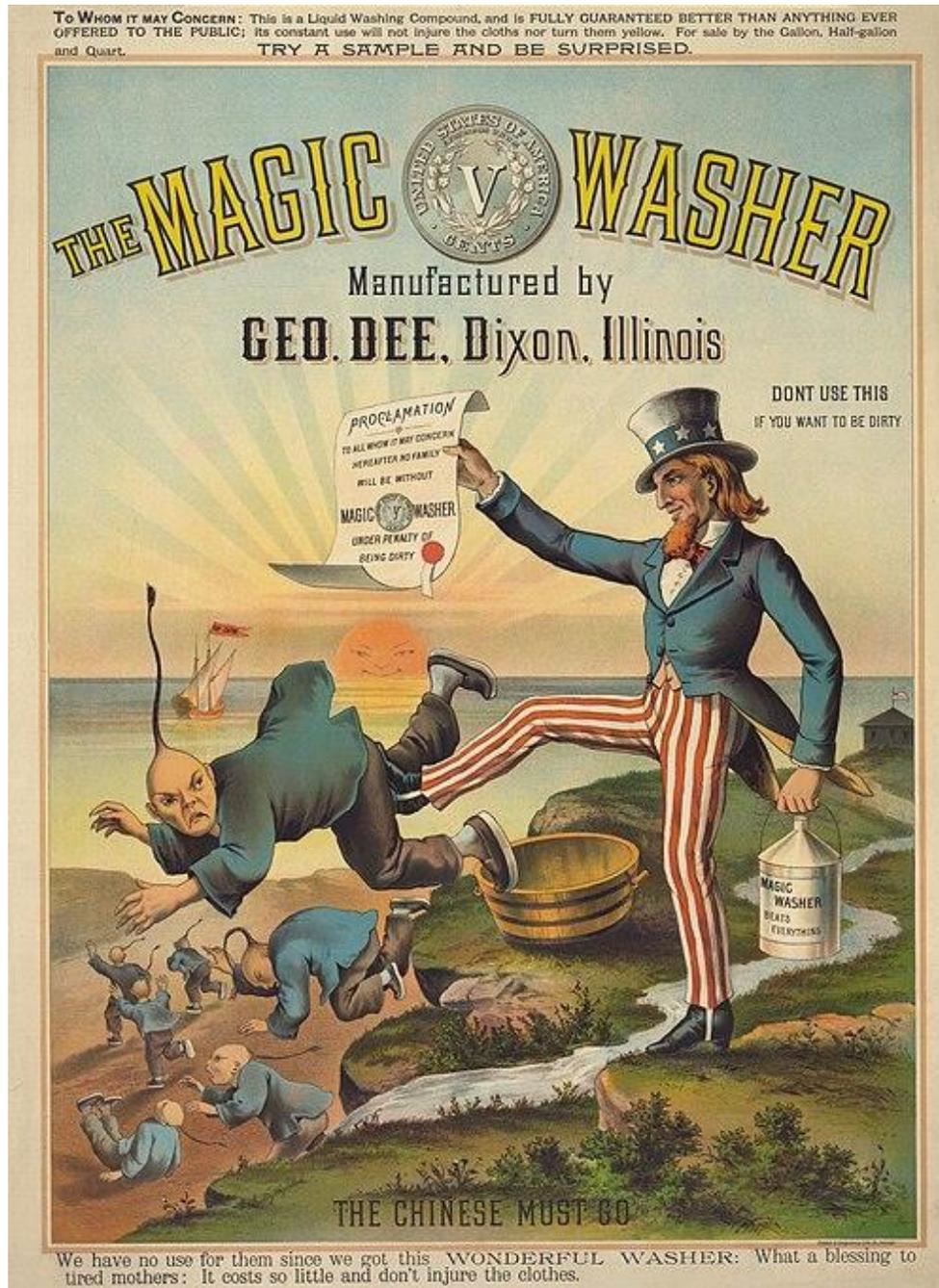
Notes on *Quiet Odyssey*

¹ Mary Paik Lee grew up in America during the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was in effect from 1882 until its repeal in 1943 by the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act. During this period, Asian immigrants endured many kinds of hardship. Some Americans tolerated and even welcomed them, but others resented and assaulted them. Below are two images from that era. The first drawing, published in *Harper's Weekly*, depicts the “Yellow Peril,” an anti-Asian ideology. In the image, a group of white Christian warriors prepare to confront a demonized Asian culture, represented by Buddhism, across the ocean. Led by a male angel wielding a flaming sword, they carry swords, shields, and spears. Above them, beams of light forming a cross serve as both a guide and a symbol of protection.



Hermann Knackfuß, *Peoples of Europe, Guard Your Dearest Goods!*, 1895, lithograph print. Public domain. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Published in 1886 by the George Dee Magic Washing Machine Company, *The Chinese Must Go – Magic Washer* depicts Uncle Sam kicking a Chinese man off a cliff while others flee, under the slogans “Don’t Use This If You Want to Be Dirty” and “The Chinese Must Go.” The cartoon links anti-Chinese sentiment surrounding the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act with a commercial advertisement.



