

# Vibrant Interview:

## Hyang Jin Jung in South Korea

Hyang Jin Jung

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6009-4913>

Email: [hjjung@snu.ac.kr](mailto:hjjung@snu.ac.kr)

Seoul National University, South Korea

**(1)** What are the main topics of anthropological research and teaching in South Korea today? And what, if I may, are you using as data or evidence of them?

In the newest trend in research and teaching in Korean anthropology, I find topics like queer, animal rights, caring and welfare, gender and feminism, mental health, digital finance, and social media and online sociality, all of which reflect the latest social and cultural changes, both local and global. Alongside with these topics, there is a robust current of critical anthropology addressing social issues, such as urban redevelopment, neoliberalism, youth and unemployment, migration, and social disaster, while research studies about the COVID19 are beginning to be published. Historical ethnographic studies of the Japanese colonial rule and related contemporary issues have also made a strong presence in Korean anthropology in recent years.

For my evidence, I primarily used the two (Korean-language) anthropology journals in South Korea, *Korean Cultural Anthropology* (한국문화인류학) and *Cross-Cultural Studies* (비교문화연구), and anthropology course syllabi from several different universities (same for question #2).

**(2)** Have those topics been of interest to anthropologists in South Korea for many years or are they relatively new? Again, what are you using as data or evidence of them?

Topics like animal rights, digital finance, or online sociality are very new, while most other topics in the above have been around for the past ten to twenty years. Other, more enduring topics include family and kinship, community sociality and revitalization, ritual, cultural heritage and tourism, war and state violence, and other consequences of modernization. These topics generally cut across different regional interests, although ethno-historical studies are mostly done about Korea or South Korea. Speaking of regional interests, Northeast Asia (China and Japan), Southeast Asia, and South Korea itself are three main areas among Korean anthropologists, while other regions like Latin America or Middle East are also researched, though less frequently. For the size we are, the regional diversity in Korean anthropology is remarkable.

(3) Has the war with North Korea, and the long-time division of the Korean peninsula, had any impact on anthropological research and teaching in South Korea? Please detail this as much as possible.

Quite a few Korean anthropologists have studied how the Korean War and the national division have affected people's lives, for example, through oral histories of war refugees or survivors of incidents of state violence over ideological allegiance. Lately, some anthropologists are also working with North Korean defectors coming to South Korea. As far as North Korea itself is concerned, however, it is so far out of reach, so it doesn't seem to have any real impact on our anthropological research and teaching in general, which paradoxically shows how profound the impact has been. North Korean studies is big in South Korea, mostly drawing from the disciplines of political science, international relations, economics, or sociology, as well as humanities disciplines. The impossibility of on-site fieldwork in North Korea has practically barred anthropologists from taking it as an anthropological other. To South Koreans, North Korea may be the ultimate example of "the familiar made strange." Yet it has not rendered itself to be approached as such. I note that a few anthropologists, including myself, are endeavoring to do anthropological research and teach about North Korea. There are a couple of anthropological monographs about North Korea as well.

Apart from the immediate problems in researching and teaching about North Korea anthropologically, the war and division more deeply influenced anthropology in South Korea. To try a subjunctive, if we had been a unified Korea, that is, if there had been no division when the Japanese colonial rule (1910-45) ended, it might have been particularly more favorable to anthropology. I speak with an actual historical episode in mind. Upon the liberation, a group of scholars who had been trained in ethnographic research during the colonial time founded the National Museum of Ethnology. Their vision was, I believe, to de-colonize Korean people's self-perception by putting Korea into a wider comparative horizon of peoples and cultures. Yet the Korean War soon broke out and the museum was short-lived. Decades later, Korean Folk Museum (presently, National Folk Museum of Korea) was opened, which on its website claims to have succeeded the National Museum of Ethnology. In my view, the change of "ethnology" to "folk" paradigmatically witnessed a change in public sentiments vis-à-vis the world at the time: from the hopefulness and willingness to engage in the immediate post-liberation years to the inward-looking inclination after the war and in the following several decades. It was probably that the concept of "folk" served better the public's longing for what they perceived were being lost in Korean society during the time of rapid modernization (see #4 for a related issue involving folklore studies). I also ponder that Korean society being homogenous ethnolinguistically, the "folk" became a sort of an internal cultural other.

