Special Essay

The Flow of Ideas and Institutions – James Palais: His Critics and Friends

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I regard it as a great honor that I was asked to address you as a speaker at the First Annual Kyujanggak International Symposium on Korean Studies.[1] I accepted this invitation because this lecture is supposed to be dedicated to the memory of my long-time friend and colleague, James B. Palais (1934-2006). It is certainly befitting to look back at the work of a scholar who shaped Korean Studies in the United States for over thirty years and left a number of publications that will continue to influence the flow of ideas on pre-modern Korea for a long time to come.

Like many of his contemporaries, Palais came to Korean Studies through his service in the U.S. military in Korea. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1968 with a dissertation on the reform policies of the Taewŏn'gun in the late nineteenth century. It was in this work, published under the title *Politics and Policies in Traditional Korea* by Harvard University Press in 1975, that he started to develop his ideas about the basic political, social, and economic institutions that in his eyes characterized the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). Indeed, this book was the first attempt by a Western historian to embed the

1. This is a slightly amended version of the keynote lecture I delivered at The First Kyujanggak International Symposium on Korean Studies on October 16, 2008.

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analysis of Chosŏn history in a comprehensive theoretical framework and to establish the terms by which pre-modern Korean history could be freed from the then still widely held image of being a variant of the Chinese great tradition and understood as an independent cultural entity that warranted close scholarly attention.

In view of the few places where Korean history was taught in the United States at that time, Palais considered himself lucky to be called to the University of Washington in Seattle in 1969 to start a university career that was to last for more than thirty-five years. During that time, he not only developed Korean history into a viable academic discipline, but also brought forth a number of students who now hold key positions in Korean studies all over the United States.

Palais was a passionate teacher and lecturer – and a sharp critic. With his phenomenal memory, he was able to dissect problems with precision and come up with novel views and ideas that often baffled his students and colleagues. When you sent him a twenty-page piece of work for comment, you got forty pages of notes and suggestions back! He used to excuse this proliferation with his ability to type at great speed, but it was his quick and lucid mind that outpaced our arguments and forced us to rethink much of what we had written.

Palais also developed expertise on modern Korea as his numerous lectures and presentations on political and economic issues of contemporary South and North Korea testify, yet his main interest clearly focused on traditional Korea, and today I like to confine my observations to his contribution to an understanding of pre-modern Korea.

As we all know, Palais' greatest contribution to Korean history is his magnum opus on Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622-73), on which he worked for almost twenty years.[2] It is a very detailed analysis of Yu's thinking about the evils of his time – the mid-seventeenth century – and his proposals for social, political, and economic reform. Yu laid his reform plans down in his *Pan'gye surok* (A miscellaneous account of the man of Pan'gye) between 1652 and 1670 when he lived as a recluse in Puan (North Chŏlla). With his wide-ranging exploration of contemporary problems and his equally in-depth search for their remedies in the Chinese Classics, Yu presented a many-layered reform program that was brought to the attention of the official world in Seoul only some one hundred years after Yu's death. Palais followed Yu's layout of topics, but embedded

2. James B. Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

them in an analysis of the historical circumstances, which preceded Yu's time and thus largely conditioned his thinking, and a consideration of the influence Yu's proposals may have had on later statecraft thinkers. Because Yu framed his reform proposals in terms of the ideal institutions he thought to have existed in China's antiquity, Palais was forced to dig into Chinese history and make a wide-ranging study of Chinese institutions from pre-Confucian times to the Ming. In addition, Palais critically perused the Korean and Western secondary literature up to the early 1990s. Indeed, Palais fulfilled a herculean task worthy of Yu Hyŏngwŏn's encyclopedic approach to reform.

