

# Outsiders within: Latin American Studies from East Asian Perspectives\*

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## ABSTRACT

**Outsiders within: Latin American Studies from East Asian Perspectives:**

This paper aims at contemplating on the contribution of East Asian perspectives to Latin American studies. To do so, the author revisits her own experience of being an East Asian scholar of Latin American studies and argues that East Asian scholars have a special positionality within Latin American studies as an outsider within, which is a theoretical concept raised by Patricia Collins who states that such positionality allows researchers to be more creative and critical. By applying such notion, this paper informs about unique contributions that East Asian perspectives should make to Latin American studies and illustrates a few ways to do so.

**Keywords:** East Asian perspectives, Latin American studies, Outsider within, Positionality, Insider-outsider debate

## INTRODUCTION

At the end of my dissertation on Mapuche's struggle to recuperate their cultural rights in the Chilean health sector, I asked myself who I am as a researcher and why I should study Latin America and I wrote,

I am a Korean who studies Latin America, specifically, in this work, Mapuche communities. I would usually be qualified by many as a total "outsider". I am not a Mapuche. I am not even a Chilean. I was not born in Chile and I do not speak Mapudungun, Mapuche language. Thus I would be

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an outsider. Am I? Not really. For Mapuche activists as well as non-Mapuche researchers, I am not “just” another outsider wondering around indigenous communities to find the truth about humanity because I am not even an “imperialist colonizing Western” researcher. At best, I am a stranger at the border. I am from the third sector, which is neither Mapuche nor Western (Park 2006, 281).

I tried to answer the questions about my identity or even authenticity as a researcher of Latin American studies. Toward the end of the methodology section, I confessed,

My position as a strange researcher at border does not end with the fieldwork. Whenever I submit a paper, I am tempted to change my name into a more “Latin” or “Western” name thinking that it might enhance my credibility or authenticity as a researcher. What about “Eva Parque” instead of “Yun-Joo Park”? or “Jennifer Park Rodrigues”? However, I constantly struggle with the politics of authenticity because it seems my authenticity as a Latin American researcher has no place in the world of the academia strongly divided based on “outsider/insider” dichotomy or “the Colonized/the Colonizers” dichotomy (Park 2006, 282).

When the Japan Society of Social Science on Latin America asked me to be a panelist on the session about East Asian Perspectives on Latin America and to present my thoughts on the possible contributions of East Asian perspectives to Latin American studies, I immediately recalled the insecurity I felt as an East Asian researcher on Latin America who has been educated in the US institution. I have to admit that I see striking resemblance between me who sees oneself as a stranger at the border and East Asian scholars of Latin American studies who have been treated as strangers at the border for a while in the world of Latin American studies. Before looking for possible contributions of East Asian perspective to Latin American studies, I believe we need to address first our peculiar positionality as East Asian scholars of Latin American studies.

## **POSITIONALITY OF EAST ASIAN RESEARCHER OF LATIN AMERICA**

As a Korean researcher of Latin America, the question I got the most was why I am interested in Latin American studies rather than

what I am interested in. This question comes from Latin Americans, Non-Latin Americans as well as Koreans. First of all, Koreans seem to want to know what is the contribution of Latin American studies has to Korean society. I often felt that question somewhat nationalistic because it implies the uncertainty about the usefulness of my study, especially when the questioner realizes that my research area is not about Korean relations with Latin America. Studying other area to serve to national interests seems to be the obvious starting point of any area studies. Since Latin American studies in Korea has never been one of dominant disciplines in Korean academic society, a small group of Korean Latin America researchers have responsibility of producing valuable knowledge about the region. Despite the necessity of knowledge production for Korean society, area studies with purpose of expanding national interests are dangerous to say the least. We already have learned many lessons about the danger of nationalistic area studies from the history.

Latin Americans are often very curious about my motivation and some of them even questioned my credential as a Latin American researcher. The curiosity about a Korean researcher is more than understandable due to the scarcity of Korean researchers of Latin America. The membership of the biggest academic association of Latin American studies in Korea, LASAK (Latin American Studies Association of Korea) reaches only to 350 members. The number of active members is expected to be much smaller. But many times, the queries about my doing research on Latin American issues goes beyond simple curiosity. Mapuche activists expressed unease about my research by saying that they do not want to “add” more colonizers snooping around their community. They have enough Western researchers observing their life. Why would they need more from East Asia?

