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A History of American Studies in Korea

*Nam Gyun KIM**

INTRODUCTION

When I heard from the JAAS president, Jun Furuya, at the American Studies Association of Korea (ASAK) conference last year in Seoul that the next JAAS meeting would be held in Okinawa, I was very excited. As an American diplomatic historian, I have always wanted to have an opportunity to visit Okinawa because of its special place in the history of US-Japan relations. In a sense, Okinawa is similar to Pyeongtaek, the city where I live now, because Pyeongtaek has the biggest US military base in Korea. I will discuss the origin, development, and current status of American studies in Korea.

THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN STUDIES IN KOREA

When, would you guess, did the Koreans encounter Americans for the first time? It was 1855. There is some historical evidence showing Korean fishermen who met strange foreign whalers prior to 1855. The foreign whalers had visited the Korean ports for a very short time because of unfavorable weather conditions. However, there is no record to clearly

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prove the visitors were Americans. Compared with the previous incidents, the 1855 case was different. In June 1855 four Americans came to Korea and stayed for a month. They were American whalers who deserted their whaling ship. They deserted their ship because they felt that their captain, John Childs, was abusing them.

The whalers probably attempted to navigate toward Japan, but their boat was wrecked near a small fishing village called Tongcheon in Gangwon Province, which is located on the east coast of the Korean Peninsula. They were rescued by the villagers and brought to the local government office. There, nobody could communicate with them. They were eventually brought to Seoul, where, again, they were unable to communicate with Korean officials in English.

After a month of unsuccessful attempts to figure out who the whalers were, the Korean government decided to send them to China. In China, they were fortunately discovered by an American consul, Robert Murphy, and sent home safely. The whalers were identified as Melville Kelsey, Thomas McGuire, David Barnes, and Edward Brailey.¹

These four whalers were the first Americans to encounter Koreans. This incident is well proven by official records of the two countries. From this evidence, I can't resist having a wild historical imagination to surmise that Thomas McGuire and his friends were the first Americans who tasted the hot, spicy Korean kimchi. Of course, there is no concrete evidence to support my argument that they actually ate kimchi. Therefore, it is totally up to you whether you buy my argument or not.

I was personally interested in this incident and obtained some primary documents six years ago, at the New Bedford Whaling Research Library in New Bedford, Massachusetts. I was thrilled when I found Captain John Childs's letters pertaining to the incident.

Despite this encounter in 1855, Korea did not have any official relationship with the United States until the two countries signed the Korea-US Treaty of 1882, a Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation.



Korean delegates to the United States in 1883 after the signing of the US-Korea Treaty of 1882
 Source: *Hankyoren*

The head of the delegates was Min Young Ik, who is seated in the middle of the first row in the photograph. On his right is Hong Young Sik, who was the deputy of the delegates. On his left is Seo Kwang Bum. Beside him is Ou Tang, a Chinese observer.

On the far left of the picture, in the first row, you can see a gentleman who looks different. He was an American. His name was Percival Lowell. He was hired as a special adviser to the delegates.

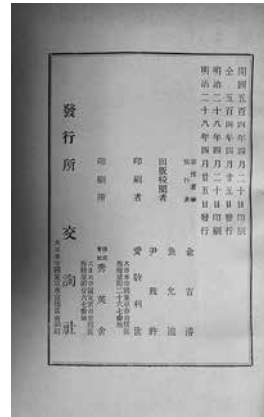
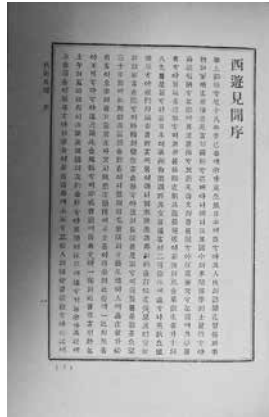
Behind Lowell, you can see another gentleman who did not wear traditional Korean clothes. Why? Because he was not a Korean. He was Japanese. His name was Miyaoka Tsuneziro. Why was a Japanese man included among the Korean delegates? He was the interpreter for Lowell.

How did the Japanese interpret the discussions between the Koreans and an American? Well, if any one of the Korean delegates wanted to talk to Lowell, he had to talk to Byun Soo, who is pictured standing on the far right of the second row. Byun Soo would translate Korean into Japanese for Miyaoka Tsuneziro. Finally, Miyaoka Tsuneziro would translate Japanese into English for Lowell. This was the complicated way that the first Korean delegates communicated with Americans and began a relationship.

Here I would like to pose an open question about the translator, Miyaoka Tsuneziro. I know he was a college student and later became a diplomat for the Japanese government. That is all the information I have about him. If there is anybody who has more information about Miyaoka Tsuneziro, please let me know.

Beside Miyaoka Tsuneziro, on his left side, stood Yu Kil Chun, who became the first Korean student in the United States. More important, Yu Kil Chun published a book about America in the 1890s.

