

## **A Portrait of Early American Anthropology Drawn from the Analysis of Scholars Who Studied Korea a Century Ago**

*An Asian Frontier: American Anthropology and Korea, 1882–1945*, by Robert Oppenheim.  
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Heon-mok JUNG

In the context of an individual discipline, education and research on its history constitute an important part of work, as they can contribute to forging future directions by reflecting on its trajectory up to the present. Anthropology is no exception, which has a relatively short history in the fields of humanities. Looking at the current educational practice in Korea, anthropological history classes, both at the graduate and undergraduate level, generally start with the introduction of British and American anthropology which emerged between the late 19th and the early 20th century—if extended, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, founders of French anthropology, may be added. This is the same in my case as well; when I think about my training at a Korean university and also the curricula I use for my lectures in history of anthropology classes. This may be an inevitable result originating from the fact that anthropology is rooted in Western societies.

At the center of the early history of anthropology are so-called big name scholars who left behind significant achievements in its development. In this loop are included leading figures of 19th century evolutionary

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Heon-mok JUNG is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Culture and Arts (Anthropology),  
The Academy of Korean Studies. E-mail: devius@aks.ac.kr.

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anthropology such as Edward B. Tylor, Lewis H. Morgan, and James G. Frazer, and also founders of modern anthropology in the 20th century, including Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Alfred Radcliff-Brown. Their lives and academic accomplishments gave them enough qualifications for their establishment as main actors on the stage of early anthropology. Another element deemed important in the history of anthropology is the region or “field” as an object of study. Because of the discipline’s characteristic of stressing construction of theory based on ethnographies, it is possible to present a representative region associated with a particular subject. For example, Africa under colonial domination by imperial Europe was regarded as the place for kinship research; native Americans had to be studied to understand myths; and Melanesia was seen as the theoretical origin of gift exchange and economic anthropology. However, when Korea is tracked down along anthropological researchers or locations of research, it is actually very difficult to find anything associated with it in its entire history of anthropology.

In this regard, Robert Oppenheim’s book, *An Asian Frontier: American Anthropology and Korea, 1882–1945*, is quite a notable achievement. That is because it traces the footprints of American anthropologists who studied Korea, a country on the periphery of anthropological research, from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century. The years 1882 and 1945 in the subtitle of the book refer to two time points of great importance in the Korea–US relations. As it is well known, 1882 is the year when diplomatic relations between Joseon Dynasty and the U.S. were initiated for the first time, while 1945 is the year when Korea began to be placed under the direct influence of America upon obtaining independence with Japan’s surrender in World War II. The work contains multi-faceted approaches and analyses on American anthropologists who had interest in Korea and studied it during that period.

It was Japanese scholars who produced the largest bulk of anthropological research outputs on Korea during the period, and it is not difficult to find literatures on their activities and findings. In addition to them, activities of Korean anthropologists of the same period have recently been brought to

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light gradually in Korea.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, American anthropologists who studied Korea have rarely been noticed anywhere until today. Of course, research achievements of American anthropologists who have studied Korea from the second half of the 20th century to the present have been taken note of continuously (e.g., Janelli and Yim 1982; Kendall 1985; Abelmann 1996, 2003; Harkness 2013), and they actively engage in exchanges with Korean academic circles. But the area of American anthropology that studied pre-modern Korea—before the establishment of the Republic of Korea in the mid-20th century—has remained in an academic vacuum.

At this juncture, Oppenheim presents unexpected research findings. According to him, although Korea (to be precise, *Joseon*) might not have been the best object of study in the view of American anthropology, which was in the process of finding its place as a modern discipline at the end of the 19th century, it had importance and attraction of its own as a “second-tier” one at least. On this point, the author gives an interesting piece of information: “More was published about Korea in the pages of *American Anthropologist* before 1990 than would be for decades afterwards” (p. 3).<sup>2</sup> In order to track down the part of American anthropological history which has remained in the dark all along, he makes thorough reviews of letters, books, newspaper articles, and academic journals lying dormant in the archives of major libraries and museums in the United States. Building on this base, the author opts for a delineation strategy of keeping a chronological description at the center and portraying the life histories of several representative figures. Let me walk through the book chapters to examine how the study of Korea was conducted in early American anthropology.

Excluding the preface and the conclusion, the seven chapters of the

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1. Chun's study (1999) is a representative one, which illuminates on Korean scholars of the first half of the 20th century, including Son Chin-t'ae and Song Seok-ha, in the context of the development of Korean anthropology. Also, Kim's study (2014) is worth noting for pointing out that most studies made during this period were made in the streams of folklore, history, and *Joseonhak* (*Joseon Studies*) rather than anthropology as a discipline.
  2. *American Anthropologist* is a flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association that has been printed since 1888.

