

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**JAMES B. PALAIS**



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The *Review of Korean Studies*, in cooperation with *Chǎngsin munhwa yǎn'gu* (Korean Studies Quarterly) features interviews with eminent Korean Studies scholars worldwide. In this second interview installation, we introduce Dr. James Palais, former Chairman of the Korean Studies Program at The Henry Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, USA. His contributions to the development of Korean Studies in the US have been paramount. The interview was conducted by Dr. Han Hong-gu and was first featured in Korean in the 2001 Summer issue of *Korean Studies Quarterly*.

The Editorial Board of the *Review of Korean Studies* would like to express our deepest gratitude to Dr. James Palais for graciously agreeing to the interview. The Editorial Board also would like to thank Dr. Han Hong-gu for his work in transcribing the interview tapes and for writing both the Korean and English manuscripts. The next issue will feature an interview with Dr. Mikhail Pak known as "the grandfather of Korean historical studies in modern Russia." (Editor)

## **An Interview with James B. Palais**

**Question:** I am glad to see you again here at your office in Seattle. Although your academic work is well known, not much is known about your personal history. When you started studying Korean history, not many people in the West were interested. What led you to study this relatively unknown field?

**Answer:** I majored in American history at Harvard until graduating in 1956. I then joined the army, and was sent to the Army Language School at Monterey, California. At first I applied for the Russian class, but it was already full. Only the Chinese and the Korean classes had vacancies. The Chinese class was an eight-month course while the Korean class was one-year course. I thought studying Chinese for only eight months would not be sufficient, so I chose the Korean class. After I finished the course, I served one month in Japan, and from 1957 to 1958 I served in Korea at Yöngdūngp ó and Üijöngbu. After military service, I returned to the United States and applied to several graduate schools. I wanted to study either business or East Asian studies. I was admitted to two business programs, but admitted to only one East Asian studies program, that being Yale. So I went Yale. At that time there was no Korean history program in the United States, so I chose to major in Japanese history. Yale's Japan specialist at the time was professor Yanaga Chitoshi. He was a political scientist, but he also taught Japanese history. For Chinese history, I learned from professors Arthur Wright and Mary Wright. At Yale, I continued studying the Korean language from Prof. Samuel Martin. At that time he was busy editing a Korean-English dictionary.

**Question:** According to you, it seems as if it was by chance that you became first interested in Korean studies.

**Answer:** Right, it was by chance. In fact I originally majored in chemistry. I had finished all but one class to fulfill my major, the one class being physical chemistry, which I almost flunked. I went to my chemistry professor in my junior year for advice, and he said I was in bad shape. The only way I could graduate was changing my major to American history. So if I took all history classes, I could graduate on time. And that's what I did. (laughs) The only reason why I decided to major in chemistry in the first place was my father. I was more interested in languages, particularly French and Latin. But my father convinced me that there was no utility in languages. He had been a businessman, a manufacturer. He ran a small factory, but he had no training. In fact, he had received a law degree in the 1920s, but was persuaded by his brother to go into manufacturing. For that reason, he was pushing me into mechanical engineering, which I absolutely could not do at all. In eighth grade, I took an aptitude test in which I scored in the bottom 8 percent out of one hundred. I wasn't as bad at Chemistry, but the main reason I chose it was for practicality. I was only getting Bs, once in a while Cs, and really was going nowhere. Next I took some pre-med courses for a while, but my grades were not good enough, so I abandoned that. When I graduated I took the dental school exam, and I flunked. Failed that test, no good in chemistry, no good in medicine, so I decided to go back to what I really wanted to do originally, language. I didn't have a chance to study Russian.

When I discussed my plans to study Korean history with professor Yanaga Chitoshi, he advised me to go onto a Ph.D. in Japanese Studies. But I replied I had already spent all this time in Korea, learning the Korean language, and I was interested in Korea, I really want to study Korea. He said there was no future in Korean studies in the United States. But when I found out that Wagner was teaching at Harvard, I decided to go to Harvard to do Korean history.

**Question:** When did Harvard University open its Korean history program?

**Answer:** It was 1959 when Edward Wagner became a professor of Korean history at Harvard. He had taught Korean history for five years

at Tenri University in Japan before he came to Harvard. Then professor Edwin Reischauer made a position for him. When Harvard opened the Korean history program, I started my Ph.D. course at Harvard in 1960 immediately after I received my Masters degree in Japanese history at Yale. I finished my course work by 1962, took my general exams, and got a fellowship from the Ford Foundation. With that funding, I went to Japan and collected materials from various libraries and archives for one year. It was around this time that I became interested in the Taewon gun period and the Kanghwa Treaty. I started reading Tabohashi Kiyoshi's book, which was over two thousand pages. It took more than a year to finish reading it.