Such reactions from Latin Americans turn out to be more than comprehensible considering the emergence of Latin American studies as a colonizing discipline from the Western world. The first Latin American scholars, as we all know, were European colonizers who collected information to serve the interest of the empire. Latin American studies has evolved since then and now we tried our best not to be colonizers. However, the very nature of area studies, “studying others”, makes such progress hard to notice. Why do you study others? Latin Americans have every right to ask researchers from outside of Latin America and we should be able to face the ethical as well as methodological question of studying others.

Interestingly enough, many Western researchers, who have dominated Latin American Studies, also show their curiosity toward my identity as a researcher of Latin America. Again, it stems from the lack of Korean researchers in the field. However, would I be asked multiple times why I study Latin America if my specialty were Chinese Studies? I wonder. Once I raised the point to my beloved American Latinamericanist friends, they became perplexed. Do Western scholars have better credential than mine in Latin American studies? Yes, or maybe. If you look at the most prominent academic works in Latin America, most of them is done by either Latin American scholars or Western scholars. Of course, it is partially because of the volume of researches done by Western scholars on Latin America. However, such abundant interests of the Western world on Latin America indicate the complex relation between Latin America and the Western world as well as the odd positionality of East Asian scholars.

Ironically, the positionality of East Asian perspectives crystalizes the essence of the relation between the first world and the third world within Latin American studies. There have been Latin American studies by the insiders i.e. Latin Americans and the Latin American studies by the outsiders i.e. the Westerners. Adding East Asian perspectives to the existing equilibrium turns out to be an effort to create “another” way of doing Latin American studies. The problem is East Asian scholars are neither insiders nor outsiders. We could argue that we are part of the first world now however we all feel that it could be quite difficult to be a “perfect” member of the first world. For example, China has been bigger economy than anybody else in the world for a while but it could not make it to G7. There is a rumor that Korea might be invited soon to G7 yet it is not clear. Japan has been rather successful in joining the first world among East Asian countries, but does it have the same privilege and power as other “Western” countries in the ruling block of the world? East Asian countries have been invited to be an honorary member of the first world. Are we even going to be actual members of the first world in the near future sharing power with “the powerful”? That seems to be a big question mark. In that sense, our identity as a scholar from the first world is in question.

Most important, our experience of having been dominated by the Western world enables us to sympathize with Latin Americans. We have experienced and are experiencing now orientalism and its byproducts. The industrialization process of Korean economy as an emerging market

resembles to Latin American economic development. Political turmoil East Asian countries had to go through and still are going through to achieve and stabilize democracy seems a lot like what Latin American countries have endured. However, does such resemblance in history, economy as well as political development make us an insider? Not really. We are, despite of being an honorary, still a member of the first world. Personally, I had hard time to realize my identity of a citizen of the first world because my upbringing in 1970s and 1980s tells me otherwise. However, I have to admit that the presence of East Asian countries in Latin America is not as an insider. Once employees of the global economy became an employer of the economy. Once we were the factory of the world, now we do more than just being factories in global economy. Therefore, East Asian scholars do not have a credential as an insider. Not anymore, I guess.

Understanding the contribution of East Asian perspectives to Latin American studies requires to reflect on who we are. We are neither insider nor outsider of Latin America. In this note, I argue that East Asian scholars of Latin American studies are outsiders within, who bring creativity as well as novel perspectives to the field. And this positionality holds key to explore contributions that East Asian perspectives could make to Latin American studies.

## **THEORETICAL INQUIRIES: EAST ASIAN RESEARCHERS AS OUTSIDERS WITHIN**

The relation between the subject of a research and its researcher has long been an important methodological issue in social science. Like natural science where total objectivity seems to be required and possible, the early social scientists tried to value objectivity as a core principle of methodology. Simmel could be one of them who argues for outsider doctrine. He stated that outsider “is freer, practically and theoretically...he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective ideals; he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and precedent” (Simmel 1950, 404-405).