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book may be roughly divided into three. The first part, Chapters 1 and 2, deal with the encounter of American anthropology and Korea, which was studied by visits to museums and private collectors. The second part, Chapters 3 and 4, cover Joseon's participation in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and the work of Stewart Culin who came to have interest in Korea through the event. The final part, Chapters 5 to 7, examine two different perspectives on Korea under the Japanese colonial rule through the lens of two anthropologists, Frederick Starr and Aleš Hrdlička, who occupied a place of their own in the history of American anthropology of the first half of the 20th century.

The main content of Chapter 1 describes the collection of folk items, household artifacts, and folk paintings of the time, which was made, in a large part, at the Smithsonian. In the process, Oppenheim notes the fact that “there was at multiple sites a tension between *ethnological and diplomatic* deployments of objects” (p. 27, emphasis by author). Articles collected in Korea during the final period of the Empire of Korea had been employed as raw materials supporting sociocultural evolutionism, which was a prevailing trend in 19th century anthropology. For instance, the material culture of 19th century Korea reconstructed on the basis of the collected materials was viewed as a case of “survivals,” which was a concept emphasized by Edward B. Tylor, a representative evolutionary anthropologist. According to Tylor, survivals are the evidence of cultural evolution from an old to a new one, and refer to cultural customs and relics remaining as samples. That is, specific cultural traits in the stages of evolutionary development from savagery to civilization are the vestiges of an early cultural form. From the evolutionist perspective, Korea was looked upon as a backward place where survivals of primitive society could be identified. But that was received as an obvious misunderstanding on the part of Americans who had close contacts with upper-class Koreans, such as Horace Allen, and some intellectuals among the first-wave Koreans who made visits to the U.S. The first Korean collection exhibited in an American museum was, inevitably, perceived as “one battleground in a larger struggle over Korea's image, present character, and future potential” (p. 61).

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Chapter 2 portrays another side of the anthropological collecting network by focusing on the case of ceramics, including *Koryo* celadon, which are representative relics of Korea. The collecting process of ceramics—in which the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the University of Pennsylvania Museum as well as the Smithsonian intervened as main actors—did not rely solely on clean and fair procedures. While some were gifts from high-ranking Korean officials, most of the collections were obtained via illegal methods, such as purchase from tomb robbers and excavation of old graves. While it might be a little excessive to judge the imperialistic plundering based solely on the ethical standards of today, that could be a good example demonstrating very well to what extent the activities of museums and collectors shaped the formation of the discipline in the late 19th century, before anthropology was incorporated in full scale into the establishment of academia. Meanwhile, the depictions in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 provoke interest by addressing the history of the final period of the Korean Empire from the US point of view, through the channels of anthropology and museums. Further, they serve as a window to the early image of Korea represented and contested in America at the historical juncture.

Discussion on the approaches of early American anthropology which attempted to place 19th century Korea—as an object of anthropological study—under the lens of evolutionism continues in Chapters 3 and 4. From Chapter 3, the book puts focus on specific figures and the first one is Stewart Culin, an anthropologist who deployed activities in connection with the University of Philadelphia Museum in the 1890s. The chapter starts off with tracing how Culin came to switch his research interest to Korea from his initial subjects of study, Chinese immigrants to America. The turning point was the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. At the end of the 19th century, international exhibitions offered Western powers a stage to show off their feats and scientific developments under the banner of modernism. The 1893 Exposition was one in which Korea opened a separate exhibition hall for the first time in such international events. But it could hardly be said that King Kojong garnered a success in his diplomatic

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strategy to use the opportunity to demonstrate Korea's capacity as an independent nation in the wake of foreign intrusions. Compared to other countries' exhibition halls boasting overwhelming size and fancy exhibits, Korea's was shabby. Contrary to the Korean government's intention and aim for participation in the exposition, American visitors only confirmed the backwardness of Korea as the Other. Culin was no exception; after watching articles showcasing the mode of life in Korea at the exhibition hall built in the style of a traditional Korean house, he believed that he found in Korea the "missing link" of the worldwide evolutionary scheme he had been looking for.