The book written by Yu Kil Chun was *Seoekyunmoon*. This title translates as *Observations on My Journey to the West*. This is the first book written by a Korean about the United States and the Western countries. Today, this book is considered a classic in Korea. One more interesting thing (especially for Japanese scholars of American studies) is that this book was printed in Japan—not in Korea—by a famous publishing company established by a well-known historical figure, Fukuzawa Yukichi. The company was Ko jun sha.



Front page, a part of the introduction, and back cover of Yu Kil Chun’s *Seoekyunmoon* [*Observations on my journey to the West*], reprint edition (Seoul: Iljogak, 1971).
Photos by Nam Gyun Kim

The influence of this book on Korean society is incalculable. Following *Seoekyunmoon*, many more writings about the United States were published at the turn of the century, such as *Doklipsinmoon* (*The Independent*), the first Korean and English newspaper published in Korea. (Actually, Yu Kil Chun was deeply involved in publishing *Doklipsinmoon*). With the introduction of Korea to the United States, the English language

became introduced into Korean society. I will not, however, be able to touch on the English language issue here because it is too big of a topic.

In addition, around this time, Koreans began migrating to the United States. From 1902 to 1905 there were about six thousand Koreans who immigrated to Hawaii to work on the sugar plantations. Along with the plantation workers, about seven hundred to one-thousand so-called picture brides also settled in Hawaii.² In total, about seven thousand Koreans immigrated to Hawaii and became the basis of Korean American society in the United States.³

THE DEVELOPMENT OF US-KOREA RELATIONS AND AMERICAN STUDIES

The American-Korean relationship was very good until 1905. At that time, the relationship between Korea and the United States stopped abruptly when the United States and Japan made the secret Taft-Katsura agreement, which eventually made it possible for Japan to occupy the Korean Peninsula, while the United States could solidify its occupation of the Philippines.⁴ From 1905 to 1945, for forty years, therefore, there was no official relationship between Korea and the United States. This resulted in a big gap in the history regarding Korean American studies.

On August 15, 1945, when the Second World War ended, Korea was liberated by the Allied Powers and, in particular, by the United States. South Korea was placed under the responsibility of the American military, led by US Army Lt. Gen. John Hodge, until the Republic of Korea was established in Seoul in 1948.

The US military made a great impression on Korean society, and this included an interest in American studies. Above all, the US military government implemented the study and practice of the English language as an important part of middle and high school education. Following this new educational policy, almost all colleges made English a part of their entrance examinations. Thanks to this new direction, English has become an indispensable part of the Korean education system ever since.⁵ This educational policy has also contributed to the growth of the study of English literature as part of American studies in Korea.

As the American influence increased after 1945, the Koreans needed not only English teachers but also teachers for related subject matter, including American history. That was how Bo-hyeong Lee became the first to teach American history in Korea.

Before introducing Professor Lee's story, however, I cannot avoid mentioning the Korean War and the Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty that was signed in October 1953, after the Korean War ceased. Both events left a great influence on Korean society and American studies. The Korean War itself molded the relationship between the two countries. There were no big diplomatic changes between the two countries after the Korean War and the Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty, but they influenced the fundamental Korean perspective and understanding of the United States. It is hard to describe the American influence on Korea after the Korean War in a few words, so, once again, I will leave this for others.

Here, let me introduce how American studies began in Korea after the Second World War by introducing Bo-hyeong Lee's story—how a Korean historian of America was created. Yu Kil Chun, the author of *Observations on My Journey to the West*, was the first Korean who wrote on the United States. But his book was basically not a history book of the United States, although it addressed many issues regarding the United States.

When the Second World War ended, Bo-hyeong Lee had just completed his two-year college education at Yonhee Junior College in Seoul, which later became Yonsei University. He then entered Kyongsung College (the former Kyongsung Imperial University that was later reestablished as Seoul National University in 1946). While he was attending the university as a history major, he boldly published a book in 1947 titled *Mikooksa Kaeseol* [*An introduction to American history*]. Bo-hyeong Lee's book became the first American history book ever published by a Korean. According to the author, *An Introduction to American History* was a very short book. The total length was 140 pages, and it was published by Shin Mun Hwa Yeonguso.⁶

After graduating from Seoul National University, Bo-hyeong Lee enrolled as a graduate student at the same school. However, the Korean War broke out. He then went to Busan as a kind of war refugee to escape the battle and was unable to continue his graduate studies. While staying in Busan during the war in 1951, he was able to earn a living by teaching American history at the College of Liberal Arts, Seoul National University. The dean of the college at that time proposed to Bo-hyeong Lee that American history should be taught when US military forces returned to Korea, as they had pulled out of the Korean Peninsula in June 1949.

