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CONFERENCE LETTERS

Academy of Korean Studies International Conference: Reciprocity in Comparison: Spain, Vietnam, Italy, and Korea

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On October 29th, 2020, the Academy of Korean Studies in South Korea held an international conference online. Participants from Europe joined the conference at 7am, participants from the United States at 2am, Korean participants at 3pm, each at their local time. The real time online conference was conducted with a service of simultaneous translation in English and Korean. The title of the conference was “Reciprocity in Comparison: Spain, Vietnam, Italy, and Korea”.

The research presented was wide-ranging, very relevant to cooperative enterprises, which comprise a large and growing sector of social and business organizations, a sector of ever greater socioeconomic relevance worldwide. Reciprocity and related relational phenomena—trust, solidarity, social capital—, *mutuality in general*, are all crucially important not only for cooperative organizations, but for healthy and meaningful social life in the widest sense. It is crucial if human beings are to be successful in terms of both their technical and economic goals, their social and human goals, not to mention environmental sustainability. Presenters covered cooperation and reciprocity in Korean society, social enterprise in Vietnam, worker-member transfer in Mondragón,

cooperative governance in Italy and the history of a cooperative and ecological movement in Korea.

The first panel had three presentations. Imanol Basterretxea and Josu Santos (University of the Basque Country, Spain) presented on the different labor flexibility measures adopted by Mondragón cooperatives in times of crises. Mondragón cooperatives have always offered an almost 100% job security to its working members in exchange of labor flexibility. Worker-owners accept working time flexibility, in the form of reduced working hours when demand goes down and recovering those hours when demand goes up again, or even working non-paid extra hours. Worker owners also vote for wage reductions in times of crises and also adopt measures of functional flexibility, through the relocation of redundant members in cooperatives in crisis to those in need of workforce. Their work analyzes how this reciprocity issue of job security in exchange of flexibility can suffer different breakdowns and limitations, and how different stakeholders can resist the adoption of labor flexibility measures.

Silvia Sacchetti and Ermanno Tortia (University of Trento, Italy) shed light on the complexity in the motives of members in cooperatives and their relationship with the incentives offered by organizations. Using rich survey data of Italian social cooperatives, they show that the members are driven by their strong collective and non-monetary motives when they join the organizations. It is a good thing, therefore, that the cooperatives put great emphasis on non-material incentives in their rules and organizational designs. The members, however, cannot survive on their ideals alone and monetary incentives become increasingly more important for sustaining their commitments. The findings highlight the importance of institutional designs that reflect this complex and dynamic nature of what motivates cooperative members.

Esther Horat (University of Zurich, Switzerland) presented research based on her ongoing fieldwork in Vietnam, revealing multiple complexities in Vietnam's fast-growing sector of social enterprise, starting with what "social" means in social enterprise. Vietnam is one of only a few countries in Southeast Asia that has codified social entrepreneurship into law. Vietnamese social entrepreneurs she interviewed conceptualize the "social" nature of their enterprises in terms of their own moral commitments, whereas the government focuses on their impacts that can be standardized and measured. She argues that if we want to understand what makes social enterprises "social" in Vietnam, the answer does not primarily lie in them trying to solve social problems, but in their moral reasoning of "doing good".

Together, these studies highlight multiple dimensions of complexity in cooperatives and social enterprises arising from the interplay between individual members, entrepreneurs and managers, markets, and the government. Harvard Economist Dani Rodrik once said that the correct answer to almost any question in economics (and social science in general, of course) is that "it depends"; that it depends on some critical features of the real-world context. These three presentations unquestionably contribute to our understanding of the scope of the conditions on which the success of social cooperatives and enterprises critically depends.

The reality of cooperatives and social enterprise, needless to say, is more complex than their ideals. The main task of scholars then is to examine them in their full complexity, not just their

“real utopian” ideals, nor their limitations and failures. The three presentations of the first session effectively highlight some of these complexities.

The second part had two presentations.

First, So Nam Kim (National Institute of Korean History, South Korea) presented on the history of a special group in Korea’s cooperative movements. The paper discussed a series of historical events from the formation of the Wonju group. The Wonju Group played one of the most important roles for democratization movements in the country. It led the so-called “life movement” of the 1980s and to the Hansalim consumer movement, thereby playing a leading role in Korea’s new social movements such as environmental movement, peace movement, rural-urban solidarity movement, anti-nuclear movement, and consumer cooperative movement. Wonju is a famous city as a representative place where religious social participation activities were actively carried out in the community since the 1960s. The Catholic Church played a key role in democratization of society. The city also produced local “new society” philosophers, such as Il Soon Jang and Ji Ha Kim, who developed a local philosophy based on local religion *Donghak* (Eastern Learning) and Taoism. The presenter showed the overview of the local history based on his thick monograph on the Wonju Group.