The key he discovered was the similarity between "Yutnori," a traditional Korean game, and "Sholiwe," a game of the Zuni, a native tribe to North America. Chapter 4 concentrates on his co-work with Frank Hamilton Cushing who had studied native North American people. On the ground of the resemblance in form between the two cultures found in the joint research in terms of the instruments used for the games and the manners that they were played, he argued that cultural traits identified in individual societies appeared through independent invention, not via diffusion. His first book, *Korean Games: with Notes on the Corresponding Games of China and Japan* (1895), analyzed a variety of Korean games. As shown here, to some American anthropologists who showed interest in Korea in the 19th century, Korea was no more than a place to provide evidence for the evolution theory.

Chapters 5 and 6 draw attention to the activities of Frederick Starr, the first anthropologist to join the faculty of the University of Chicago established in 1892. According to Oppenheim, Starr did not catch up with the changing current in the American anthropological community in general which was led by Franz Boas around a new conceptualization of "culture." In several aspects, he was evaluated by fellow anthropologists as a "weak theorist," or a "popularizer" with an eccentric inclination, rather than a specialized researcher capable of theoretical analysis. However, such an assessment was made in comparison with Boas, who occupied an unrivaled position among American anthropologists at the time. Therefore,

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Oppenheim calls to reevaluate him as an anthropologist “in terms of what he was, and not just what he was not” (p. 156).

Notable is the fact that of all the scholars dealt with in the book, Starr was the one who visited Korea most often; he came to Korea six times from 1911 to 1930. Visiting colonial Korea, he garnered knowledge about the country through exchange with Korean intellectuals, including Choe Nam-seon and Yi Neung-hwa, and published research findings on Korean Buddhist culture. However, he had more affection and interest in Japan. He was fascinated by Japanese culture to such an extent that he was fond of wearing kimono in public appearances, and this inclination was reflected even in his stance on Japanese imperialism. While he was basically a self-appointed pacifist and against Western imperialism in general denouncing its domination and exploitation of the Third World, Starr did not maintain the same view on the Japanese rule over Korea. This was well displayed in the ambiguity of the concept “culture” in the discussions he made in the U.S., Japan, and Korea. At that time, American anthropologists were actively engaged in studying and analyzing the concept of culture with Boas and his students playing a leading role in it. Meanwhile, the conceptualization of “culture” in Japan and Korea had already been established in a somewhat different fashion from the American discourse.<sup>3</sup> Influenced by that, Starr conferred that Korean culture was “a hybrid thing, formatted simultaneously by anthropological ‘culture’ and colonial cultural discourse” (p. 191).

The ironic situation of Starr, contributing to Japanese imperialism as an American intellectual, albeit unintentionally, is in contrast with another irony displayed by Aleš Hrdlička, a physical anthropologist, whose story is introduced in Chapter 7. Hrdlička, the first curator of physical anthropology of the U.S. National Museum, was one of the main figures in the early development of physical anthropology and also served as the first Present of

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3. A good example is the so-called “cultural rule” of the Japanese colonial government, which is also discussed in the book. After the March First Independence Movement of 1919, the colonial government sought to change its domination policy from the existing force and coercion-based rule to a cultural one. Here the concept “culture” signified something different from what was discussed in the American anthropological community at that time.

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the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. He is often viewed as a defender of racial typology that countered the anti-racial position which is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest achievements of American cultural anthropology in the first half of the 20th century. For Oppenheim, however, racialism itself “could contribute simultaneously to both racist and antiracist political efforts” (p. 224), and that was the case of Hrdlička. Hrdlička took the political stance of supporting Korea’s independence from Japanese colonial domination; however, it was grounded on the fact that Korea and Japan have different racial characteristics. He opposed Japan’s imperialist assimilation policy for the reason that Korea has one ‘unique’ race, whereas Japan has a hybrid racial composition.

While Starr, who departed from his initial evolutionary view in the early academic career and began to move closer to Boasian cultural relativism, endorsed Japanese colonial rule, Hrdlička, who was engrossed in the conceptualization of biological race—at which the Boasian School hurled a severe criticism—advocated Korea’s independence. This fact illustrates the aporia of anti-racism very well. A merit of Oppenheim’s book is that it defies a flat review of major characters of the time. He notes, key concepts of anthropology, such as culture and race, were heavily contested in the political milieu of the time and in the context of the academic history; hence, it is unreasonable to make a simple judgment based on the standpoint of the present day. The irony of a critic of racial discrimination in the U.S. and the emergence of fascism in Europe ending up protecting Japan’s colonial domination in East Asia and a devotee to racial typology supporting the liberation of colonized Korea, points to the fact that rupture and disagreement between one’s scholarly position and political practice play out in such a complex context.