For the discipline of anthropology to flourish, it needs a public who is interested in knowing about other societies, other cultures. Not only the colonial subjugation, but also the national division by the super powers, the subsequent Korean War started by North Korea, and the ongoing Cold War paradigm on the Korean peninsula, all have contributed to a certain defensive national consciousness among South Koreans, which works against fostering anthropological interests in the public. The tension and competition among the neighboring countries in Northeast Asia (China, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea) are another factor in the defensive nationalism among South Koreans. However, the time may be changing. Along with the maturing of democracy in political and social spheres, the global success of the Korean popular culture has undoubtedly given South Korean people a new sense of confidence to move forward to a more open engagement with the world at large. I am cautiously positive that anthropology will be able to garner more public support and take a firmer root in South Korean society.

(4) How many anthropologists do you believe there are in South Korea today, and what are the main issues they debate? It would be helpful to know the breakdown of anthropologists by region, gender, age, generation, or socioeconomic class/status/family background.

Anthropology in South Korea is predominantly sociocultural, as physical or biological anthropology is much less developed, so I speak about sociocultural anthropology here. I will briefly touch on physical anthropology later.

I estimate the number of practicing anthropologists to be around 200. The number of full members of the Korean Society for Cultural Anthropology (KSCA), the only professional society for anthropologists in South Korea, stands at 151, as of this writing. The number of anthropologists holding professional positions in universities or other institutions is a little less than 150. Those in institutional positions are not necessarily members of the KSCA, though mostly they are. With the help from other anthropologists, available public information, and my own knowledge, I was able to compile the general demographic information and academic backgrounds of 153 anthropologists, which I use as a base group in the following answers.

Meaningful social categories among Korean anthropologists are made along the lines of gender, age, and the granting institution of their doctoral degree (domestic or international). In terms of gender, females are 46% (70 out of 153) of the practicing anthropologists in my list. In terms of age, those in their 40s and 50s count the biggest numbers, each 35%, followed by those in their 60s (18%) and their 70s (7%). South Korean institutions have a compulsory retirement: university's retirement age is 65 and in other institutions it tends to be earlier. This affects the activeness of those in the 60s and beyond. When gender and age are combined, a generational change is shown. Out of the 153 anthropologists, those in their 60s through the 80s, males are 28 and females 13. In the 50s bracket, the gender ratio is more balanced with 30 males and 24 females. In the 40s, the ratio is reversed: 24 males and 30 females.

The home institution of the doctoral degree, whether it is an "abroad" (*haewoe*) or "domestic" (*gungnae*) one, has long made a conspicuous social category among anthropologists like in the Korean academia in general, whereby the degrees from the Western countries, particularly the US, are considered as better academic credentials and are granted more (or far more) prestige than degrees from South Korean institutions which have a prestige scale among themselves. Among those in my list, the US degree holders are 44%; the British, Australian, and French degree holders are 5%, 3%, and 3% respectively. The degree holders from the Western countries altogether make up 55%. The South Korean degree holders are 35%, while the Japanese degree holders are 4%. The rest of the home institutions of the doctoral degree include Canada, Germany, China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Israel, and Mexico, each with rarely more than one case. When the degree-granting institution is combined with age, there emerges an interesting recent trend. To compare the numbers of US and South Korean degree holders only, US degree holders outnumber South Korean degree holders in the age brackets of the 70s (8 vs. 1), the 60s (13 vs. 8), and the 50s (25 vs. 16), but in the 40s bracket, South Korean degree holders outnumber US degree holders (16 vs. 26). This reflects that with the political and economic advances of the society, South Korean higher education institutions have increasingly recruited more graduate students; that in anthropology specifically, those in their 70s through 50s, many of whom had studied abroad, have made conscious efforts to train the next generations of anthropologists in South Korean graduate programs.

To speak of debate issues in Korean anthropology, I break them down into theoretical issues and identity issues of the discipline. First, for the theoretical side, although many Korean anthropologists are specialized in many different regions outside South Korea, it is mostly in the studies of Korea that theoretical debates have occurred. It is perhaps because Korea is the regional focus for a large enough number of anthropologists, as well as because anthropological research about Korea can more readily enter into conversations with other

Korean social sciences. Most notably, Korean anthropologists have debated about the sociality of a traditional village community (hierarchy vs. egalitarianism) and its transformation, and the characteristics of Korean kinship and social structure, and the degree of the predominance of the Confucian family ideology and its continuing (or diminishing) significance. These debates are closely tied to the anthropological interests in the cultural identity, continuities and changes of the people and society under the rapid modernization.