Second, Chae Yoon Lim (University of Wisconsin, USA) and Dong Kyun Im (Seoul National University, South Korea) presented social survey results. As a part of the multi-year research project on reciprocity and cooperation on contemporary Korea, the interdisciplinary research team led by Do-Hyun Han (Academy of Korean Studies, South Korea) has designed and conducted several surveys to examine the norms and practices of reciprocity, cooperation, and social trust in contemporary Korea. Even though many past surveys in Korea had examined some aspects of these norms and practices, there had been no comprehensive survey that would allow researchers to systematically study the relationship between them. Measures scattered in different surveys also make it difficult to track trends over time. One of the main goals of the research team was to develop a comprehensive survey with wide range of measures on the norms of reciprocity and trust and cooperative practices in one place—similar to the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey in the United States—and which can also be repeated so that researchers can track the trends in the fast-changing Korean society. Therefore, each year’s survey contains a number of “core” items measuring social trust, reciprocal norms, and formal and informal participation in civic and community activities. In addition, each year has a special focus. The 2018 survey, for example, included a number of questions to explore how emotional experiences of social interactions in daily life are related to the radius of social trust and the sense of social solidarity. In 2019, the survey focused on how the fast-growing number of single-households in Korea could shape the future of reciprocal norms and cooperative behaviors. In 2020, the team conducted three large surveys, including a survey of employees in social cooperatives and social enterprises. The survey data has already produced some interesting findings. For example, in a paper recently published in *Social Indicators Research*, two members of the research team (Dong-Kyun Im and Chaeyoon Lim) used the 2018 survey data to show that Koreans have a narrow trust radius and that the radius is negatively related to individualistic value orientations, findings that contradict the research mostly based on European countries. A working

paper based on the 2019 data examines how the rise of single households is changing the culture of family and social meals, which in turn is affecting social cohesion. Preliminary analysis of the 2020 data shows that individuals' feelings of relative deprivation increase their ethical and relational cynicism, which hurts their reciprocity beliefs.

In the conference, researchers' findings revealed the complexity of "other-regarding" human motivation and behavior, how they are differently shaped and manifested in different social, historical, cultural and organizational contexts. Participants were reminded, by the impressive amount of contemporary and historical data described, that *Homo sapiens* is a mix of the self- and other-regarding, the competitive and cooperative, and that the shifting interplay of numerous factors in our immediate and broader social environments leads to a wide variety of social results, some sobering and others encouraging. Questions and discussion shed light on future research challenges and potential practical approaches to strengthening reciprocity and collaboration. Fred Freundlich (Mondragón University, Spain), who was a discussant at the conference, said researchers, practitioners and policymakers would be well advised to follow this research if we are to achieve the degree of cooperation and co-responsibility that will be needed—at the local, organizational, national and international levels—to begin to address humanity's global challenges in a serious and sustained way.

This conference is part of the large international research project "Genealogy of Reciprocity and Cooperation" funded by the Academy of Korean Studies. Do-Hyun Han is the head of this research team set up in 2018. The research team involves about 30 scholars from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, folklore, sociology, business, history, and political science. Although they work together under one team, scholars have their own individual and autonomous research topic. The research team has just finished stage one (2018-2020), and starts a second three years research period in 2021. The research team is composed of three groups.

The first group focuses on historical cases of reciprocity and cooperation in premodern Korea. This group is composed of historians and social scientists. For the last three years, 2018-2020, this group found and analyzed many interesting cases. Scholars in this group investigate credit rotary associations (*Kye* in Korean), community organizations (*Hyangyak* in Korean), occupational networks, kinship networks, tax payment organizations, etc. These historical studies are very helpful for understanding reciprocity and cooperation in contemporary Korea.

The second group studies theoretical issues on reciprocity and cooperation. Most of the scholars of the second group are anthropologists. Although Korean society has rich heritage and tradition of reciprocity and cooperation, the academic concept of reciprocity or that of the solidarity and social economy was introduced from Europe and the US. From a critical perspective, the second group discusses the genealogy of reciprocity in Korea and tries to find localized practices.

The third group focuses on practices and behaviors of reciprocity and cooperation in contemporary Korea. This last group is composed of social scientists. Scholars in this group study cooperatives, social enterprises, governance, connectivity, social infrastructure, and sharing economy. In addition, this group conducts systematic and regular social surveys on reciprocity and cooperation of Korean people.