Oppenheim draws in this book a very enticing picture of the activities of early American anthropologists. As if one is reading a chronicle of famed orientalist roaming Egypt, Southwest Asia, and Central Asia (often dubbed the Silk Road) during the 19th century, the stories of anthropologists who had interest in Korea, a country mostly unknown to the West at that time, are fascinating to read. Moreover, it is meaningful to examine from

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American scholars' perspective the strenuous struggle of officials and intellectuals of the final period of the Korean Empire to save the country from the fall through exchanges with the U.S.

One thing that remains to be desired is, though, that it is a little unclear to what extent the ample examples contained in the book have implications for the reassessment of the generation of anthropological theory in the context of its history and research on Korean Studies. As mentioned earlier, unlike the cases of African tribal societies, Native Americans, and Melanesia, where ethnographic studies on regions of interest exerted an enormous influence on theoretical production, East Asia has received relatively scant attention from the anthropological community. For China and Japan, however, there are many anthropological studies representatives of each country whose research outcomes are widely known (e.g., Benedict 1946; Embree 1939; Fei 1939; Hsu 1948). Nonetheless, in a broader context, it is unreasonable to claim that studies on China and Japan contributed directly to the production of important anthropological theories and concepts. In comparison, it is difficult to say that the contribution of Korean studies in the past was any greater than theirs. As Oppenheim himself points out explicitly, Korea had a "second-tier" status as an object of anthropological study up to the first half of the 20th century. That said, it would be appropriate to view that Korea was, in most cases, a matter of interest only to those who had a peculiar academic predilection.

A similar assessment can be made as for the contribution to research on Korean Studies. Considering the temporal period covered in the book, most of the research activities of the anthropologists featured by Oppenheim were carried out during the period when anthropology was labeled the "handmaiden of imperialism." In fact, theoretical concepts of evolutionism, diffusionism, and race, which were fashionable in the anthropological circle at the time, have been deserted more or less in contemporary anthropology. Therefore, it is difficult to fathom that the concepts and outcomes of American anthropologists who paid attention to Korea a century ago have meaningful theoretical implications for the work of scholars trying to study Korean history and current society in the 21st century.

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Whereas early American anthropology's approaches to Korea of the past had obvious limitations in the context of the development of anthropology and Korean Studies in general, Korean society of today can be an excellent object of study for the construction of contemporary anthropological theory. In this regard, it is worth noting the fact that work on the ontological turn, which is an important theoretical trend in the global anthropological community in recent years, is carried out with great inspirations from studies on Latin America (e.g., Kohn 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2014). Currently, studies noticing ontology of tribal societies in the Amazon rainforest region are a leading force in the academy, as an alternative to blind faith in science and technology and environmental destruction caused by the dichotomy of nature and culture and anthropocentrism based on Western epistemology. As mentioned in the introductory part of this writing, in anthropology, there is a strong tendency of affinity between a specific research subject and a specific region. Currently, Latin America (particularly, the Amazon), as an object of anthropological study, has passed the era of the conventional academic interest, i.e., post-colonialism, and now attracts attention as the platform for constructing new theories to overcome the ills of industrial society.

In contrast, Korean society has enough potential as an object of study, allowing to capture diverse contradictions and complex phenomena caused by the global diffusion of the capitalist system. Ethnographic cases to be easily identified in contemporary Korean society include social sufferings under the tide of neoliberalism, social change and fast-altering family ideology, the coupling of capitalism and nationalism (close to chauvinism and ethnocentrism), the global influence as both consumers and producers of highly industrialized mass culture, and many social problems generated by blind trust in technology and capital. As a matter of fact, recently, a growing number of Korean and foreign anthropologists study Korea taking note of it as a study object revealing contemporary problems facing the world.

Despite some lacking points mentioned above, this book has many strengths. Without Oppenheim's efforts, it would be still impossible to

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understand the process and significance of anthropological studies on Korea conducted in America from the late 19th century. Above all, it offers outstanding reference materials to reflect on the history of the formation of early American anthropology. The time frame of the book, 1882 to 1945, corresponds to that of the institutionalization of anthropology as a formal discipline in the U.S. Helping us appreciate the contribution of Korea as an object of study in the development of early American anthropology and the application and contestation of leading theories and concepts of the period, it will be able to ultimately contribute to enhancing American anthropology's self-understanding. Allow me to recommend perusal of the book to people who are interested in the topics of relations between the history of early American anthropology and Korea, and Korea as an object of anthropological study.

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