Secondly, there have been debates around the identity and scope of the discipline, that is, around “what kind of anthropology” Korean anthropology should be. Foremost among them is the issue whether anthropology should relate to folklore studies and how. The relationship between folklore studies and anthropology is complicated not only with the tension between description and analysis, or data and theory, but also with the postcolonial consciousness over knowledge production, with which anthropology may be the “imperialist suspect.” In recent years, however, the boundary between the two disciplines has become more blurred. Particularly those anthropologists working in the areas of cultural heritage and community revitalization have attempted intellectual conversations with folklore studies in their research and teaching, while many folklore scholars are not shy of using anthropological theories. Anthropology is better represented institutionally as departments or programs, but the field of folklore studies has a far larger number of practicing scholars with four different professional societies (and one national museum), drawing from a wide array of humanities (e.g., literature, religious studies, ethnomusicology) as well as from anthropology and folklore studies proper.

I add that the debates around these issues had their peak times in the 1980s and 1990s through the early 2000s. In the more recent years, however, Korean anthropological scholarship has been rather quiet, despite there are many theoretical issues that can potentially make rich and exciting debates. Let alone debates per se, there don't seem to be enough intellectual conversations among anthropologists. There may be a number of reasons for this, but I think the increasing integration of local scholarship into the global academic market is a substantial one. Since the mid-2000s, publishing in the citation-indexed, predominantly English-language, journals has been prioritized, i.e., has counted more, for employment or tenure. This institutionalized drive for “global excellence” in a way intensifies the dominance of the Western scholarship, particularly in theory-making, as you are compelled to make references to the theoretical literature familiar to English-speaking audiences, which is overcarried into Korean-language publications. This circumstance is hardly favorable to intellectual conversations among local scholars across the board. Another, related yet more deeply-running, factor may be a general perception among Korean anthropologists that “we do not have an intellectual heritage to carry on.” Perhaps I am being too critical here, but in our academic practice, we tend not to look to what our predecessors (or colleagues) had to offer. When there is not much of a shared ground or efforts to make one, debates are not likely to happen.

Lastly and briefly, to report on physical or biological anthropology, the Seoul National University Department of Anthropology is, presently, the only department that has a physical/biological anthropologist. The SNU Anthropology has produced several doctorates in physical or biological anthropology. In several regional national universities, anthropology is jointed with archaeology, but those joint programs do not have physical anthropologists. The Korean Society for Physical Anthropology was established in 1958 and in 1988 began to publish its journal, *Anatomy & Biological Anthropology* (formerly, *Korean Journal of Physical Anthropology*). Its members are drawn primarily from anatomy and related fields in medicine and dental science, but physical and biological anthropologists from the SNU Anthropology are active members of the association.

(5) What are the main anthropological journals and associations in South Korea, and what do you think are the publishing houses that are most willing to publish books by anthropologists?

The Korean Society of Cultural Anthropology is the professional society for sociocultural anthropologists. It was founded in 1958 and started its flagship journal, *Korean Cultural Anthropology* (한국문화인류학), in 1968. The two other journals, *Cross-Cultural Studies* (비교문화연구) and *Korean Anthropology Review* are published by the Seoul National University Department of Anthropology. *Korean Cultural Anthropology* (thrice-yearly) and *Cross-Cultural Studies* (twice-yearly) are similar in scope and orientation, probably the former representing the more cutting-edge, theoretically oriented scholarship of Korean anthropology. *Korean Anthropology Review: A journal of Korean anthropology in translation* (annual) is an English-language journal that carries translations of select articles previously published in the two Korean anthropology journals. I listed the names of the association and journal for physical anthropology in #4.

For the publishing houses most willing to publish anthropology books, I would name Seoul National University Press, Iljogak, Jipmundang, Minsokwon, and Nulmin, but recently many other publishers have published anthropology monographs that appeal to a larger public.

(6) Are there any themes or topics that are of interest to foreign anthropologists but not welcome as areas of specialization among anthropologists in South Korea? And vice versa, in other words, are there any themes or topics that are of interest to anthropologists in South Korea that you think are not welcome as areas of specialization among foreign anthropologists (at least foreign anthropologists who work in and on South Korea)?