On the basis of his painstaking investigation, Palais concluded that Yu Hyŏngwŏn drew his inspiration for reform mostly from the Chinese classical literature and thus did not exemplify the kind of "progressive" statecraft thinker that would make Yu one of the early representatives of the so-called *sirhak* or practical learning school. Rather, as Palais pointed out, Yu creatively used the vast corpus of Chinese literature, which laid out the structure and the mechanics of an ideal society, in his quest to reestablish in Korea a truly moral society ruled by moral officials. Yu, however, clearly had to work within the constraints of his time and society. When he called, for instance, for the abolition of slavery and its replacement with waged labor, he saw himself forced to tone down his most radical proposal because he recognized that its realization would have been impossible during his own time. He equally ran against a wall with his proposal for the replacement of the ruling yangban with a new kind of moral bureaucrats selected on the basis of a revised universal education system. In contrast, some of Yu's recommendations for economic improvements were more "progressive" than those of his contemporaries, and may indeed have had some impact on later reform policies. On the whole, however, Palais concluded that however remarkable the thrust of Yu's reform plans was in view of the relatively backward situation of contemporary Korea, he did not develop "progressive" concepts such as individualism or liberalism that would have made him a true initiator of a new age of thought in Korea.

Not surprisingly, Palais' conclusions did not receive the undivided approval of his Korean colleagues. On the contrary, Palais was often accused of perpetuating the view that "stagnation" rather than "change" characterized the late-Chosŏn society and economy. As much as Palais emphasized stability, which he saw as resulting from what he called "checks and balances" with which the Chosŏn political and economic system was kept alive for more than five hundred years, he never used the term "stagnation." He was well aware of the unhappy connotations this term was carrying in Korea. On the other hand, he thought that his research did not allow him to subscribe to the view of some

Korean economic historians who maintained to have discovered indigenous roots of capitalism in the late-Chosŏn economy. These so-called "roots," Palais countered, were not strong enough to give rise to economic activities that would warrant the label "capitalist."

This whole debate about stagnation versus change in the Chosŏn period certainly had its historical justification: some forty years ago, Korean historians were indeed called upon to get rid of the odious image the colonial rulers had impressed on Korea – the image that the Koreans were unable to generate change, whether political, economic, or otherwise. But the effort to refute this image may have led at times to forced interpretations of data that, if looked at again from a greater, less emotional distance, may yield quite a different picture. In short, terms such as stagnation are analytically meaningless, and there are certainly more salient aspects of Palais' work that now call for comment.

Let me briefly go back to Yu Hyŏngwŏn. Although Palais pictured Yu as a child of his time suffering from the constraints his society put upon him, Yu does not really emerge as an individual in Palais's book. Characteristically, Palais was more interested in exploring the institutional aspects of Yu's reform plans than in Yu's biography. Even though Yu's other works besides the *Pan'gye surok* do not seem to be extant, a somewhat fuller description of Yu's intellectual background, I feel, might have been desirable. In particular, Yu Hyŏngwŏn, though still very young at the time, could not have been spared the grave impact the Manchu invasions of 1627 and 1637 had on Korea's national psyche. Yu apparently did not mention these invasions in his work, but he must nevertheless have been aware of the court's military plans to mount a counteroffensive against the new rulers of Qing China, and of Korea's grappling with redefining its political and cultural position within the vastly changed international environment.

Furthermore, why did Yu, who was born and resided in the capital, decide to go to distant Puan (Chŏlla Province) to live as a recluse for the rest of his life? Was it because he was disgusted with the political establishment at the center to which his family, having earlier supported the Northern faction, no longer belonged? To what extent, then, we might ask, did his life's changed circumstances in rural Korea influence the way he saw the world around him? Of course, Yu was foremost a statecraft thinker, but, as Palais briefly mentioned, he did have to take a position on the *i-gi* (principle and material force) debate, which had become the key issue of Korean Neo-Confucian thought. Yu apparently came to prefer *principle* because he thought that it not only was inherent in things and events, but also in the laws and institutions of

the real world. Palais was thus convinced that "Yu's unitarian world view was based on his concept of the interconnectedness of moral principles and the mundane affairs of government and the real world" (p. 13). This stated, Palais did not further elaborate on this in the rest of his work. But was it not exactly the fact, as Chŏng Tuhŭi pointed out,[3] that Yu was able to break out of the rigid Neo-Confucian thought patterns of his time that makes Yu "progressive" in comparison to his contemporary fellow intellectuals? In brief, then, the criticism that Palais did not pay sufficient attention to Yu's personal and intellectual background may not be entirely unwarranted.