The George Dee Magic Washing Machine Company, *The Chinese Must Go – Magic Washer*, 1886. Commercial/political cartoon. Public domain (PD-US). Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

² Horace N. Allen is usually considered the first Protestant missionary to arrive in Korea, coming in 1884. A year later, in 1885, Horace G. Underwood, a Presbyterian, and Henry G. Appenzeller, a Methodist, followed and became key early leaders in Korean Protestant history. Samuel Austin Moffett (1864-1939) arrived in Korea in January 1890 and became one of the most influential early American Presbyterian missionaries, particularly in northern Korea. After beginning his work in Seoul, he concentrated his ministry in Pyongyang, where he planted churches, promoted evangelism, and in 1901 started a small theological class in his home that later developed into major Presbyterian institutions; he also served as the third president of Soongsil University. Following 46 years of service, ending when Japanese authorities expelled him for resisting their colonial policies, he returned to the United States in 1936 and died in 1939.

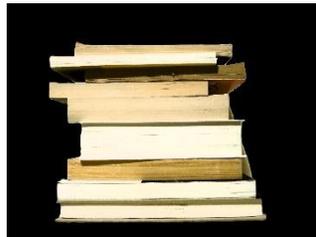


Samuel Austin Moffett in 1889. From the Moffett Korea Collection, *Photographs. Albums of Selected Old Korea Images*, Album D – Part 1: *Moffett Family, 1889–1899* (Album D, Part 1), Princeton Theological Seminary – Theological Commons. Unknown photographer. This image was never published prior to January 1, 2003, and is in the public domain in the United States under 17 U.S.C. § 303 (author unknown; created before 1906).

³ With the arrival of Western missionaries—especially from the United States—Korean society began to change significantly. Missionary schools and hospitals were established, and the idea of the equality of all people began to take root. Not surprisingly, many Koreans embraced the Christian faith, helping to lay the foundation for Korea’s emergence as a largely Christian nation. Here is a photograph of Korean Christians from 1914:



Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., *Reports of the Missionary and Benevolent Boards and Committees to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, 1914 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication). Image courtesy of Internet Archive Book Images via Wikimedia Commons. Public domain / no known copyright restrictions.



2. Dynamic Hills: Modern Social Realities in Eli Cranor’s Ozark Thrillers

Cranor, Eli. *Broiler*. Soho Crime, 2024.

_____. *Don’t Know Tough*. Soho Crime, 2022.

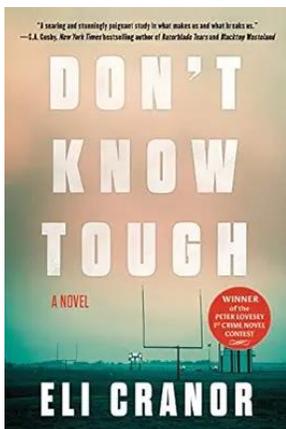
_____. *Ozark Dogs*. Soho Crime, 2023.

Eli Cranor—born in Forrest City, Arkansas, in 1988—is a new voice in Ozarks fiction reshaping the tradition of Ozark noirs. With the publication of three recent novels, *Don’t Know Tough* (2022), *Ozark Dogs* (2023), and *Broiler* (2024), all published by Soho Crime, he has gained wide national critical acclaim. The first novel won the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best First Novel and was a finalist for several other contests, including the coveted Hammett Prize. *Ozark Dogs* was also nominated for both the Barry Award for Best Novel and the CWA Ian Fleming Steel Dagger. In addition to fiction writing, he teaches creative writing and literature at Arkansas Tech University, and his weekly column, “Where I’m Writing From,” appears in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

Cranor not only incorporates elements of mystery, crime, and thrill but also goes beyond the scope of classic Ozarks noirs. Writers such as Daniel Woodrell and Nancy Allen established the genre’s core elements: rural poverty, geographic isolation, and moral codes shaped by family loyalty, endurance, and survival. Their narratives often emphasize long-standing community ties, intergenerational conflict, and cycles of violence rooted in regional customs.

Although Cranor continues this tradition (his epigraph for *Ozark Dogs* draws from Woodrell), he significantly expands the thematic and cultural scope of Ozark noir, offering a model attuned to twenty-first-century realities. His work diverges from earlier authors in several notable ways. First, he shifts focus from isolated outlaw subcultures to modern institutions—high school athletics, megachurches, and poultry-processing plants—that generate new forms of pressure, conflict, and moral ambiguity. Second, he foregrounds youth perspectives and psychological trauma, portraying characters who grapple with contemporary forms of instability, abuse, and emotional fragmentation. In doing so, his novels merge regional noir with a heightened sense of psychological realism.

Don’t Know Tough: A Sports Novel



Sports fiction, a subgenre of popular fiction, has made its way into Ozarks literature. *Don’t Know Tough* centers on a volatile high school football player from a deeply dysfunctional home. The novel revolves around the

murder of Travis Rodney, a stereotypical “white trash” figure who is an alcoholic and physically abusive. More compelling than the crime itself, however, is the turbulent inner life of Travis’s stepson, Billy Lowe, a star football player at Denton High School in Arkansas. Notably, the novel alternates between chapters written from an omniscient third-person perspective and chapters narrated by Billy himself. The third-person chapters are rendered in standard English, while Billy’s first-person narration appears in an ungrammatical, colloquial dialect.