Korean Christianity and corporate culture, two very different yet equally emblematic aspects of a capitalist Korea, have produced significant anthropological scholarship among foreign anthropologists specialized in South Korea, but not as much among Korean anthropologists. I understand that for a Korean anthropologist, it may be more difficult to gain a fieldwork entry to a conglomerate company, let alone publishing the result in Korean. The case of Korean Christianity is interesting. Apart from an entry problem, it may also be the relative lack of interests in Christianity on the part of Korean anthropological scholarship in general, when Korean shamanism has been considered a classical, endangered (“by Christianity”) anthropological subject. Korean popular culture also comes to mind. Internationally, there seem great demands for ethnographically produced knowledge on K-pop and other phenomena of K-culture, but Korean anthropologists have not been actively undertaking studies in this area, with a few exceptions.

Those themes that have stimulated greater interests among Korean anthropologists include kinship ideology and practice, transformations of the traditional status system, ethnoecological adaptation, and indigenous knowledge, with rural or fishing villages, including remote islands, as frequent fieldwork sites. Researching in these thematic areas often involves an ethnohistorical approach to a varying degree, which may require extensive research with old documents and in some cases an adequate degree of literacy in the Chinese characters. It is not only that Korean anthropologists are generally better prepared to do historical data-based research; but also that they have taken it seriously to witness and theorize the cultural transformations under modernization and urbanization of South Korean society.

**(7)** How is employment today for university graduates in anthropology? As in question 5 above, it would be helpful to have this information broken down by region, gender, age, generation, and socioeconomic class, status, or family background. For example, do you think it is harder for someone from a rural area to find employment with a degree in anthropology? Or do you think it is harder for women with a university degree in anthropology to find employment?

For undergrads, the job market is very tight, regardless of their major, so it is not particularly worse for those majoring in anthropology. Many undergraduates in my department are opting to go to a professional school upon graduation, typically in law or medicine. For those with a master's in anthropology, they have a niche market, like research firms, museums, or non-governmental organizations. For those with a doctorate, most degree holders have professional jobs in anthropology-related institutions, although university professorship is harder to get. Nationwide there are only 11 universities with anthropology departments or programs, including one graduate-level only program, with a total of 46 anthropology positions in my counting. Many anthropology doctors are hired in various departments such as Korean studies, sociology, area studies, or general liberal education. Still others work in research institutions or museums. I note that the strength of anthropological scholarship, particularly in the studies of East Asia and Southeast Asia, has created many job opportunities beyond anthropology in the Korean academia.

Region, socioeconomic class, or family background do not usually impact employment, but gender and age do. With the compulsory retirement and the culture of seniority, age is an important consideration when hiring; younger and junior scholars are preferred. In terms of gender, I do not deny that in anthropology too, the male is the preferred gender; however, female anthropologists presently occupy 16 out of the 46 positions (35%) held in anthropology departments, which are more coveted, compared to positions in other departments or non-university institutions.

**(8)** Would most anthropologists in South Korea say that they are liberal, progressive, traditional, conservative, apolitical, Marxist, globalist, radical, or nationalist? Perhaps none of those work there, though they are frequently chosen as self-descriptors by anthropologists in a number of other countries. If these terms don't work for anthropologists in South Korea, what term or terms would be better?

In the civil society and the political circle, and in the academia to a less degree, "progressives" (*jinbo*) and "conservatives" (*bosu*) are self-identifying or otherwise social descriptors, but most anthropologists would not identify themselves as either. My conjecture is that they are fairly liberal and progressive overall regarding social issues, while politically they are more likely to be center-right or center-left. They also tend to have a certain distance from nationalist agendas, although they would largely share a nationalist consciousness.

**(9)** How does one become an anthropologist in South Korea today? This is the main question here but I have a number of other pedagogical questions, too, as follow ups. For example, do all universities include anthropology departments or programs, or just some of them? Are there fields, like sociology, that claim that there is no difference between them and anthropology and, therefore, say that they train people to do anthropological research and teaching? Does training in anthropology in South Korea require long-term fieldwork, and is that fieldwork generally done in South Korea itself? Is knowledge of languages other than Korean required? Your English is terrific and you worked in and on the U.S. for many years, but are you/were you unusual in doing so?

To be a professional anthropologist, one has to have a doctoral degree in anthropology. As pointed out earlier, there are 11 anthropology departments or programs nationwide, ten of which have a doctoral program. Among the disciplines of humanities and social sciences, anthropology is one of the least represented in Korean academic institutions. Many prospective graduate students choose to go abroad, mainly to US, for a doctoral study, but Korean anthropology programs have become more competitive in recent years.