Bo-hyeong Lee was born in 1923. He was only in his twenties when he got a teaching job at the university during the Korean War. He was never formally educated in American history. The undergraduate education he

received at Seoul National University was his only formal higher education. However, he was still one of very few pre-Korean War college graduates in history. His college education allowed him to obtain a teaching job. He had no choice but to carry out his new professional duties. Lee started to teach American history at the same time as studying it himself. With that, American history was introduced for the first time in Korean higher education in the midst of the Korean War.

Professor Lee later moved to Seogang University in the late 1960s. He published a book in 1976 that was also called *Mikooksa Kaeseol* [*An introduction to American history*], which became the basic textbook of American history written in the Korean language at least until the 1990s, and is still in use.⁷ For decades, Professor Lee's book was read by all Korean students who wanted to study American history. I happened to be one of these students in the late 1970s, although I did not attend his university.

The year 1965 was a turning point in the history of American studies in Korea. Professor Lee became one of the charter members of the American Studies Association of Korea in 1965, along with about twenty additional scholars. Their disciplines were diverse: American literature, American history, American politics, and so on. Chu Yo Sub was elected as the first president of the ASAK. Chu Yo Sub was a professor at Kyonghee University. He was born in Seoul in 1905 and studied education in the 1920s at Stanford University in California. He was also a well-known novelist. His short stories were printed in middle school textbooks in Korea. Chu served as president of the association for two years beginning in 1965.

Let me introduce a little bit more about the ASAK. One year after the ASAK was founded, the charter members started to have an international conference. The ASAK will have the 2014 International Conference at Pyeongtaek University in September. The theme of the 2014 ASAK International Conference is "The American Dream Reconsidered."

In 1969, the ASAK began publishing the *Journal of American Studies* once a year. The first editor was Hong-gu Lee, who was a professor of political science at Seoul National University at that time. He later became the prime minister of Korea. The *Journal of American Studies* is now published three times a year: May, September, and December. Foreign scholars are also welcome to submit their papers to the journal.

In 1978, the ASAK began a lecture series on America for the general public, which has developed into what is called the Thursday Lecture Series today. In 2014, the ASAK provided five lectures around the country from Seoul to Busan on five different topics.

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS IN AMERICAN STUDIES

Finally, I would like to discuss the undergraduate programs in American studies in Korea.

Even though the ASAK was started in 1965, there were no well-established undergraduate programs of American studies until the 1990s. Of course, there were American history classes available as part of a history program and American literature classes available as part of English language education. However, there were no schools that offered an American studies undergraduate program that taught holistically about the United States.

In the 1990s, the field of American studies faced a momentous opportunity when the Kim Young Sam administration emphasized globalization policy as a new national economic development strategy. The administration then selected seven universities to which the government gave an unprecedented amount of financial support for the initiation graduate programs in regional studies, which was to include US studies. Along with this new governmental direction of educational policy, some universities also opened American studies programs for undergraduates.

The undergraduate programs were begun at Bukyoung University in Busan; Catholic University, Dae Jin University, and Pyeongtaek University in Gyeonggi Province, which is near Seoul; Tamra University on Jeju Island; and Kyemyong University in Daegu. Kyemyong University was the first Korean university to provide a type of American studies program, but it was not able to establish an undergraduate program fully identified as American studies until the 1990s.⁸

I myself joined the Department of American Studies at Pyeongtaek University in the spring of 1998. Therefore, I have been an eyewitness to the development of American studies education in Korea since that time.

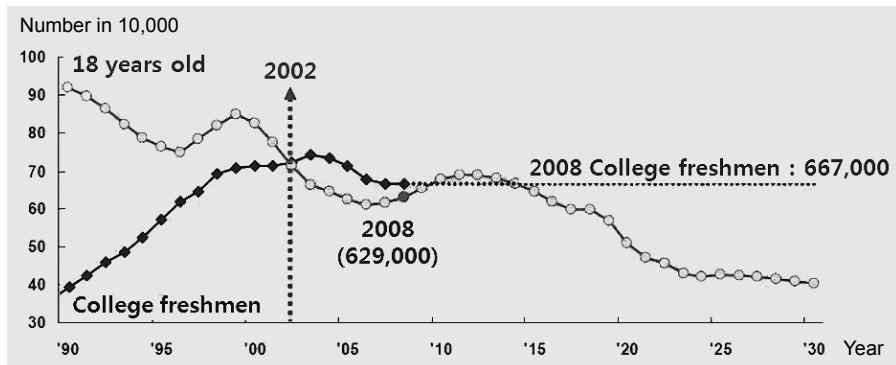
Even after the American studies programs were introduced in higher education in Korea, the general public could not understand what American studies meant for a long time. Even my colleagues at Pyeongtaek University used to call me an English professor, even though my major field did not have anything to do with English language at all. They could not understand the difference between American studies and English literature or English language education. If I asked the freshman in my department why they had applied to the program, they generally answered that they had applied because they wanted to learn English.

