

Some Reminiscences on Forty Years of Research in Korea

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It was in the autumn of 1967 that I first went to Korea as a research fellow of Harvard University to do research in the Kyujanggak Library of Seoul National University. Forty years have since passed, and I appreciate the opportunity the Director of Kyujanggak Institute of Korean Studies affords me to look back on these forty years and express some thoughts on the development of Korean Studies during that period.¹

When I first arrived in Korea, my knowledge of Korean history was very limited. True, I had just received my Ph.D. in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University with a dissertation on Korea's opening to Japanese and Western trade and diplomacy from 1875-1885, but my dissertation research had been confined to the small stock of books and documents I could find in the Harvard-Yenching Library. It was John K. Fairbank, my advisor, who first suggested that I write my dissertation on Korea's late nineteenth-century diplomatic history. At first I was reluctant to take on this assignment because I

1. This is a slightly revised version of the talk I gave in Korean at the Kyujanggak Institute in Seoul on October 11, 2007. I also showed a series of slides I had taken in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Lew Young Ick (Yonsei University) and Chung Doo-hee (Sogang University) were kind enough to act as discussants.

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knew nothing about Korea. It was perhaps partly my admiration for Fairbank's work on the Chinese ports, and partly the exciting prospect of exploring an as-yet-uncharted field of historical research, that eventually persuaded me to begin working on Korea. Fairbank, moreover, assured me that I would not have to study the Korean language since all the documents I needed were written in classical Chinese! Because the documentary basis on which I then wrote my thesis was limited, I received a Harvard research fellowship to go to Korea to work on archival materials preserved in the Kyujanggak Library.

Getting to Korea from Europe was not easy in the late 1960s. There were no direct flights to Seoul, and I had to spend a night in Tokyo before boarding a small aircraft that took me to Kimp'o Airport. It was an entry into an exotic world! I had the feeling of stepping back in time. Indeed, Korea was then a country that had been little touched by industrialization. For me, it offered fascinating insights into traditions and customs that in the meantime have all but disappeared, and it was this fascination that prompted me to start learning the Korean language. Would interaction with life around me have been possible without being able to communicate in such a communicative country?

My primary task was to search through the holdings of the Kyujanggak for materials that would expand and enrich my doctoral dissertation for eventual publication. The Kyujanggak was located in the precincts of the old Seoul National University in Tongsung-dong, only some fifteen minutes from my home in Myŏngnyun-dong. On my way to the Library I passed by the high gate of the National Shrine to Confucius (Munmyo), reminding me of Korea's great Confucian past, which then still exerted a vibrant influence on daily life. The Kyujanggak Library was housed in a small, Japanese-built building. There were few amenities in the Reading Room, where it was icy cold in winter and very hot in summer. Library work turned out to be physically quite exacting. But there were also special rewards. What today is unimaginable was normal then: I handled Korea's treasures on a daily basis. It gave me a special thrill to collect my data from original sources. One was the *Ilŏngnok* (Royal Annals), that multi-volume work containing detailed information on late Chosŏn's internal and external history. Some sources were even written by hand and had rarely been touched by researchers before. Collecting data, however, was a very time-consuming enterprise because I had to excerpt the materials by hand. In 1968, the Harvard-Yenching Institute donated a Japanese-made copying machine to the Kyujanggak, but this was only a partial improvement as the copying process allowed the reproduction of only a few pages at a time; the bulk I still had to write out by hand. Toward the end of my stay, I was allowed to enter the library stacks and view the original *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* (Royal Annals of the Chosŏn

Dynasty). I still remember the faint smell of beeswax with which the pages were impregnated against dampness. Close by, the black wooden boxes were stacked in which the *Sillok* had been evacuated during the Japanese invasions at the end of the 16th century, and again during the Korean War. Holding a national treasure in hand was indeed a unique experience!

My time at the Kyujanggak was not only invaluable for collecting essential information with which to significantly enrich my original dissertation; I also became acquainted with the Korean researchers with whom I shared the Reading Room day in and day out. Most of them were graduate students in the History Department of Seoul National University. Once the novelty of having a female Westerner in their midst wore off, our contacts grew very cordial and helpful. Indeed, as my colleagues eventually advanced into important academic positions around the country, they extended support and encouragement to me that continue to this day. This I have always regarded as a very special benefit I reaped from my work in the Kyujanggak. At times I was joined by other Harvard students, and occasionally famous visitors used the Library. I vividly remember the visit of the renowned Chinese historian Ch'ien Mu. Clad in long, gray-colored traditional dress, with old-fashioned round spectacles on his nose, he looked through stacks of *munjip* and kept his aides running back and forth. Was he then working on his study of the spread of Neo-Confucian thought to Korea?