In South Korea, sociology is far more established and predominantly quantitative. There are more than 40 sociology departments or programs nationwide. I know of an anthropology textbook written by a group of sociologists at a major private university, which rarely employs anthropology degree holders even as instructors. In my knowledge, a couple of sociology departments have hired an anthropologist. Outside anthropology, the discipline is usually associated with ethnography or qualitative research, so when other social scientists look to anthropology, it is most often for the methodological aspects. In some fields, like education and sports studies, they train students in qualitative research and call their sub-field “educational anthropology” or the “anthropology of sports,” but there is not much communication between sociocultural anthropology and these other anthropologies.

Yes, a dissertation project in anthropology requires long-term fieldwork of a year or more. For the information of fieldwork sites, I looked at the area topic of the doctoral dissertation of the anthropologists in my list. South Korea has attracted the largest number of doctoral projects (41%). It is followed by Japan (14%), China (11%), and the regions of Southeast Asia (10%). The rest cover a wide variety of countries from Mexico to Tunisia, to India, to South Pacific, to Ireland, or to Russia. Among the minor area specialties, US has been the field site in a small yet considerable number of dissertation projects (5%), each of which was done for a graduate program in the US. Similarly, France has been researched by several Korean anthropologists while pursuing a degree in a French institution (2%). Latin America (5%) has also attracted relatively more dissertation projects, done mostly for US or British graduate programs.

In terms of language, proficiency in the language of one’s field site is a must. Plus, English has increasingly become the second language in the Korean academia; younger-generation scholars are particularly expected to be fluent not only in reading but also in speaking and writing in academic English.

Am I unusual in studying US anthropologically? As shown above, there are quite a few other Korean anthropologists who did their fieldwork in and wrote their dissertation on US. I may be unusual only in that I have continued working on US, after returning to South Korea, but I have to confess that my supposedly current US project has been sitting idle for many years now, while I am committed to North Korea research.

**(10)** What courses are required of students in anthropology, and does the assigned reading typically include non-Korean authors, and not just Western European or U.S. authors, but also Latin American, African, and Asian authors??

Most typically, History of Anthropology, Anthropological Theories, and Ethnographic Field Research and Methods are required courses. For reading assignments, in our department at Seoul National University, we tend to assign texts in Korean and by Korean anthropologists for undergraduates, but use English-language texts as well. For graduates, the majority of readings are in English. Many of the English-language texts are authored by US or British anthropologists, but they also include English publications by Korean anthropologists and US-based anthropologists of a non-US origin. We use Korean or English translations of French texts fairly regularly. In the case of authors from other than US or Western Europe, if their texts are translated into Korean or English, they are more likely to be used in courses. Overall, we have heavily relied on English-language texts for graduate-level training, whether they are by English-speaking authors or translations.

**(11)** Is there much talk among anthropologists in South Korea of World Anthropology or World Anthropologies? I know that a South Korean association belongs to the WCAA (the World Council of Anthropological Associations), but I do not know what most anthropologists in South Korea mean by that term (or those terms). Do you know, and could you at least hazard an educated guess?

I don't think there is much talk of "world" anthropologies among South Korean anthropologists. My guess is that the majority of Korean anthropologists are not much aware of the existence of the WCAA, although the Korean Society for Cultural Anthropology is indeed a member association. I note, however, that there have been considerable efforts to connect with anthropologists based in the other parts of Northeast Asia, to help build East Asian anthropologies. Currently the East Asian Anthropological Association (EAAA) holds an annual conference, rotating its venue among China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

**(12)** Is there a "brain drain" in South Korea? In other words, is there fear in South Korea that students who go abroad for graduate school (like you did) will not come back to South Korea? You did, of course, but do most anthropologists? I guess I think that it would be useful to know both if anthropology students feel pressured to go abroad for their doctorates and if there is fear in South Korea that they will not come back.

The pressure is certainly there to go abroad to obtain a doctorate from an overseas institution, preferably US, but then there is a strong desire to come back to South Korea, generally speaking. Even if you are hired in a top-tier university in US, you still want to come back, at the risk of having to take a lower-tier position in Korea. The "best scenario" is to obtain a doctorate at a US higher education institution and secure a professorship position at a South Korean university. Yet as I spoke earlier, the pulling power of a domestic doctoral degree has been remarkably increasing in recent years. With younger generations of Korean anthropologists, the "best scenario" may be changing.

**(13)** Are there things I should have asked and didn't?

No. Thank you for all the questions. They really pushed me hard to reflect on the current state of affairs in Korean anthropology.