This kind of misperception about American studies hindered further

development of American studies in higher education in Korea. This misunderstanding caused even more of a challenge to our undergraduate programs when the current educational environment of Korea forced the collegiate community to completely restructure. The educational environment in Korea these days is dramatically shifting, mostly due to a significantly lower birthrate.

For decades since the 1960s, Korea made an effort to reduce the birthrate to improve economic development, without thinking of the consequences it would bring. The birthrate of Korea finally went down to the bottom and became the lowest in the whole world. Until the 1970s, for example, the total number of babies born in a year was over 800,000. Now, only 400,000 babies are born in Korea each year.

The low birthrate has caused a lot of educational problems in addition to the many social and economic issues. The number of high school graduates has been rapidly shrinking every year. After 2016, the number of high school graduates is expected to drop even more drastically.⁹ This will result in a big cutback in enrollment for Korean colleges (which was 667,000 in 2008) if the current number of colleges remains the same.¹⁰



Projected birthrate and number of entering freshmen in Korea
 Source: Korean Bureau of Statistics (2009)

Under these new circumstances, the Korean universities are under pressure to restructure their whole educational systems. American studies programs are no exception. The big question is, under these circumstances, can American studies survive as a successful undergraduate program in Korea?

Already, Tamra University in Jeju has felt the effects of the restructuring

and closed their American studies program. In addition, in the spring of 2014, Daejin University and Kyemyong University downsized their departmental American studies programs into ones that combine several regional studies programs.

CONCLUSION

In 2015, the ASAK will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its founding. During the past fifty years, it has grown from about twenty charter members to over six hundred members and become one of the major academic organizations in Korea. Despite the growth of the ASAK, ironically, undergraduate programs in American studies are not growing and now face a difficult challenge.

There is, however, still a bright side. First, the United States remains the most important country for Korea and for the world. It will be studied for a long time. Second, Korean college students still want to learn more about America, especially after the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) became effective in 2012.

One more interesting factor that can boost American studies in Korea is the emerging importance of Korean Americans in the United States. Korea must understand that Korean Americans abroad want to study Korean history in order to grasp the roots of their heritage. Interdisciplinary work between scholars in American studies and Korean studies programs could undoubtedly increase interest and support for our field.

Finally, Korean higher education often values many specialists, such as American economists, American political scientists, and American law experts. However, the importance of the generalist, who knows the United States as a whole, is not appreciated. In addition, undergraduate programs in American studies are hard pressed to educate students beyond the broader view of US law, economy, culture, literature, and so on. There are gaps between thorough American studies education and the social demand for specific American subject matter specialists. I don't know how to narrow this gap.

Taking into account all that I have mentioned, it may be easy to conclude that American studies as a discipline in Korea has an uneasy road ahead.

NOTES

This is a slightly edited version of the address I delivered on June 7, 2014, at the 48th

annual meeting of the Japanese Association for American Studies held at Okinawa Convention Center, Ginowan City, Okinawa, Japan. I want to express my deepest gratitude to the organizers of the 2014 JAAS annual meeting for giving me this opportunity

¹ Nam Gyun Kim, “19 Seki Mikookeui Pokyongup, Taepyongyang, grigo Asia” [The nineteenth century whaling business and the Pacific and Asia], *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 22–23.

² Wayne Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896–1910* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1988), 173.

³ Of the seven thousand Korean immigrants, about one thousand left Hawaii for the US mainland to seek better opportunities between 1905 and 1910. Bong-young Choy, *Koreans in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 76.

⁴ Years later, Pearl S. Buck critically wrote in the epilogue of her novel *The Living Reed: A Novel of Korea* that “there is a direct connection between that secret agreement signed in Tokyo by Taft and Katsura and the young men of many nations who died on Korean soil [the Korean War].” Buck, *The Living Reed: A Novel of Korea* (New York: John Day, 1963), 477.

⁵ Eun Gyong Kim, “English Educational Policies of the US Army Military Government in Korea from 1945 to 1948 and Their Effects on the Development of English Language Teaching in Korea,” *Language Policy* 10, no. 3 (2011): 201–3.

⁶ Bo-hyeong Lee, *Wooam Sa Ron 1* [*Woo Am historical studies 1*] (Seoul: Sonamu, 2013), 24.

⁷ Bo-hyeong Lee, *Mikooksa Kaeseol* [*An introduction to American history*] (Seoul: IL Jo Kak, 1976).

⁸ Yeon Sun Chung, *Hankookaeseoeui mikookhak: Erongwa silje* [*American studies in Korea: Theory and practice*] (Seoul: OeiDae Chulpanbu, 2005).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ http://www.kdi.re.kr/epic_attach/2009/D0901021-2.pdf.