Coming from a dysfunctional and violent family background, Billy finds football to be both an outlet for his anger and something to hold on to. As a player, he instills both fear and admiration on the field. Indeed, the end of chapter 27 reflects the importance of football in his life: “Feel my muscles twitching, aching for a bar and some weights. Need to lift something, to hit something—need Coach and football” (193). The head coach becomes his life mentor, and Billy is drawn to the coach’s daughter, Lorna: “Got Lorna clothes and that book [Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*] in my hand, holding them tight like they [were] the only thing I got left” (193). Midway through the novel, readers naturally become curious about how his relationship with Lorna will turn out. Is she one of those teenage girls attracted to a “bad boy,” or will the relationship grow into something more positive?

The coach, who himself spent six foster homes in five years during his childhood, takes Billy in. He tells Billy that faith in Jesus was instrumental in turning his life around and, as a born-again Christian, urges him to confess his sins and change his own life. Billy’s talent as an excellent football player offers a viable path to a college football scholarship, which could lead to a successful life that would be nearly impossible in his home environment. For Billy, tough but not particularly fast, football is the only avenue for upward mobility. A fellow white player even remarks on the racial dynamics of the sport: “[Y]ou [have] to be Black to play big-time college ball” (106). At the end of the story, a coach from Arkansas Tech plans to attend Denton High School’s football game to scout Billy’s potential. Billy’s mother, who is in jail, hopes he will impress the scout—unaware that he cannot play that night due to a gunshot wound. Football as a means of success for an Ozark white boy is not a common theme in fiction, and Cranor’s novel innovatively explores this possibility.

Billy also references Wilson Rawls’s *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1961), a coming-of-age novel set in the Ozarks, which he read in one of his classes. Perhaps the teacher assigned it to help students connect with their cultural heritage, as some Ozarks schoolteachers do. Although the story itself does not particularly impress Billy, he notes his connection to the protagonist, who shares his name and whose story unfolds in the Ozark hills. At Lorna’s suggestion, he begins reading Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* to improve his literacy. In this way, Billy is mentored by both the coach, who provides spiritual guidance, and Lorna, who offers moral and intellectual support.

The main plot of *Don’t Know Tough* revolves around Billy, but an equally intriguing character is his coach, Trent Powers. A man of excessive religiosity, Trent believes that Christian faith is the only proper guide for Billy’s life. Near the end of the novel, he baptizes Billy in cold water within a cave. In chapter 47, Billy narrates:

I can feel the water rising, his fingers digging in.

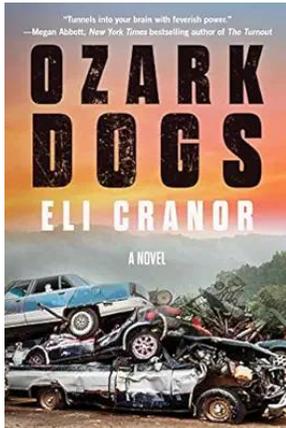
“But now that we’re here, in this dark place, together, I see that I’ve forgotten the most important truth of all. I can still *save* you, Bill.”

He wait a few more seconds, breathing fast and loud. Almost don’t recognize his voice when he say, “I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son...” and then he push me under. (309-10; italics in original)

Ironically, Trent is also responsible for killing Billy’s stepfather, an act that he justifies as punishment for the

suffering Billy and his family endured. This raises the question of whether Trent’s sense of moral righteousness aligns with the principles of Christian faith, or whether it reflects his own dangerous obsession with control and judgment.

The Hilly Underworld: *Ozark Dogs*



Ozark Dogs explores memory, revenge, and domestic violence through the intertwined lives of a Vietnam veteran, Jeremiah, and his granddaughter, Jo. The novel opens with a letter from Jo to her father, an inmate at the Cummins Unit on Highway 65 in Grady, Arkansas. The letter reveals that her father, Tommy Fitzjurls, is incarcerated for murder, casting a long shadow over her life. As a teenager, Jo lives with her grandfather, who runs a junkyard and fiercely protects her—a protection she deeply values.

The plot takes a sharp turn when Jo disappears. The Ledford family, who lost a son at Tommy’s hands, kidnaps her, propelling the story into a tense, suspenseful thriller. Through the Ledfords, the novel exposes the darker elements of the Ozarks underworld: meth production, white supremacy, religious extremism, family feuds, and violence. As the title suggests, it is a world of “dogs” in both literal and figurative senses: loyalty, survival, and aggression shape every relationship. Jo’s letters to her father also reflect her evolving emotions: in the first, she signs only her name; by the final one, she writes “Love” above her name, suggesting her feelings toward him have softened despite the circumstances.

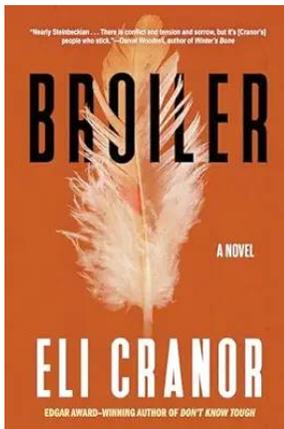
In the Author’s Note, Cranor emphasizes that *Ozark Dogs* is a work of fiction, though fiction inevitably draws on the author’s experience (291). Those familiar with the Ozarks will recognize that while most residents are kind and welcoming, crime does occur. For readers less acquainted with the region, some depictions may seem exaggerated, but fiction is not a factual report; it offers slices of life, which can occasionally feel stereotypical.