Interestingly, Palais seems to have taken over Yu's negative view of the first two centuries of Chosŏn, which he (Palais) called the "period of degeneration." Indeed, any reformer would want to see the conditions of the period preceding his own time as "failure" or "degeneration" to give his reform proposals historical justification and relevance. Thus, Yu, too, was perhaps too negative about early Chosŏn. He called it a "degenerate age" because he recognized that Korea's Confucianization was still incomplete. With his reforms, therefore, he did not intend, I think, to create a "new" society, but a fully *Confucianized* society. And how did he propose to achieve such a society? By taking recourse to the ideal society described in the Chinese Classics. In fact, in this respect, Yu did not greatly differ from the dynastic founders. They, too, used the *Liji* and the *Zhouli* in a creative way in their quest to transform Korean society into a *moral* society. In short, what Yu seems to have called for was nothing less than a "re-Confucianization" of Korean society, in particular, of course, of the ruling elite in the capital. He felt that the tightly organized group of officials, who monopolized power at the helm of government, had to be replaced by "moral men" selected not by pedigree and the traditional examination system, but by their moral qualifications acquired in a reformed education system open to anyone.

I find it remarkable that Yu Hyŏngwŏn did not comment more on the social situation in the countryside. Like many scholars before him he did draft a community compact (*hyangyak*), but the social changes he must have witnessed around him – for example, the gradual building-up of lineages – seem to have been outside the purview of his concerns. It is furthermore noteworthy, but left uncommented by Palais, that Yu apparently did not mention the first ritual controversy of 1659 that exerted such a divisive influence on politics both in the capital and in the countryside. Showing little

3. For a lengthy review of Palais' work, see Chŏng Tuhŭi, *Miguk esŏ ŭi Han'guksa yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Kukhak charyowŏn, 1999), 43-65.

interest in contemporary ritual issues, was Yu, then, the armchair scholar Palais made him out to have been?

In a brief lecture entitled "A Search for Korean Uniqueness" he gave at Harvard in 1994 in honor of the retirement of Professor Edward Wagner, Palais outlined his "version of the uniqueness of Korea." Later printed in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*,[4] this presentation succinctly summarizes the features Palais regarded as most characteristic of the Korean historical experience and is therefore well worth a closer look.

Slavery heads his list. He noted: "I would point first and foremost to the phenomenon of slave society in Korean history as possibly the most obvious mark of uniqueness. This is a phenomenon that should attract everyone's attention because no other country in East Asia had a slave society worthy of the name" (pp. 414-15). As we all know, Palais insisted that with over thirty percent of its population consisting of slaves, Korean society was best characterized as "slave society," and he was often irritated that other historians, whether in Korea or in the West, did not readily agree with his assessment. "To be sure," he wrote, "it is admittedly a striking label that draws attention not only to a phenomenon that occurs only in a few societies, but one that probably lasted for almost nine hundred years, and one that demands a response to the question why a society so civilized by other criteria should have subjected so many of its people to the cruelties accompanying a slave system" (p. 417). Why, he asked, did neither Buddhism nor, later, Neo-Confucianism comment on this inhuman situation? Indeed, even Yu Hyŏngwŏn had to defer the implementation of his demand for the slaves' liberation to an uncertain future. For Palais, then, the slave issue, which remained largely unquestioned and therefore unresolved throughout Chosŏn, was one of the principal obstacles for the emergence of a protocapitalist society at the end of the eighteenth century and may have, even after the abolition of official slavery in the early nineteenth century, contributed to the unrest and disruptions that rocked the countryside later in that century.

