For Boston Congress of the IPA

For Development of Psychoanalysis in the Asian Context

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The Korean Psychoanalytic Study Group

1. Brief summary of the history of the development of psychoanalysis in Korea;

In May 1980, 5 psychiatrists including Professor Cho made a group named the Seoul Psychoanalytic Study Group for psychoanalytic study. It was the beginning of psychoanalytic thinking as a group in Korea. But only a few psychiatrists saw patients with psychoanalytic orientation at that time.

Since then, for almost 30 years, the Korean Group has held regular meetings for psychoanalytic studies domestically and has invited over 60 foreign psychoanalysts not only for teaching psychoanalytic concepts but also for case seminars on psychoanalytically treated patients. These psychoanalysts from abroad have been a huge influence on individuals who had interests in getting psychoanalytic training abroad. With the help from these foreign psychoanalysts, some Korean psychiatrists went to the United States for psychoanalytic training. Also, these 60 foreign psychoanalysts had given more accurate psychoanalytic orientations, so that more psychiatrists in Korea came to see patients with more psychoanalytic orientation. As a result of this atmosphere of belief in psychoanalytic orientation, the Study Group opened the Advanced Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Course in 2000.

In 2008, the IPA approved the Korean Psychoanalytic Study Group and the Allied Center. And finally in September 2009, the Korean group established its psychoanalytic training program with 5 IPA recognized analysts who were partly and fully trained in psychoanalysis in the United States.

As of July 2015, the Korean Psychoanalytic Study Group has 10 IPA recognized analysts, 5 training and supervising analysts, and 25 candidates from two groups. We are going to recruit the third candidate group for psychoanalytic training in this November. In the near future, we are going to apply for a Provisional Society of the IPA. In addition to the Study Group, we have almost 430 additional friends for the Study Group. That is 200 members in the Allied Center and another 230 members who completed the Psychotherapy Course of the Korean Association of Psycho-analysis (KAPA).

The most important thing, I think, in the development of psychoanalysis in Korea as well as in other area of the world, was the establishment of psychoanalytic training program. With the start of the training program, and with the need to see patients in analysis for graduation for candidates, the number of psychoanalytic practice began to expand in Korea. Through the expansion of analysts’ and candidates’ clinical experience in analyses, we came to recognize that psychoanalytic thinking is not only for academic studies but also for clinical practice for patients who suffered from various kinds of neurosis and personality disorders.

2. The status of psychoanalysis in Korea; what is the interactive relationship between local social culture and psychoanalysis?

I am not an expert in social science and I did not have enough time to think about the relationship between psychoanalysis and the Korean culture. In fact, it is extremely difficult to gauge to what extent the traditional Korean culture could accept orientations of psychoanalysis. It is definitely true, however, for people of any culture and society to have psychoanalytic unconscious mind and the Korean culture is not an exception.

According to some psychiatrists (Kim, 2000 and others) who paid attention to the unique Korean culture from psychoanalytic frame of reference, analysis and analytic psychotherapy are suitable for more westernized and psychologically minded people in Korea. But only a few people fit those criteria. Kim said that they frequently confronted substantial difficulty in doing psychoanalytic psychotherapy for Korean patients, especially those who were entrenched in the Korean traditional values. I can list the following as some traditional values which may run contrast to psychoanalytic orientation in Korea: lack of individualism, projection toward the outer world instead of introjection of one’s mind, somatization, tendency to express emotions without any insight, and overvaluation of harmony with outer world instead of finding conflict in an inner mind.

But the more recent tendency of emphasis on individualism, narcissism, and break-up of the traditional extended family system in Korea might place Korean people in need of more analytically oriented therapies. From my own experience with patients, I could tell you that more Korean people would like to have analytically oriented therapies once they recognized the importance of childhood emotional experience and of their need to talk to someone about themselves.

Recently, I think, more and more psychiatrists are recognizing the suitability of psychoanalysis and analytic oriented psychotherapy for psychiatric patients in Korea.

I believe that the following facts are evidence of more suitability and of more promising future of psychoanalysis in Korea. It is true that we came to have more and more biology-oriented psychiatrists in Korea as any other countries. The very interesting phenomenon is that the percentage of psychiatrists who wanted to get a 2-year-course in psychoanalytic psychotherapy (the KAPA is responsible for this program) is gradually increasing. For example, the number of applicants for the course for this year was 34, which means that over 20% of newly appointed psychiatrists in Korea wanted to get training in psychoanalytic oriented psychotherapy. It was quite a bit of progress, because I found that less than 20 out of 120 (less than 15%) newly appointed psychiatrists wanted to get the psychotherapy course in 2000’s. Compared to the numbers in 1992, the increase is more striking. At that time, I was an applicant for a member of the KAPA. The number of the applicants for our group was 3 out of 100 (less than 5 %).