Although the Ledfords are depicted more negatively than the Fitzjurls, the novel does not present crime as a matter of simple right or wrong. In classic Ozark crime fiction, moral boundaries are often clear, with well-defined “good guys” and “bad guys.” In contrast, Cranor’s characters are morally complex, making choices that are understandable yet ethically ambiguous. The novel further departs from traditional conventions by showing crime as embedded in everyday life, emphasizing the situational and contextual nature of morality rather than framing actions in absolute terms.

Ultimately, *Ozark Dogs* redefines the moral landscape of Ozark crime fiction. Cranor portrays a world in which loyalty, vengeance, and survival intersect with ethical ambiguity, illustrating that human behavior cannot be

easily categorized. The characters—both victims and perpetrators—are shaped by history, family, and circumstance, creating a narrative in which morality is situational, violence has consequences, and choices carry weight. In doing so, Cranor elevates the Ozark crime novel beyond formulaic noir, offering a nuanced, ethically intricate portrait of rural life that reflects both the enduring traditions and the contemporary complexities of the region.

Ozarks Fiction Turning Multicultural: *Broiler*



For more than a century, most Ozarks novels centered on the lives of white characters—some portrayed as heroic, others as villainous. Nonwhite characters rarely appeared; when they did, they were often reduced to sidekick roles whose primary function was to illuminate white experiences. Their portrayals were frequently based on stereotypes. For example, in Harold Bell Wright’s novels set in the Ozarks, Black characters appear as physically strong but servile and lacking intelligence. They include “the black giant” in *That Printer of Udell’s* (1903), who is easily duped by the clever Dick Falkner, and “the old negro” in *God and the Groceryman* (1927), whose attitude is described as having a “rigid alertness much like a good pointer dog.”

In this regard, Eli Cranor’s latest novel marks a new direction in Ozarks literature: it presents nonwhite characters as fully realized people capable of propelling the entire storyline, with their struggles for livelihood taken seriously. As in his two earlier novels, the setting is the Arkansas Ozarks. In this noir narrative, a young Hispanic couple struggles to survive while working at a chicken-processing plant in Springdale, Arkansas. The workers are not allowed sufficient bathroom breaks, so they wear adult diapers during their work hours. Edwin Saucedo, one of the workers, becomes an eyesore for his white manager, who hopes to gain a promotion by making an example of him. The story turns perilous when Edwin responds to his dismissal by kidnapping his boss’s six-month-old son. Will the child be found? What will happen to Edwin and his wife, Gabriela Menchaca?

In this thriller, the author depicts immigrant labor and Latino poultry workers, challenging traditional portrayals of the Ozarks as culturally homogeneous. The novel also raises important questions about race and labor, signaling a meaningful shift in the region’s literary landscape. An Amazon reader aptly compared *Broiler* to Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), a muckraking novel set in a Chicago meatpacking plant. Indeed, there are some similarities between the two: both focus on immigrant families—the Lithuanian family in Sinclair’s work and the Mexican family in Cranor’s—and both expose inhumane work environments, functioning as works of social critique. However, *Broiler* is a protest novel in a more limited sense. Unlike Sinclair’s notably humorless work, Cranor’s novel is punctuated by moments of lighthearted entertainment. More fundamentally, Cranor’s book is a crime thriller, whereas Sinclair’s is a naturalist novel and a fictionalized social document.

Conclusion

In many ways, Cranor continues the new aesthetics of Ozark noir pioneered by Daniel Woodrell, portraying the region as a place marked by violence, meth infestations, feuds, poverty, and fractured families. At the same time, he introduces more contemporary social concerns. By foregrounding high school athletics, he examines the challenges faced by poor students in the hills. By incorporating themes of globalization, racial diversity, and labor exploitation, Cranor connects regional fiction to broader national conversations about economic precarity and shifting demographics. His work demonstrates that the Ozark crime novel is not a static regional form but a dynamic and adaptable mode of American storytelling, increasingly attuned to the complexities of modern rural life.

Cranor's novels reflect both the hallmarks of Woodrell's Ozark noir and the new possibilities of Ozarks crime thrillers. While sustaining suspense, he offers a panoramic view of contemporary life in the hills, which, like other parts of the nation, is undergoing social transformation. Traditional lifestyles persist, evident in a sense of individual freedom and adherence to an honor code. Yet the region, as depicted in his work, mirrors American society at large—an area not immune to national issues such as labor exploitation, immigration, and poverty.



3. Secrecy, Menace, and Moral Ambiguity in the Ozarks: The Novels of Laura McHugh

McHugh, Laura. *The Weight of Blood*. Thorndike Press, 2014.

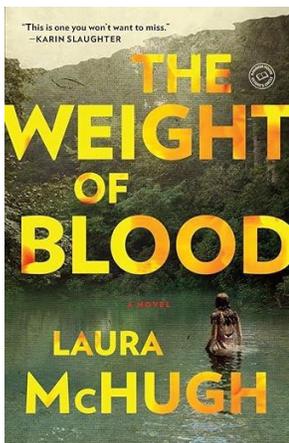
_____. *What's Done in Darkness*. Random House, 2021.