Palais' views on the high profile of the slave in Korea's traditional society have sparked considerable controversy among Korean scholars. It is not the place here to retrace the arguments that have been brought forward to counter Palais' assertions, but it should be clear, I think, that Korean slavery cannot be reduced simply to economic terms. Rather, Chosŏn-dynasty slavery must be analyzed as a multi-faceted phenomenon. The slave led an ambivalent

4. James B. Palais, "A Search for Korean Uniqueness," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55, no. 2 (December 1995): 409-25.

existence: he lived in close proximity to the elite, and base women were taken even by elite men as secondary wives, producing sons who were barred from participating in their fathers' descent group activities as well as from public office; the slave thus was subjected to a degree of discrimination that highlighted the social chasm separating "high" from "low." Equally remarkable, I think, were the Chosŏn government's policies over time to manipulate the population ratio between slaves and commoners by fixing by law the social status of the offspring of such mixed marriages. Clearly, the kind of inequality characteristic of Chosŏn slavery gave rise to many contradictions and ambivalences that have to be studied in a framework that is larger than purely economic considerations.

As a further "significant mark of Korean uniqueness" Palais enumerated "the nature of the yangban elite and the question of aristocracy" (p. 418). Even though Yu Hyŏngwŏn identified his society as an "aristocratic" society, Palais was not ready to follow suit. He used to speak of "semi-aristocrats," asserting that the ruling class of Chosŏn was best characterized as aristocratic/bureaucratic. Such a definition implies that being an aristocrat depended largely on passing the examinations and holding office in the bureaucracy. This, however, is clearly much too narrow a definition of what the late-Chosŏn Korean aristocrat was, whether called *yangban* or *sajok*. In fact, in 1994 Palais quoted Wagner's definition of a "real yangban" as having as his chief characteristic a "latent entitlement to strive for important political preferment and all that it might bring with it" (p. 418). It was an ongoing entitlement, Wagner emphasized, and one that did not depend on immediate considerations of rank or post. Though Palais accepted Wagner's definition and recognized the existence of a hereditary ruling class as a distinctive feature of Korean society, it is curious that he would have continued talking about "semi-aristocrats" or about a "hybrid between contrasting ideals of meritocratic bureaucracy and hereditary aristocracy." After all, as Yu Hyŏngwŏn also critically pointed out, the Chosŏn-period bureaucracy was hardly a meritocratic bureaucracy.

It was perhaps easier for Palais to speak about slaves than about aristocrats. Despite his long association with Edward Wagner, he never seems to have developed a deep appreciation of the inner workings of Chosŏn-dynasty society. He remained skeptical, for instance, about the significance of aristocratic lineages in the countryside and thought that these lineages, if they existed, were not comparable to the lineage system of southeast China. He was perhaps influenced by Yu Hyŏngwŏn who, as mentioned earlier, must have taken the social activities of his contemporaries for granted and therefore did hardly comment on them. Like Yu, Palais was foremost interested in the

political and thus regrettably tended to neglect to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the *social* matrix of Chosŏn Korea.

As a further defining characteristic of Chosŏn Korea Palais mentioned hereditary factionalism. He called it a "clearly distinctive phenomenon" and noted that it was surprising that it occurred in mid-dynasty and not at the beginning of the dynasty when Neo-Confucianism was first introduced to Korea. Again, had he appreciated the social workings of the Chosŏn dynasty, he might have been less puzzled about the emergence of the deep fissions within society when they occurred. I know that Palais planned to write a history of factionalism. If he had got around to it, I am sure he would have been forced to enlarge his picture of the ruling elite beyond its political boundaries.