The fruits of my first research stay at the Kyujanggak, from 1967 to 1969, were incorporated into the monograph *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885* (University of Washington Press, 1977). I thus achieved what I had set out to do, though I gradually lost some of my enthusiasm for diplomatic history. During my two-year stay in Korea, I frequently had the opportunity to go to the countryside, and it was there that I first witnessed Confucianism in action. Observing Confucian-style rituals was an eye-opening experience that persuaded me to switch to Korean social history. I started to collect written and oral materials on Korean traditional life and, after my return from Korea, when no teaching position was in sight, decided to get advanced training in social anthropology at Oxford University. I had then the good fortune to find in Professor Maurice Freedman an enthusiastic and inspiring teacher who with his immense knowledge of Chinese society guided my first inquiries into Chosŏn-dynasty society and ritualism. This was a difficult enterprise as there was practically no literature on Korea in any Western language, and research on social history in Korea had only just begun. Freedman recognized the importance of including Korea in any consideration of East Asian society and encouraged me to go back to Korea to do intensive library and field

work.

The theme of my research during my second stay in Korea, from 1973 to 1975, was thus the impact of Confucianism on Korean society, with emphasis on the Chosŏn period. I resumed my work in the Kyujanggak, where this time I concentrated on collecting data from the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, collected works (*munjip*) of eminent Chosŏn-dynasty scholars, ritual manuals, and legal literature. With my training in classical Chinese, I tried to access a world in which ritual performance seems to have dictated the rhythm of life. When, in the summer of 1974, the old Kyujanggak was closed in order to be moved to the new campus at the foot of Kwangaksan, I went back to the countryside to observe ritual practice. Meeting with ritual practitioners was a rare experience that allowed me to approach my written sources with greater confidence and comprehension. It was already clear at that time that age-old rituals performed in home and village were being threatened by the rapid modernization that had started to engulf the countryside.

Library research and the experiences I had in the countryside convinced me that ancestor worship was a major mechanism through which Neo-Confucianism transformed Chosŏn society. Indeed, Confucian-style ancestor worship and its impact on all spheres of social life became the theme of my *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Harvard University Press, 1992). A Korean translation appeared in 2003.

I have revisited the Kyujanggak Library many times since 1975, when I returned to Europe to teach Korean history, first at the University of Zurich and later (from 1988) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). Indeed, with its fabulous resources the Kyujanggak has remained a continuing source of intellectual stimulation. It was there that I developed the idea for a further project on which I am still working today. It has become common to use Confucianism to explain the manifold changes that took place in the long history of Chosŏn Korea. Even though no one would dispute that Confucianism had an enormous impact on Korean thought and society, I have come to question the validity of taking Confucianism as the sole criterion for assessing those changes. Rather, it seems to me that the social history of Chosŏn has to be studied in a much wider conceptual framework that also encompasses Korea's "pre-Confucian" past. I have done this to an extent in my previous work, but have perhaps not fully considered the tenacious survival of pre-Confucian social norms, such as bilaterality or fraternal equality, in "Confucianized" Chosŏn. To revisit this problem, I have broadened my inquiry and now make, instead of Confucianism as an "ideology of change," the indigenous Korean descent group (*ssijok*) the major focus of my research. This

new approach, which emphasizes the “social” rather than the “ideal,” seems to deliver fresh insights that I hope to present in a new monograph. It also necessitates a rethinking of the conventional periodization of Korean history. In place of keeping to dynastic time units, I follow what the French historian Fernand Braudel called the “longue durée” – that is, I view the history of descent groups in a time perspective that ranges from late Silla to roughly 1600. In such a widened perspective, which crosses dynastic boundaries, continuities as well as changes emerge as aspects of a long-term process of adaptation to the flux of time. For this research, I principally use the large number of private documents that have recently come to light. It is these private documents (*komunsŏ*) that vividly describe how ideological, economic, and political trends influenced and eventually changed the inner workings of elite descent groups. In short, then, the reconfiguration of Chosŏn-dynasty society is a much more complex process than a simple “Confucian” premise suggests.

As much as my own research interests and methods have evolved over the past forty years, so has the Korean perception of Western scholarship on Korea. In the 1960s, it was regarded as quite arcane when a foreigner started to interest him/herself in Korean history. The study of Korean history was a “national” pursuit and was at the time principally concerned with freeing the historical record from the distortions of Japanese scholarship. The focus was on political history from the vantage point of Seoul. Cooperation between Korean and Western scholars was therefore not very easy, though Western scholarship was always to a degree dependent on the research done by Koreans. Such dependence also resulted from the great scarcity of readily available documentation on Korea in Western libraries. Korean historical materials started to become more widely accessible in the mid-1950s, with the reproduction of the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, but it was not until the early 1980s that reprints of sources began to appear in greater numbers, which led to a diversification of scholarly interest and expertise.

