EDWARD W. WAGNER

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by
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The Review of Korean Studies, in cooperation with *Jeongsin munhwa yeongu* (Korean Studies Quarterly), features interviews with eminent Korean studies scholars worldwide. In this ninth interview, we introduce Edward Willett Wagner, Professor and Director of Korea Institute at Harvard University, now deceased. The article was written by Lee Hoon-

sang, Professor of Korean history at Donga University. He teaches and stud-

ies contemporary affairs of Korea. He has written many articles and books on the *hyangni* (local functionaries) and the elite of late Joseon. The Board of *The Review of Korean Studies* would like to express our deepest gratitude to Prof. Lee Hoon-sang for graciously agreeing to write this biography. Further thanks go to Prof. Martina Deuchler for her kind assistance. - Editor

Edward W. Wagner: The Father of Korean Studies in North America

Lee Hoon-sang

His Life and Work

Edward Willett Wagner was the pioneer scholar of Korean history in the United States, and he spent most of his life at Harvard University where he trained the next generations of students in Korean history. Harvard was the first American university to establish a Korean history program, and Wagner's long career paralleled the development of Korean studies in the U.S.

Edward W. Wagner was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1924 and admitted to Harvard University in 1941 at the age of seventeen. He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1943 and served as a civilian adviser in charge of foreign affairs to the U.S. military government in Korea from 1946 to 1948. It was at that time that he became interested in Korea. Upon returning to Harvard University, he finished his undergraduate studies in 1949 and moved on to receive an A.M. in Regional Studies—East Asia in 1951. In the same year, his work based on his experiences in Korea and Japan was published under the title of The Korean Minority in Japan. It was the first academic study on Koreans living in Japan.

As a Ph.D. student in Korean history at Harvard University, he studied under Professor Takahashi Toru at Tenri University, Japan, from 1953 to 1955. He spent the next three years in Korea for dissertation research. He received his doctorate with a dissertation entitled The Literati Purges: Case Studies in the Factionalism of the Early Yi Dynasty, published by the East Asian Research Center at Harvard University as The Literati Purges: Political Conflict in Early Yi Korea in 1974. He started to teach Korean history at Harvard in 1958, was appointed assistant professor in 1959, and eventually advanced to full professor. In 1981, he became the first director of the Korea Institute. Wagner devoted his entire life to the development of Korean studies at Harvard University. In seminars and lecture courses, he not only deepened knowledge of Korea's long history and culture but also helped to enlarge the Korea collection of the Harvard-Yenching Library.

One of Wagner's major works is the English translation of *Han' guksa sillon* (A New History of Korea) by Lee Ki-baik, which became a widely-used Korean history textbook (Wagner 1984). By translating Lee's acclaimed book, Professor Wagner gave the Western student a readable and systematic introduction to Korean history. Indeed, the English edition became the standard for a series of further translation projects in Korean studies (Lew Young Ick 1988).

Although Wagner paved the way for Korean historians to share their academic works with Western scholars, he pursued his own scholarly course. His approach to Korean history was not only original but also supported by sound research based on primary sources. His studies focused on the Joseon (or Choseon) period (1392-1910), and with painstaking labor, he established a vast database of some 100,000 men who belonged to the Joseon upper class. His database is based on the records of some 14,600 men known to have passed the civil service examination (mungwa or munkwa) and who composed the core of the Joseon ruling elite. In the lengthy collaboration with Song June-ho (formerly of Chonbuk National University), he developed what has become known as the "Wagner-Song Munkwa Project." This vast undertaking greatly contributed to new approaches in historical scholarship that differed significantly from research directions in Korea. Wagner also took a comparative perspective and attempted to identify the unique characteristics of the Joseon dynasty elite in contrast to that of China and Japan, thus giving his arguments broader appeal and applicability.

Wagner's Approach to Comparative History

The main focus of Wagner's research was the Joseon period—a period that Korean historians also consider as the most important research topic. As is well known, Japanese colonialism defined Joseon as a stagnant period in order to justify the inevitability of colonial rule. But as of the 1960s, Korean historians began to emphasize and demonstrate the dynamics and changes that had taken place in Joseon. This was nourished by the assumption that a universal rule in world history existed and was confirmed in Joseon Korea. This was to later become the basis for a school of thought centered on the so-called "theory of

indigenous development."