Palais further mentioned as a concomitant feature of the aristocratic strength of the yangban the relative weakness of the Korean kingship. This was not, he emphasized, the result of personal flaws of individual kings; rather, it was an endemic feature already clearly present in Silla and surviving through time to the end of Chosŏn. In other words, aristocratic strength and royal weakness conditioned each other. Nevertheless, he ascribed the longevity of Korean dynasties to China's protective shield, which, he thought, guaranteed the peninsula's peace, rather than to the stability "hereditary families and lineages in the ruling class" provided. To be sure, there were military incursions into the peninsula, the worst during mid-Chosŏn, but the curious fact is, as Palais observed, that foreign invasions destroyed Chinese states resulting in alien rule. This did not happen in Korea. Despite the severe destruction the country suffered at the time, Korea survived the Japanese and Manchu invasions, and the Chosŏn dynasty continued to exist for another two hundred years. In the last analysis, then, Palais found that it was the "ironic legacy of an adverse geographical situation which should have proved fatal to the Korean people, but which in fact achieved the opposite."

Since change rather than continuity and stability has been on the agenda of most Korean historians, it is understandable, I think, that they paid special attention to economic issues. Using historical materials such as census (*hojŏk*) and land registers (*yangan*), they highlighted with quantitative data the kind of economic and social change they thought was leading to a modern, capitalist economy and society. Equally, the transition period from late Koryŏ to early Chosŏn has generally been seen as a major turnover in the composition of the ruling stratum and thus as a landmark signifying a major advance over the preceding era. The general assumption thus seems to have been that "change" would necessarily lead to "progress." Such endeavors to prove that Korean

history progressed on its own, independently of outside stimuli, through roughly the same stages as are known from Western history have, I think, obstructed a long-term view on Korea's *social* reality.

Korean society, I contend, was (and still is) a kinship-based society. From its beginnings, reaching as far back as Silla and possibly beyond, kinship was the constitutive principle in the formation of Korea's hierarchically structured social status system. In other words, it was the constitution of a consciousness of common descent and ancestral prestige that bonded kin together and created the lasting *social* structures and networks through which the aristocratic descent groups at the top of the social hierarchy pursued their political and economic objectives. It is thus my contention that the primacy of socially manipulated and legitimized patterns of hierarchy and dominance determined the nature and operation of the country's political, economic, and cultural institutions. From the perspective across dynastic boundaries, then, it was the persistence with which this kinship ideology was articulated and utilized that more than anything else determined the tenor of the Korean people's historical experience over time. To be sure, this indigenous descent-group-based social system experienced two major challenges: the introduction of the examination system under Koryŏ King Kwangjong (r. 949-75) in 958, and the adoption of Neo-Confucianism as an ideology of social renovation at the beginning of Chosŏn. As deep and long-lasting as the impact of both these imports from China was, they did not destroy the preeminence of Korea's aristocratic descent groups in society and politics. On the contrary, it was the remarkable resilience of this descent-group ideology that, against any kind of egalitarian influence of the examination system or of Confucianism, provided the long-lasting internal stability that saved Korea from frequent dynastic upheavals and enabled her to survive foreign invasions. Continuity and stability should thus no longer been disparaged as antonyms of change. Rather, if historical reality is understood as being socially and culturally constituted, the focus on society and the social will not only reveal dynamic variations and adjustments over time as well as in space; it will also lead to a greater appreciation of what was really unique in Korea's historical experience.

If Palais had been prepared to pay more attention to *social* factors and had put political and economic institutions and the bureaucratic system less in the center of his considerations, he might have stacked what he regarded as the "unique elements in Korean history" in a different way. But, then, Yu Hyŏngwŏn was his principal informer – an authoritative voice that Palais let powerfully resonate in his work and thought.

Finally, Western historians of Korea, Palais included, have often been asked

for what kind of an audience we think we are writing. Our answer, I believe, has always been unanimous: we are writing primarily for Western readers. This involves, of course, the question of perspective: we cannot avoid looking at our subject from a particular point of view. Therefore it is inescapable that the views of Korean and Western scholars are not always congruent. In fact, I believe there should not even be an attempt to reach congruence! Rather, this First Kyujanggak International Symposium provides us again with a splendid forum for floating our ideas on Korean history in an atmosphere of mutual appreciation and encouragement. The study of Korean history has long ceased to be the sole domain of Korean scholars. Whether or not this has been fully appreciated in Korea, the history of Korea and its people has irrevocably become an integral part of the history of the world.