The earliest Ozarks novels appeared more than a century ago, with Harold Bell Wright's *That Printer of Udell's* (1903) often cited as the first. Wright followed this work with *The Shepherd of the Hills* (1907), *The Calling of Dan Matthews* (1909), and several other novels set in the region. His stories present the Ozarks as a moral and spiritual landscape, where the hills and hollows function as sites of ethical formation. Conflicts are resolved through reflection, communal guidance, and adherence to traditional Christian principles, offering a pastoral and optimistic vision of rural life.

At the same time, traditional Ozarks novels often reinforced regional stereotypes, including hillbillies, moonshining, lack of education, violence, and rural poverty. These portrayals persisted in many twentieth-century works, and some of these elements even appear in parts of Wright's works. With the commercial success of Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (2006), which was adapted into a film, contemporary literature has increasingly depicted the region as a setting of crime, poverty, and social struggle, a style sometimes called "Ozark noir." Laura McHugh's novels *The Weight of Blood* (2014) and *What's Done in Darkness* (2021) follow this trend.

In *The Weight of Blood*, small-town tranquility masks generational secrets surrounding the murder of one teenage girl and the disappearance of another. *What's Done in Darkness* centers on a cousin's disappearance on a remote farm, revealing betrayal, tension, and psychological complexity. In both novels, the Ozark landscape amplifies suspense and mirrors emotional isolation, portraying the region as a space where trauma, hidden violence, and family secrets simmer beneath the surface. The titles themselves—*Blood* and *Darkness*—hint at the sinister undercurrents that define these contemporary stories.

The Weight of Blood



In *The Weight of Blood*, small-town tranquility masks generational secrets surrounding the murder of one teenage girl and the disappearance of another. The Library of Congress classifies Laura McHugh's novel as addressing mothers and daughters, human trafficking, family relationships, and the Ozark Mountains region. At its core, the mystery centers on the murder of Cheri Stoddard, an intellectually disabled teenager who is kidnapped and later

found dead. The story is narrated by Lucy Dane, a former high school friend of Cheri, who pursues the case not only out of loyalty to her friend but also because her own mother, Lila, was murdered following a mysterious disappearance during Lucy's childhood. From the opening chapters, the novel establishes an atmosphere of suspense and intrigue, drawing readers into a layered narrative of generational secrets and violence.

Although McHugh is now a resident of Columbia, Missouri, her experience living in the Ozarks is evident in her familiarity with the region's culture and atmosphere. She recognizes the physical and emotional toll of life in the hills. For example, Chapter 4, narrated by Lila, includes a description of an Ozarks woman who appears prematurely aged due to lifelong labor. Ransome Crowley

had the posture and skin of someone much older than her fifty years, which she attributed, without bitterness, to a lifetime of hard work and hand-rolled cigarettes. She was so scrawny, I thought at first that she must be seriously ill. That was before I saw how she worked the rows, heaving rocks and yanking weeds with ruthless authority, her gray hair knotted in a heavy bun at the base of her skull. (71)

At the same time, the narrative occasionally relies on regional stereotypes. This tendency is evident in Lucy's observation: "It was common knowledge that in the hills, with infinite hiding places, bodies disappeared. They were fed to hogs or buried in the woods or dropped in abandoned wells" (13). Such depictions risk reinforcing a longstanding cultural stereotype; while crime exists in the region, it is no more frequent than in other parts of the country. Another stereotype appears in the portrayal of inbred families: "One table of inbred-looking assholes [...] knocked their drinks on the floor and laughed while I cleaned up their mess. [...] I concentrated on the lousy tips left on the tables and did my best not to look pissed" (77). These moments highlight the tension between McHugh's credible, experience-based depiction of the region and more sensationalized notions of Ozark life.

Supernatural elements also permeate the narrative, reflecting local beliefs and folklore. Ghosts are treated as real within the story: Cheri's mother remarks that she "got [Cheri's] goddamn ghost hanging on," while Daniel's mother claims she "gets rid of spirits" (142, 144). These elements reinforce the novel's themes of memory, trauma, and the lingering presence of past violence, linking the physical landscape of Henbane, a fictional town of just over 700 residents, to its haunted social and emotional terrain (126).

In addition to these supernatural elements, McHugh structures the novel with alternating narrators, including Lucy and her deceased mother Lila. Lucy's chapters focus on her investigation into Cheri's murder and the circumstances surrounding her mother's death, while Lila's chapters recount her own life, struggles, and eventual demise. Other characters, such as Ransome, contribute additional perspectives, creating a multifaceted narrative that traces patterns of disappearance, violence, and secrecy across generations. Through these shifting viewpoints, McHugh underscores how past traumas reverberate through families and communities, making the investigation as much an exploration of personal reckoning as a pursuit of justice.

Lucy assumes the role of a private detective, pursuing the cases of "Cheri and Lila, two lost girls," whose lives serve as bookends to decades of unresolved mysteries. She believes that solving one case may illuminate the other, as both follow similar patterns of disappearance followed by death. This detective framework drives the suspense while revealing Lucy's emotional investment and desire for closure in the face of family tragedy.