In Korea, one part of the psychiatric board examination is analytic oriented psychotherapy. It has been a tradition since the early 1980’s. I think it is important for us to continue psychoanalytic training for psychiatric residents and psychoanalytic education in medical schools in Korea. In the past, there were so many psychotherapy oriented faculty members in university hospitals in Korea. Unfortunately, however, the number of the faculty members in medical schools and university hospitals became less compared to biology oriented faculty members. This might explain one of the reasons why so many newly appointed psychiatrists wanted to get psychotherapy course. It seems to me that they want more knowledge about psychoanalysis and analytic psychotherapy because they did not have enough training when they were psychiatric residents. We felt we should not discourage them.

3. Is it easy for the Korean people to get to know and accept psychoanalysis, in terms of understanding themselves, relationships, social phenomenon, etc. through psychoanalytic perspectives? How should we understand that ease or difficulty?

I could say a few things about the Korean society regarding psychoanalysis, which seems to be very common in other Asian countries.

The fast-paced changes that Korean society experienced, such as the rapid rate of economic growth since the 1960’s made it difficult to choose problem-solving methods which require a lot of time. Generally speaking, Koreans want very quick solutions. However, analysis definitely cannot be a quick solution which they want. My question is whether or not analysis is suitable for rapidly changing societies such as Korea. Koreans may think that they do not have enough time to reflect on their past. They might think that they are busy enough already dealing with their current problems. They might think that what they need is a strong strategy for the future. As a matter of fact, whenever I visited American cities such as New York and Cleveland where I got psychiatric and psychoanalytic training, I was impressed by “unchanging” landscapes of the cities over 10 years. I could see the same buildings and streets that I had seen 10 years ago. That was quite impressive compared to the constantly changing sceneries of Seoul. Seoul is a very dynamic city, and every year, it seems to undergo dramatic changes. The largely consistent sceneries of the American cities that I visited made it easy for me to reflect on the past experiences that I had 10 years ago. The consistent atmosphere in which almost nothing changed for a long time could be a good atmosphere for psychoanalysis. When I visited Vienna and the Freud Museum there, I became more sure of this belief. I was struck by the vividness of 16th or 19th century pictures in Vienna museums, especially because the people in the pictures did not seem different from the people out on the Vienna streets. It was in spite of the fact that people on Vienna streets did not wear 16th or 19th century clothes. I thought that with this consistent atmosphere, in which the past is not quite different from the present, where the past and the present coexist, Freud had thought that the past was as important as the present and the future. This consistent atmosphere of Vienna must have influenced Freud. That might explain one of the reasons why Freud began to think about his past and became to found genetic interpretations of patients’ thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

On the other hand, rapid changes of society could have many adverse effects especially the people’s identity confusion. In the era of confusion, they may need more accurate knowledge about themselves. This could be achieved by psychoanalysis and analytic oriented psychotherapy. What I am trying to say is that analysis could give more stability for people of a society that went through a dramatic changes in terms confusions of both physical environment and inner mind. The other thing that I would like to mention is that with the rapid economic development, there has been less adequate rearing and more childhood abuse and neglect in Korean society. That means there is increasing number of severe personality disorder patients in our society now. And I think the most important and most efficient way in dealing with these personality disorder patients will be the methods of psychoanalysis and analytic psychotherapy.

I could discuss the problems of socio-medical system in Korea, too. The National Medical Insurance System introduced in 1970’s made the clinical application of psychoanalysis or analytic psychotherapy difficult. Even though psychoanalytic treatment is one of the items covered by the insurance system, the fee set by the system is quite low compared to that of the US or European countries. Therefore, the system has accelerated the decrease of psychoanalytic treatment in Korea. However, the number of patients who accept extraordinary fees not covered by the system is increasing, now.

Since 1980’s, biologic psychiatry has weakened psychoanalytic treatment. Biology-oriented psychiatrists don’t talk about conflict, but they talk about dopamine and serotonin, with which most psychiatric patients were not satisfied. Ironically, I think, the trend of biologic psychiatry is strengthening the need for psychoanalytic treatment.

4. What is the idea of establishing constructive relationships among Asian countries so as to build up psychoanalytic area in Asia?

First of all, we could have regular meetings and discussion between analysts among these countries especially regarding the discussions about psychoanalytic cases. Through the discussion, we could find out the core elements of analysis and the cultural factors which were included in the analysis. It was like my discovery that neuro-vegetative symptoms of depressive disorder are unanimous phenomena among Eastern and Western population. It was through my experience in the United States and Korea as a psychiatrist.

Second of all, we could realize the idea of a psychoanalytic journal focused on Asian countries. I have heard this idea since a few years ago in international meetings, especially in the meetings among Asian countries. But nobody tried to make this idea come true.

Third of all, I think, we all need money to realize the above mentioned ambitions and other methods to improve the communication among Asian psychoanalysts. It may be naïve for us to be able to get some support from the IPA. I think we need to think about “balance” issue again. To be frank with you, it is true that we had thought that we needed very advanced psychoanalytic theories and techniques from developed countries such as the US and Europe. I mean we have visited and contacted psychoanalysts of the US and European countries, but we have not thought about mutual learning by communicating with Asian psychoanalysts. I do think we need to continue communicating with far advanced psychoanalytic experiences from the US and European countries and to start communicating with our own Asian colleagues. I mean we need to balance in investing our energy. I think it is time to think not only about Western psychoanalysis but also about Eastern psychoanalysis.