Outsider doctrine was contested heavily by scholars of race and gender. Besides impossibility of ever being “object” toward any subject of social scientific research, those who criticize outsider doctrine contend that the outsider has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien

groups, statues, cultures, and societies. They further state that, unlike insiders, the outsider has neither been socialized in the group nor has engaged in the run of experience that makes up its life. Therefore, they argue, the outsiders cannot have the direct, intuitive sensitivity that alone makes empathic understanding possible (Merton 1972, 15). They proposed insider doctrine instead of outsider doctrine. The stance of those who believe in insider doctrine could be summarize with Connant's remark that "whites are not and never will be as sensitive to the black community precisely because they are not part of that community" (Connant 1968).

Merton's discussion (1972) on outsider's view vs. insider's view urges us to unite rather than confront each other around intellectual and theoretical line that divides those who hold each view. He points out the growing division between social scientists reflects divisions and conflicts in the larger society and, because of that condition, scholars often become combative about their position. The debate on insider's view vs. outsider's view turned into a matter of belief rather than a matter of academic conversation to find a common ground. His arguments cannot be more relevant in analyzing the invisible dissection regarding the questions of "who we are as researchers and which views embrace more truth". However, instead of producing a dialectical solution toward the dichotomy of views, the debate has resulted in the division of labor within the social science that we witness in these days. i.e. "outsiders" do their own little science project without consulting "insiders" while "insiders" write their painful or joyful stories thinking that outsiders would never understand them. So, contrary to what Merton wanted to see, the two views are yet un-merged and divisions persist.

As stated previously, East Asian scholars do not fall into either of the two categories of Latin American Studies. Actually, the two categories are too simplistic in the era of globalized world that endlessly produces new types of self and knowledge. The debates about insider's view vs. outsider's view stemmed from the social conflicts and problems of 1960s and 70s when the US had yet seen neither Wal-Mart made in China nor Mexico in the middle of L.A. Brilliant thinkers like Collins (1986) later captured the complexity of our ever-changing social reality and urged to develop further comprehensive approach to the views such as "outsider within". Collins urges sociologists to embrace their self and reflect it in the research. According to Collins, outsider within is an outsider but shares some experience and knowledge of the group. Good examples are a black female domestic worker who became honorary

members of white family but could never be a true member of the family or black feminists who are an honorary member of white sociology. They are seen as either not black enough or “sociological” enough. Collins states that such marginality is not a weakness rather could be a strength. The marginality that outsider within ended up acquiring provides her/him a creative position to evaluate the group by understanding it without being one of them. She goes on and said that such positionality should be used “wisely”.

As previously mentioned, I believe that East Asian perspective on Latin America is that of outsider within. We are neither insider nor outsider. We are outsider but share historical, economic as well as political commonalities with Latin America. Therefore, like Collins pointed out, we have a unique positionality as outsider within which allow us to be in a truly creative position to understand Latin America. Then how would we use this unique positionality “wisely”? I have several suggestions.

## **PROPOSALS**

East Asian scholars of Latin American studies have been heavily focusing on researching the relation between East Asia and Latin America. The vast majority of works produced by East Asian side of Latin American studies deal with trade relations, international relations as well as cultural relations between East Asia and Latin America. It seems natural that we do want to know more about ourselves and our presence in Latin America. No doubt that Latin American scholars also are intrigued by ever growing relations between the two regions. However, I propose that we should do more than just looking into our own relations with Latin America to further our contribution to the field.

As previously noted, East Asian scholars as outsider within have a unique position to deepen our understanding of Latin America. Developing more nuanced understanding of Latin America will benefit greatly the academic community of Latin American studies as whole. Therefore, I would argue that we should focus our effort more on researches of general topics of Latin American studies and share the analyses with our fellow colleagues both from Latin America and Western world.

Furthermore, compared to our researches on the relations between East Asia and Latin America, it is quite striking to see how little work has been done on comparing the two society. We often look into Latin

American cases and realize how relevant they are to the analysis of our own society. I also know that many Latin American scholars, too, examine East Asia in order to better understand their own society and its challenges. Now, it is time for us to engage in serious comparative researches of the two regions. We could highlight differences as well as similarities in a creative way as outsider within. By doing so, we could contribute to the understanding of humanity, which by the way is the sole purpose of social science.

In recent days, we witness a growing interest on East Asian perspectives on Latin America. I welcome it with all my heart. I wish such interest should serve to enrich Latin American studies as whole by adding our unique and creative positionality as an outsider within.

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