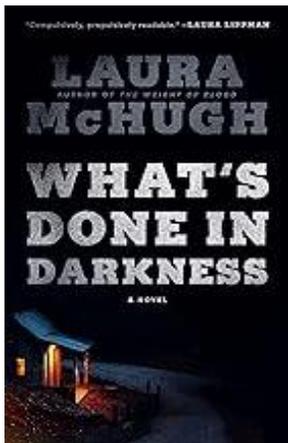
The novel's setting is grounded in realistic details that capture everyday life in the Ozarks. For example, Daniel drives a rusty old truck and takes night classes at a technical college in Springfield, hoping to save enough money to attend full-time in the fall (118). Fleeting moments of romance are interspersed within the tension-filled

narrative: “His hand traced the outline of my hair, my body, not touching but wanting to. Longing softened his voice” (113). These touches of intimacy and humanity offer relief from the darker elements of the story and deepen readers’ connections to the characters.

Finally, McHugh portrays the cruelty of outsiders who lack empathy for the victims. Tourists, fascinated by tragedy, visit the site where Cheri’s body was found and treat it as a spectacle: “One guy came in to ask me which tree it was, the one where they’d found ‘thar retarded girl’s parts’” (106). This scene underscores the dehumanization experienced by victims and critiques the voyeuristic tendencies of those removed from the realities of small-town life.

By blending suspenseful mystery, generational trauma, local folklore, and realistic depictions of rural life, *The Weight of Blood* presents a complex portrait of the Ozarks, where crime, memory, and human frailty intersect, creating a narrative that is both engaging and emotionally resonant.

What’s Done in Darkness



What’s Done in Darkness centers on a cousin’s disappearance on a remote farm, uncovering layers of betrayal, tension, and psychological complexity. As in *The Weight of Blood*, the novel situates its suspense within the Ozark landscape, which heightens dramatic tension while reflecting the emotional isolation of the characters. In both novels, the rural setting functions almost as a character itself, mirroring contemporary cultural anxieties and shaping the experiences of the young women at the center of the narratives.

Central to the novel are themes of excessive religiosity and a teenager’s rebellion against strict parental control. Like *The Weight of Blood*, the abduction of a teenage girl drives the plot, forcing characters and readers alike to confront the dangers that lurk beneath the seemingly peaceful rural environment. This parallel reflects McHugh’s interest in how isolated communities, when coupled with rigid social structures, can magnify personal vulnerability and suspense.

The prologue establishes the story and foreshadows the central conflict. Titled “Sarabeth, That Day: Age 17,” it introduces a teenage girl living in a stifling rural environment in Arkansas. Her fundamentalist Christian parents impose strict rules: Sarabeth must wear waist-length hair and ankle-length dresses, refrain from television and social media, demonstrate unquestioning obedience, and prepare to marry a man of their choosing when she turns eighteen. Any act of rebellion is met with physical punishment from her father. Midway through the prologue, Sarabeth prepares to sell produce from her family’s farm along a country road. When a man emerges from a truck

wearing a mask, she flees toward a cornfield but is quickly captured, propelling the novel into a suspenseful and morally charged narrative.

Although the prologue captures readers' attention, it relies heavily on familiar Ozarks stereotypes. Sarabeth's parents are depicted as ignorant, old-fashioned backwoods figures, while some of her female peers seem to have little ambition beyond marrying and pleasing a husband. For example, early in the novel, Sarabeth hopes to escape her parents' control by taking classes at a community college when she turns eighteen, but education is not a priority for her mother: "Then, when the course catalog she'd been waiting for finally arrived over the summer, Mama chucked it in the trash. *You'll be too busy taking care of your husband*, she'd said" (4; italics in original). In her early childhood, one of Sarabeth's friends, Retta, "had liked to pair up the dolls and give them weddings and babies" (5).

While such individuals may exist in the region, they are hardly unique to the Ozarks and can be found nationwide. Readers may also question how many contemporary fundamentalist parents would attempt to force their daughters into arranged marriages at eighteen. By foregrounding these familiar stereotypes, the novel underscores cultural and generational conflict, but it does so at the expense of nuance and complexity.

The prologue also stretches verisimilitude in its plot construction. Given the parents' strict and controlling nature, it seems unlikely that they would allow Sarabeth to sell produce alone and unprotected along a rural road. The lack of supervision conveniently enables the kidnapping, suggesting a plot device rather than a fully believable scenario. While this narrative choice creates immediate suspense, it invites critical scrutiny of the logic underpinning the story's opening events.

Because *What's Done in Darkness* is ultimately intended as entertainment, many readers may overlook its reliance on stereotypes and occasional narrative gaps. Nevertheless, the novel rewards closer attention to characterization and plot development. While six authors offer glowing praise on the back cover, readers who invest time and money in the novel have every right to form differing opinions about its literary and narrative merits.

By the novel's conclusion, Sarabeth reflects on the paradoxical nature of her Ozark upbringing, recalling the beauty of the landscape even as she mourns the oppressive confines of her home: "I had never hated the farm, the sweeping beauty of the land. What I had hated was the loss of myself, the act I was forced to put on, the suffocating dresses and submissive smile" (196). This reflection captures the duality of the Ozarks in McHugh's work: breathtakingly beautiful yet psychologically constraining, shaping its inhabitants and reinforcing themes of autonomy, rebellion, and resilience.

Conclusion

For more than a century, the Ozarks have provided fertile ground for storytelling, yet the region's depiction has shifted dramatically over time. In Harold Bell Wright's fiction, the Ozarks are infused with pastoral optimism and a clear moral vision. Good and evil coexist within a redemptive framework, and characters' ethical choices determine the course of their lives. Wright's narratives often reflect his background as a preacher-turned-novelist influenced by the Social Gospel, emphasizing faith, virtue, and the ultimate triumph of justice and morality. The region itself embodies moral clarity, testing characters while ultimately affirming virtue.