Wagner attempted to underscore the uniqueness and dynamics of Korean history in contrast to the then prevailing notion that Korean history and culture were merely regional in character and thus inferior to Chinese and Japanese cultures. Although his premise was similar to those of Korean scholars, the method used by Wagner was quite different. In his doctoral dissertation dealing with political tensions in early Joseon, Wagner described the development and influence of the highly sophisticated ruling ideology of the Joseon dynasty in contrast to that of China and Japan, thus identifying the distinct features of that period. By emphasizing that Joseon was able to maintain its longevity and stability through a civil aristocracy, he argued that the ruling system made the Joseon dynasty unique. Although he did not deal with China and Japan directly, it is clear that his research was always comparative. He once remarked that he was confronted with many people who misunderstood Korea as a mere extension of China or Japan and did not take note of Korea's creative and unique culture (Wagner 1983). As such, his work contributed greatly to changing these preconceptions in favor of a better understanding of Korean history and culture within the broader framework of East Asia.

It is not surprising then that a conspicuous difference exists between Wagner's emphasis on the history of the Joseon dynasty and the theory of indigenous development as advocated by Korean historians. Only a few Korean colleagues understood and agreed with Wagner's position at the time. For this reason, his research was ignored and marginalized by many Korean historians. Unfortunately, this situation was never amended during his lifetime, but it is noteworthy that the Korean emphasis on the theory of indigenous development is now being challenged and losing currency through the work of Koreanists in the U.S. whose approach is similar to Wagner's.

Representative Writings

Wagner's writings can be categorized as follows:

Social Stratification, Social Mobility, and the Ruling System.

- 1. The Ladder of Success in Yi Dynasty Korea (1974)
- 2. Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century Korea: Some Observations from a 1663 Seoul Census Register (1974)

- 3. The Case of the Northern Provinces in the Yi Dynasty: The Civil Examination Process as Social Leaven (1974)
- 4. The County Magistrate in Yi Korea: A Silhouette (1977, unpublished)

Characteristics of the Literati Purges and Debates on Sarim

- 1. Recommendation Examination of 1519: Its Place in Early Yi Dynasty (1960)
- 2. The Characteristics of Literati Purges in Early Yi Dynasty (1980)
- 3. The Social Background of Early Yi Dynasty Neo-Confucianists (1982)

Genealogy and the Status of Women

- 1. The Korean *Chokpo* as a Historical Source (1971)
- 2. Two Early Genealogies and Women's Status in Early Yi Dynasty Korea (1983)

Origin and Development of *Japgwa-jungin* (or *chapkwa-chungin*) Class and Its Modern Fate

- 1. An Inquiry into the *Chungin* Class in the Yi Dynasty (1973)
- 2. The Development and Modern Fate of *Chapkwa-Chungin* Lineage (1987)
- 3. The Three Hundred Year History of the Haeju Kim Chapkwa Lineage (1987)

Research on the Ruling Elite, and Computerization of Korean Studies

- 1. A Computer Approach to Genealogical Research in East Asia (1972)
- 2. Quantification and Study of Yi Dynasty Korean Elite (1976)
- 3. Problems in the Computerization of Materials in the Korean Studies Field (1982)

The May 16 Military Coup, Modernization, and Korea-US Relations

- 1. Failure in Korea (1961)
- 2. Modernization Process in Korea: Some Historical Considerations (1963)
- 3. Reflections on a Century of U.S.-Korean Relations: The First Century (1982)

All of the above articles will shortly be translated and published in Korean

under the title of *Joseon wangjo sahoeui seongchwiwa gwisok* (Achievements and Ascriptions of the Joseon Dynasty Society, trans. by Lee Hoon-sang and Son Suk-kyung). The databases on government painters (*hwaweon or hwaweon*) and government calligraphers (*sajagwan*) will be included in the appendix. This collection will provide an opportunity to reevaluate Wagner's academic work and its significance.

The Literati Purges of Early Joseon and the Homogeneity of the Ruling Elite

The Literati Purges (1974) is a revision of Wagner's Ph.D. dissertation. Focusing on the activities of Cho Kwang-jo, Wagner traced the significance of the literati purge of 1519 through the combined activities of the Office of Special Advisers, the Office of the Inspector-General, and the Office of the Censor-General). By doing so, he argued that a prototype of "due process" emerged through "firm remonstration" (ganjaeng or kanjaeng). In "The Characteristics of Literati Purges in Early Yi Dynasty" (1980), which covers the literati purges from the perspective of political history, Wagner saw the period of the first three purges (1498, 1504, 1519) not as a prelude to factional strife but as a period when important institutions were developed. He opined that if one analyzed this period with the focus on factional strife, one would not find anything of importance. Every society must have an efficient method of resolving political confrontation. Thus, factional strife as a means of resolving political tension in traditional Korea is neither unique to Korea nor very different from that found in other countries. He then concluded that the highly developed system of "firm remonstration" in particular contributed greatly to the ultimate aim of maintaining the dynasty, despite the occasional shocks of the purges.