“Korean Studies” at universities in Europe and America had initially a very difficult stand in the shadow of Chinese and Japanese studies because it was rare that universities funded positions exclusively dedicated to Korea. In Europe, in particular, the few scholars who worked on Korean subjects were widely scattered and isolated; if lucky enough to hold an academic post, he/she had to teach a broad spectrum of Korea-related subjects and rarely only his/her specialty, and student numbers were very small. It was therefore a tremendous boost to morale and scholarship when in 1977 the Association for Korean Studies in Europe (AKSE) was founded with Korean financial help. Beginning with barely thirty members, AKSE has over the years developed into a vibrant

professional institution that has stimulated the establishment of national branches and now entertains a vast network of Korea scholars in all corners of Europe, and that also attracts to its conferences colleagues from Korea and other parts of the world.

It was around the same time, in the late 1970s, that scholarly institutions in Korea started to invite foreign scholars to conferences. I vividly remember the opening ceremony of the “First International Conference on Korean Studies” that was organized by the newly established Academy of Korean Studies (AKS) in December 1979. As AKS president, the renowned historian Lee Sun Keun (Yi Sŏn-gŭn) delivered the opening speech, in which he emphasized the necessity “to create an international forum in which scholars of Korean studies can share the results and insights they have derived from their current research.” Indeed, the conference of 1979 initiated fruitful international collaboration between scholars and institutions and contributed to giving Korean Studies a sharper profile as an academic discipline at foreign universities.

Large international conferences that were staged over the years were helpful in bringing together Korea scholars from all corners of the globe, but were perhaps less effective in stimulating the exploration of new approaches and methods in historical scholarship. I therefore remember two workshops with particular fondness. The first one, organized by Edward Wagner and sponsored by the Joint Committee on Korean Studies (of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies), was entitled “Conference on Traditional Korean Society” and took place at the Yusŏng Hotel in Taejŏn on September 1-6, 1975. In its “Credo” Professor Wagner wrote: “Although much important work has been done in this field [of pre-modern society], it is obvious that the fundamental questions have not yet been answered. The effort to provide these answers will contribute much, both to the comparative study of traditional East Asian societies and to an understanding of the heritage of Korea today.” Such illustrious scholars as Yi Ki-baik, Han Woo-keun, Choi Jai-seuk, and Song June-ho, among others, were in attendance; the Western participants were all young disciples of Ed Wagner just starting to mark their presence in the field. It was an uneven cast, and due to language difficulties and the custom that “one does not argue with elders,” the exchanges were perhaps less lively than anticipated. Nevertheless, the workshop – the first I attended in Korea – was, as Wagner later wrote, “a stimulating experience for all who participated. The diversity of views . . . was much in evidence. No conversions took place, but an understanding of the perspective that differed from one’s own was certainly enhanced.”

This was surely the case, and gave me and Roger Janelli (Indiana University)

– later joined by Mark Peterson – the idea of organizing a further workshop on “Korean Society: A Historical and Anthropological Review.” As both of us were still juniors in our respective fields, a Korean scholarly association we asked for ideational and financial support was unwilling to underwrite our venture, but fortunately we received funds from the now defunct International Cultural Society of Korea. We met at an idyllic spot in Naejangsan between August 28 and September 3, 1983. It was a small but highly motivated group led by Edward Wagner, Kim Taik-Kyoo, Song June-ho, and Yi Sŏng-mu. The novelty was that we invited two China specialists, Arthur P. Wolf and David Johnson, as discussants. It was then that my work on “pre-Confucian” Korean society began to take shape. Unfortunately, we were unable to raise the funds necessary to publish the papers.

Since those beginnings, many more conferences and workshops have brought Korean and foreign scholars together, and in the meantime “Korean Studies” has been appropriated as an academic label by a number of Korean university institutions. What does “Korean Studies” mean in a Korean context? Does it point to intensified interdisciplinary collaboration among Korean scholars, or does it aim at promoting still closer cooperation between Korean and Western scholars? Both would indeed be most welcome. Time will tell in what direction Korean “Korean Studies” will go, but I hope that small, well-focused, workshop-type conferences will further encourage a diversification of viewpoints and methods in the exploration of Korea’s past and present.

The study of Korea’s past, however, seems generally to be in danger. A major reason for the decline of pre-modern studies in the West as well as in Korea seems to be a lack of interest on the part of young scholars in learning classical Chinese (*hanmun*), an indispensable tool for historical research. If this trend continues, the study of pre-modern history and culture will soon be regarded as “exotic” even at Korean universities! I hope that as prestigious an institution as the newly established Kyujanggak Institute of Korean Studies will use its incomparable material and human resources to develop programs that will help reverse this trend and stimulate renewed awareness of the old dictum, “Live in the present by knowing the past.”