By contrast, Laura McHugh's novels present a darker, more psychologically complex vision of the Ozarks. Her work emphasizes secrecy, menace, and the ways past traumas reverberate across generations. Characters are

morally ambiguous, often constrained by circumstances beyond their control, and suspense frequently emerges from human frailty rather than straightforward moral lessons. While McHugh sometimes relies on regional stereotypes to sustain tension, her depiction of the Ozarks recalls classic naturalistic fiction, highlighting the harsher, seedier side of life. The landscape and its communities are morally and socially complex, emotionally charged, and shaped by forces—family, secrecy, and circumstance—that limit individual agency.

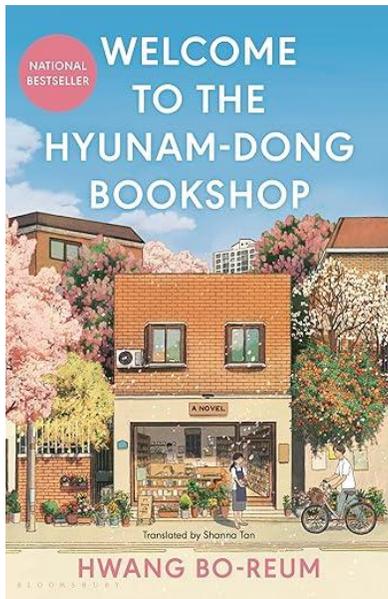
Taken together, the differences between Wright and McHugh illustrate a broader evolution in Ozarks fiction. Whereas Wright reassures readers with moral order and redemptive outcomes, McHugh challenges expectations by foregrounding ambiguity, psychological realism, and the darker dimensions of rural life. This evolution—from moralistic idealization to nuanced naturalism—demonstrates the Ozarks' enduring literary appeal while reflecting changing sensibilities and a growing interest in portraying rural America with honesty, complexity, and emotional depth.



[Book Review]

Hwang Bo-reum, *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop*. Translated by Shanna Tan. Bloomsbury, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-63973-637-9. 320 pages, \$18.99.

Reviewed by John J. Han



Upon publication of its English translation, Hwang Bo-reum’s *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop* (Korean: *어서 오세요, 휴남동 서점입니다*) received enthusiastic critical acclaim in the United States. Prominent outlets such as *The Atlantic*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Reader’s Digest* praised the novel for its gentle wisdom and relatability, while *Good Housekeeping* aptly described it as “a love letter to reading.” Such responses capture the novel’s appeal: it is a reflective work that speaks to readers seeking consolation, meaning, and balance in contemporary life. Both a healing novel and a gentle social critique, it uses reading as a central metaphor.

One of the novel’s greatest strengths lies in its accessibility. Written in a clear, plain style, it addresses concerns familiar to many ordinary readers, including burnout, failed relationships, career dissatisfaction, and the search for purpose. The story follows Yeongju, a young woman exhausted by the pressures of modern life and newly divorced, who decides to begin anew by opening an independent bookstore in Seoul. Narrated in a third-person omniscient voice, the novel traces her emotional recovery as she comes to accept that love, while valuable, is not the sole measure of a meaningful life. She also learns that certainty is elusive and that “[o]ver our life span, the right answer will keep changing” (21).

The Hyunam-dong Bookshop functions as far more than a retail space. It becomes a communal refuge where reading groups, writing seminars, and informal conversations foster connection and reflection. Through Yeongju’s interactions with customers and employees, the novel explores what it means to live well amid social expectations, economic uncertainty, and emotional fatigue. In this sense, the bookstore symbolizes a countercultural space—slow, attentive, and humane—within a fast-paced and competitive society. The novel also touches briefly on the struggles of independent booksellers, underscoring the fragility of such spaces in a market

dominated by bestsellers and commercial trends.

As a bookseller, Yeongju is frequently asked to recommend “a good book,” a question that prompts a meditation on reading itself. She defines good books as those written by authors who understand life deeply—authors who write “*about family, mother and child, about themselves, about the human condition,*” and who “*touch the hearts of readers, helping them to navigate life*” (27; italics in original). This definition reflects a widespread sense of emptiness and confusion in contemporary society: readers are not seeking intellectual prestige but connection and guidance. Hwang’s novel implicitly critiques canonical reading lists and elitist notions of literary value, suggesting that reading should be personal rather than performative.

At the same time, the novel raises questions about cultural orientation. Although Yeongju criticizes the publishing industry’s emphasis on bestselling authors at the expense of diversity, the works discussed within the novel are overwhelmingly Western, ranging from Aristotle and Goethe to Salinger, Hesse, and Kent Haruf. The absence of non-Western classics such as *Sunjata*, the *Ramayana*, or *Arabian Nights* reflects South Korea’s long-standing fascination with Western civilization, a legacy of modernization equated with Westernization since the nineteenth century. While this focus is understandable, it also highlights what is missing: engagement with global literary traditions beyond Europe and America. In an era shaped by postcolonial and New Historicist perspectives, this imbalance is noticeable.