Korean historians did not respond in any particular way to Wagner's standpoint on the literati purges and the development of the "firm remonstration" system. Instead, they put forward the argument, which quickly became widely accepted, that the literati purges should be understood as arising from the tension between the *sarim* (rural Neo-Confucian literati) and the *hungu* (the meritorious officialdom). In response, Wagner (1982) examined the composition of the early Joseon elite and their characteristics and clearly refuted that argument. By identifying and analyzing the backgrounds of the very people who were involved in the literati purges, Wagner criticized the hypothesis according to which the sarim group that eventually seized power despite suffering great losses in the purges supposedly consisted of small- and mid-sized landowners based in Gyeongsang (or Kyeongsang) Province, whereas the *hungu* group was comprised of large landowners residing in and near Hanyang. On the contrary, Wagner demonstrated that the men involved in the purges were mostly from the capital region, and that the two groups cannot be distinguished according to political or social background.

Wagner also highlighted the fact that 1,120 persons, that is, some 70% of a total of 1,567 men who passed the civil examination between 1391 and 1567, can be identified on the basis of the genealogy of the Munhwa Yu clan. Of these, only forty-nine were members of the Munhwa Yu clan itself, the rest being members of other clans that at some time formed marriage ties directly or indirectly with the Munhwa Yu. This finding clearly testifies to the close marriage network among the highest elite. Moreover, as Wagner (1982) pointed out, twenty-six out of the twenty-eight students who passed the special examination of 1519 are found in the same genealogy. In short, he insisted that the early Joseon elite should not be seen as two competing camps but in fact formed a much more homogeneous group than Korean scholars have suggested.

The Ruling System of Joseon, and Social Mobility in Late Joseon

Another of Wagner's interests in traditional Korean society was the possibility of social mobility through the civil examination system and the continuity of the ruling system through kinship. He therefore attempted to identify the interrelationship between these two. He proposed that it is possible to draw a "yangban crescent" from which region a large number of the Joseon *yangban* hailed. This region would extend "from about the mainland opposite Ganghwa Island (or Kanghwa Island) on the north through all of Gyeonggi (or Kyeonggi) Province and the western edge of Gangweon (or Kangweon), down into at least the seaward half of Chungcheong (or Ch'ungch'eong) Province" (1971). Wagner argued that the preponderance of those who filled the middle and upper rungs of the bureaucratic ladder came from this limited area.

At the same time, he pointed out that the examination system remained open, making changes at the periphery possible. In 1975, he conducted research on the *mungwa* passers from the Northwestern region of the Korean peninsula. In that paper, Wagner traced the regional backgrounds of these *mungwa* passers and

found that, except for the capital and Gyeonggi Province, the Northwestern region produced the highest number of examination passers during the latter half of Joseon. Based on such findings, Wagner concluded that the examination system mitigated the tensions arising in regions excluded from political power by providing equal opportunity to all regions, and that this ultimately contributed to the longevity and stability of the Joseon dynasty.

On the other hand, the region of Jeongju in Pyeongan Province, where the uprising of Hong Gyeong-nae (or Hong Kyeong-nae) took place, produced a high number of *mungwa* passers next only to that of Seoul. As such, Wagner's view becomes an important premise for explaining the changes that took place in the Northwest in late Joseon. His research sparked much interest in the social history of the Northwest region.

Wagner's discussion of social mobility after the Japanese Invasion of 1592 gave rise to perhaps the greatest controversy among Korean historians. On the basis of his analysis of a 1663 Seoul Census Register (1974), he suggested that the downward mobility from *yangban* to commoner or to an even lower status, or from commoner to slave became more frequent in the seventeenth century. Moreover, his definition of the *yangban* status differed greatly from widely accepted views. Despite the fact that this article neither mentions a timeframe nor problematizes the household register (*hojeok*) as a social text, Wagner's work drew attention to the need to re-evaluate existing theories on social mobility after the seventeenth century. More recent research (Lee Hoon-sang 1996, 2002) finds itself in agreement with Wagner's position and questions the disintegration of the social stratification in late Joseon.

Family, Kinship, and the Status of Women

After the 1980s, Korean research on family and kinship was relatively limited, because family and kinship as a research topic seemed unattractive at a time when progress and change were seen as important indicators of value and behavior. Despite the large amounts of material on family and kinship, Korean historians were generally disinterested in this topic, and only a few scholars (among them Choe Jae-seok) pursued the subject. Wagner's studies on the Joseon clan and the status of women, therefore, stand out. Wagner dealt with this subject in relations to politics, power, and social stratification rather than with focus on family and clan.