Beyond literature, the novel offers insight into rapid social changes in South Korea. Traditional markers of success, most notably university education, are increasingly questioned. One teenage character chooses a three-month trip to Europe over higher education, reflecting a growing awareness that degrees no longer guarantee stability or fulfillment. The novel also captures the influence of American-style individualism, particularly among women. In a book club scene, a woman insists on being identified by her own name rather than as someone’s mother (194), signaling a shift away from identity defined by family roles.

These moments underscore a broader cultural transformation. As South Korea has achieved remarkable economic success, material survival no longer dominates everyday concerns. Instead, people grapple with questions of happiness and autonomy. Characters in the novel articulate a desire to live on their own terms rather than according to rigid social scripts. Minjun, a bookstore employee, voices this generational ethos when he describes life as a progression: “First, to cruise alongside what life has to offer. Then, to live it chasing dreams. And for the last shot in life, to live the life that I was better suited for, and to enjoy it as much as I can” (252). Success, once narrowly defined, becomes personal and plural.

As a novel celebrating reading, *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop* occasionally risks overstating the decline of readership. Evidence from online reader communities, such as Goodreads and Amazon, suggests that many people continue to read. In South Korea, strong sales of contemporary authors such as Han Kang demonstrate sustained literary engagement. Nevertheless, Hwang’s point remains persuasive: intentional reading requires effort in a world saturated with distractions, and those who persist do so because they recognize its intrinsic value.

Overall, *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop* is a warm novel that offers both narrative pleasure and cultural insight. While it reflects some tensions and contradictions, particularly Korea’s uneven negotiation between Eastern traditions and Western values, it successfully portrays characters who find solace, companionship, and answers through books and community. As such, it not only affirms reading but also thoughtfully portrays a society in transition.

북미한인교수협회(KAUPA): 세계를 선도하는 한인학자들의 요람

북미한인교수협회 (Korean American University Professors Association: KAUPA)는 1986년에 북미에서 학술활동 중이던 교수들이 공동연구, 후학지원, 그리고 네트워킹 구축을 위해 만든 단체로, 미국 버지니아의 Harrisonburg 에 있는 James Madison University 에서 1985년 10월 12일 맨처음 세명의 한인교수가 의기투합하여 첫 모임을 갖고 출범하게 되었습니다. (Appalachian State University 이성형 교수, James Madison University 최인달 교수, University of South Carolina 신의항 교수)

이후 회원들의 많은 관심과 협력으로 협회는 빠르게 성장하여 이제는 미국과 캐나다를 비롯하여 한국에서 활동하는 학자들까지 모두 5,300명 이상의 회원으로 구성된 국제적 학술단체가 되었습니다.

KAUPA는 회원들이 다양한 학문 분야에서 활동하고 있기 때문에 공동연구를 위한 기반이 잘 갖추어져 있습니다. 21세기의 연구 형태는 여러 분야가 통합되어, 여러 단체간 또는 다양한 주제간의 공동 연구가 대세가 되고 있어서, 이러한 추세에 발맞추어 KAUPA는 의미 있는 역할을 하고 있으며, 앞으로도 활동이 더 활발해 질 것으로 기대되고 있습니다. 공대 뿐만 아니라 인문대, 사회과학대, 이과대, 의치대, 경제경영대, 법대, 사범대, 음대, 미대, 신학대 등 많은 분야를 아우르는 교수님들이 함께 활동함으로써 자신이 가지고 있는 학술적 역량을 더욱 마음껏 발휘할 수 있는 튼튼한 기반을 가지고 있는 종합적인 전문학술단체입니다.

공동연구와 학술활동의 좋은 예로, 여러 분야의 교수회원들을 대상으로 종신교수직 임용심사를 성공적으로 마치는 방법에 대해 세미나를 개최했으며, 각종 연구재단의 연구비를 지원 받을 수 있는 방법에 대해 성공 경험을 나누는 발표회도 개최하였습니다. 이를 통해 협회는 각자 자기 분야의 장점을 적용시켜 종신교수직 임용심사나 연구비 신청에서도 좋은 결과를 얻을 수 있는 기회를 회원들에게 제공하고 있습니다.

KAUPA는 각종 사회적인 문제에도 학술단체로서의 목소리를 내고 있는데, 코로나 이후 빈번하게 발생하고 있는 아시안에 대한 혐오범죄를 규탄하는 차원에서 패널발표회를 개최하기도 하였습니다.

KAUPA는 후학양성에도 적극 매진하고 있는데, 장학금 (이강원 교수 장학금, 박재광 교수 장학금 등)을 출연하여 정기적으로 교수님들의 추천을 받아, 엄격히 심사한 후, 학부생들과 대학원생들에게 매년 장학금을 수여하고 있습니다. 이러한 활동은 북미를 비롯하여 전 세계에서 활동하고 있는 한인학자들에게 자부심을 키워주고 있습니다. KAUPA는 회원들의 소속감, 학문의 질 또한 높일 수 있는 여러가지 기회를 제공함으로써 이들이 자신의 각 학문분야 발전에 더욱 기여함은 물론 사회에서도 중요한 역할을 할 수 있도록 적극적으로 돕고 있습니다. 아울러 KAUPA는 고국의 한인학자들 내지 북미한인학자들이 노벨상을 비롯한 각종 저명한 상들을 받을 수 있도록 긍정적인 환경을 조성하는 데에도 힘을 쓰고 있습니다.

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