Wagner's main instrument of research was the genealogy (jokbo or chokpo). He conducted his meticulous investigations in close collaboration with Song June-ho. In contrast to most Korean historians who were skeptical of the reliability of Joseon genealogies, Wagner argued (1974) that the Joseon genealogy is a mirror reflecting the life of the Joseon elite and pointed out that there is little falsification of careers or achievements even in extensive genealogies with thousands of entries. On the basis of an investigation of a number of clans, Wagner (1971) described in detail the diversity of kinship and the changes it underwent over time. He found that a considerable portion of the *yangban*—perhaps more than twenty percent—was excluded from the genealogy; the main reason may have been that it was difficult to gather detailed information about clan members who lived in distant locations. A main characteristic of the Korean clans is the existence of at least three modes of clan dispersal. According to Wagner, the Japanese Invasion of 1592 and the Manchu Invasion of 1636 played important roles in clan diffusion. A phenomenon, primarily of the eighteenth century and later, was the decline of sub-lineages; a better life was sought in the relatively sparsely settled Northern provinces or in the more remote districts of southern Korea. Political exile or punishment visited upon the kinsmen of a yangban culprit was still another cause of clan diffusion. Consequently, Wagner saw the decline of clan consciousness and the expansion of the clans as two sides of the same coin. He also pointed out that the number of branches of a clan is in direct proportion to its political success. The Joseon genealogy, he wrote, aimed to record genuine, practicing yangban.

Wagner also paid attention to the status changes women experienced from early to late Joseon by examining the methods of their registration in such early genealogies as the genealogy of the Andong Gweon (or Kweon) clan of 1476 and that of the Munhwa Yu of 1565. By analyzing the way daughters and adoptees were recorded, the order of listing of sons and daughters, the remarriage of *yangban* women, and the discrimination against the children of remarried women and secondary wives, this paper opened a new chapter in the study of Joseon women's history.

Social Boundaries and the Japgwa-jungin

Although it is true that Wagner's major works focused on the ruling *yangban* elite, he also engaged in intensive research on the passers of technical examina-

tions (japgwa) and the jungin (or chungin) in the latter half of his life. In his first article on this subject (1973), he wrote: "Still, all of us are plagued by questions of definition in our efforts to delineate the nature of Yi Korean society. A clearer image of the outlines of any single feature will help us with the more blurred portions of the historical landscape." He began his research on the premise that "if we cannot yet say what a yangban is, perhaps we can begin by describing in one sense what a yangban is not" (Wagner 1970). In other words, he attempted to identify the characteristics of the Joseon society by studying the ruling yangban elite as well as non-yangban such as the japgwa passers and the jungin in order to locate the boundaries between these two social strata. For many years, he investigated the *japgwa-jungin*'s origin, their development, and their modern fate. At the same time, he proceeded to quantify an enormous amount of material such as the Japgwa bangmok (or Chapkwa pangmok), the roster of technical examination passers, and their genealogies. He also made a special study of the Haeju Kim japgwa-jungin clan (1987), an excellent example of how generalization can be derived from research on this subject as a whole.

He also provided a solid basis for other researchers to engage in this kind of research by establishing a database on the successful *japgwa* passers and the *jungin*, in particular on the late Joseon government painters and calligraphers. The latter database, in the form of a catalog, features information on a total of 827 painters and calligraphers employed by the central government and on their immediate families and households. Though it remains incomplete, it undoubtedly sets an important milestone in Korean art history.

Database of the Joseon Ruling Elite and Its Structure

Undoubtedly, Wagner's greatest achievement was the compilation, in collaboration with Song June-ho, of a vast database usually referred to as the "Wagner-Song Mungwa-bangmok Project" (or "Wagner-Song Munkwa-pangmok Project"). It is comprised of personal data of 14,607 people who passed the civil service examinations (mungwa) held 748 times from 1393 to 1894. Begun in 1967, the Wagner-Song Mungwa Project gathered the following information on all mungwa passers: Name(s), post or title at the time of the examination, year of birth; three paternal ancestors (i.e., father, grandfather, great-grandfather), mother's father, father-in-law, preliminary examinations passed, clan seat, place of residence, and brief information on jobs held. The examination rosters were sup-

plemented with data from rosters of holders of licentiate degrees, local gazetteers, and literary collections. This unique project, which will eventually be comprised of data on some 100,000 men, provides detailed information on the entire ruling class of the Joseon period. It was close to completion by the time the two authors died, and some preliminary results have been published on CD-ROM and in book form (Song June-ho and Wagner 2000).

The Wagner-Song project was the first large-scale project of its kind to be considered for computerization. Due to its complexity, it encountered many difficulties. In particular, the computerization of Chinese characters posed great problems at a time when Chinese character programs were not yet available for personal computers (Wagner 1972). This pioneering achievement, however, will open new quantitative approaches with which the elite society of Joseon Korea can be studied.

Historical Heritage in the Modernization Process

Between 1961 and 1982, Wagner also wrote three articles on Korean society after modernization in which his views on the Joseon period can be detected, although his main research interest was the political and social history of the Joseon period,.

In "Failure in Korea" (1961), written just one month after the military coup, Wagner argued that the U.S. government would have to take a firm attitude toward the coup. He also deplored the failure of the U.S. to prevent the coup despite its long and intensive engagement on the Korean peninsula. He then suggested that the U.S. would have to take control by attempting to dissolve the Korean military machine. Filled with distrust of Park Chung Hee, Wagner concluded that the U.S. would have to take measures to bring material progress to the lives of Koreans lest it fail in its struggle against communism in underdeveloped countries.

"Modernization Process in Korea: Some Historical Considerations" (1963) was written at a time when South Korea was implementing its strong economic development plan in the name of modernization. Wagner argued that most of the traditional elements continued to exist and influence the direction and contents of modernization. Yet, in view of Korea's strong tradition of "literary men" (*munin*) controlling "military men" (*muin*), he confessed that he had held a military coup as being impossible. Compared to the other East Asian countries, royal

power in Korea was relatively weak, and this had led to factional in-fighting and misgovernment—a legacy that is still present. On the other hand, it was fortunate that Korea, unlike Japan, did not have an imperial institution that could lead the nation down a violent and totalitarian path. Pointing to the high literacy rate, he added that Korean culture had many positive aspects with which it could meet the demands of the modern world. He then tentatively suggested that it would be appropriate to consider either 1960 or 1961 as the starting point of Korea's modernization. This position provides an important clue in understanding Wagner's view of Korean history.

Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the U.S.-Korean relations, the third article summarizes the diplomatic relations between the two countries over the preceding one hundred years. Wagner strongly criticized the absence of a specific American policy on South Korea after World War II when the Americans directly intervened in the domestic affairs of South Korea. His argument was supported by his personal experience in the U.S. military government of South Korea. He concluded by suggesting that the U.S. must guard against becoming overly sensitive to security issues in its Korea policy. Written in 1982 after General Chun Doo Hwan took office upon repressing the Gwangju (or Kwangju) uprising, the article clearly testifies to an estrangement between Korea experts and U.S. policy makers.

Final Thoughts

Wagner started his work on social history at a time—the first half of the 1960s—when sinologists like Chang Chung-li and Ho Pong-ti began to publish their research on the Chinese gentry and social mobility in China. It is likely that Wagner was influenced by their work, which was carried out against a backdrop of modernization theory in America. Wagner's focus on the Korean elite and their social formation should be understood in this wider discourse. Nevertheless, Wagner disagreed with the indigenous development theory put forth by Korean historians who attempted to define the genesis and development of modernity through universal laws of world history and locate such a process in the late Joseon period. Moreover, he rejected the teleological arguments of Korean historians and treated modernity as a purely western-centered concept. Such a point of view became an important premise for the different direction Korean history took in America. Wagner's work inspired his students but, unfor-

tunately, remained marginal in the circles of Korean scholars who insisted on their indigenous development theory.

Ever since the late 1940s when he first came into contact with Korea, Wagner devoted his life to the research of Korean history for close to fifty years. During this half-century, his interests and understanding of history gradually evolved from concentration on the formation of the elite to the history from below and from social history to cultural history. Based on sound empirical data and meticulous research, Wagner's life-long work on Joseon dynasty society will continue to serve as a solid basis for asking new questions and opening new research fields both in the West and in Korea.

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Chronology

1924	Born in Cleveland, Ohio.
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1951	Received an A.M. degree in East Asian Area Studies from
	Harvard University.
1959	Received a Ph.D. in History and Far Eastern Languages from
	Harvard University.
1958-1993	Taught at Harvard University
1981-1992	Served as director of the Korea Institute, Harvard University.

Selected Publications

- 1974. The Literati Purges: Political Conflict in Early Yi Korea. Harvard East Asian Monographs nr. 58. Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center.
- 1963-1971. Elementary Written Korean, 3 volumes, co-authored with Kim Chongsoon. Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Institute.
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