**Question:** When did you come to Korea again? And how was your research there?

**Answer:** I returned to Korea in 1963 and by around 1965 I finished gathering raw materials at Kyujanggak library for my dissertation. Professor Han U-gün, who recently passed away, was a visiting scholar at Harvard from 1960 to 1962. I first met him at Harvard when I was a graduate student and he was a great help to me throughout my stay in Korea. Although I never formally took any of his courses on Korea, I visited his office many times whenever I had questions, especially when I was reading raw materials such as the *Ilŏngrok* or the *Sŏngjŏngwon ilgi*. I would always go around the corner to his office, knock on his door, and ask him to explain something. We had many long discussions in his office, and he was tremendously helpful. We also discussed the problems involved with the state of the research at Kyujanggak. What a terrible shape the collection was in at that time! The Government paid almost no attention to that wonderful collection. The *Sŏngjŏngwon ilgi* and other documents were lying amidst dust and dirt. We also discussed at length many issues with the various interpretations of Korean history. I found him very open minded, liberal, and supportive. It was a terrific relationship and I learned a lot from him. Every time I went back to Korea, I got in touch with him to sit around a couple of hours in a coffee shop. We did that over many years. And I also met some Korean graduate students at that time. Among them

were Kwon Sök-bong and Yi Söng-mu. I saw them everyday at the Kyujanggak and we became close friends. We frequently had lunch together at the mess hall at Seoul National University.

**Question:** As a foreigner, didn't you have any difficulty in doing research on Korea or studying Korean history?

**Answer:** I once asked professor Han as well as my friends what right, as a foreigner, I had to comment on the nature of Korean history or other particular problems. I didn't quite feel adequate to the task. However, professor Han encouraged me to express my point of view because he felt that he himself as well as other Koreans would be interested in hearing an outsider's opinion on the various problems in Korean history. He thought it would be beneficial to get different point of view from my interpretation of whatever my study is. I thought that this answer was very encouraging. With respect to objectivity, I do have an advantage because I'm not a part of Korean society. I don't have to worry about the pressure that those who are part of Korean society would feel. Distance gives me an opportunity to think of different interpretations of events that I've been studying over the years. His advice meant a lot to me, and gave me confidence in doing my own writing and expressing my own opinions about various historical events.

**Question:** How was your daily life in Korea?

**Answer:** When I went back to Korea, my daughter Julie was only one year old. We rented a Korean-style house near the Changch'ung gymnasium. On the first night we moved in, a thief came into the house, and a couple of weeks later, we might have lost our baby daughter Julie from briquette gas poisoning. At that time, my friend Marshall Phil had a western-style house at It äewon, but he was staying at Chang Chun-ha's place. So I moved into Marshall's house and lived there for two years. I visited Chang Chun-ha's place several times to see Marshall, where I could also meet with Dr. Kim Chun-yöp, Chang's best friend. Chang Chun-ha is the most decent person whom I

had ever met. He was a true democrat and patriot. When I was in Korea, it was before Korea took off on its economic development. There were many student demonstrations in opposition to the military government's attempt to conclude the Korea-Japan treaty. I recall that the government violated the unwritten rule not to send troops inside university campuses. In 1965, when I was studying at the Kyujanggak, I remember them putting up machine guns at the front gate. Students were marching to downtown Seoul, and they tried to prevent students from reaching downtown area by setting up blockades, covered with tanks... I witnessed all of that. It was a great deal of turmoil. However, the greatest impression that I had was of Chang Chun-ha. It was amazing that he would hide out a month at a time without being found. It indicated how those who were outspoken were always in danger, something which of course, he was aware of. That is what I remember most from the dictatorship period. Besides Marshall Phil, Gary Ledyard, who recently retired from Columbia, and John Jamison of Hong Kong University were all in Seoul doing their research at that time.

**Question:** Was it in 1967 that you finished your dissertation?

**Answer:** Yes. I returned to the United States in 1965 and started writing my dissertation, working as a TA for an East Asian history class. After I finished my dissertation, I got a job at Norfolk State College in Virginia, where I stayed for a year. Most of the students and professors were African-American, and neither they nor the college administration were interested much in East Asian history. Only five students registered for my Asian Civilization class. I had to teach a European history class 12 hours a week, which was boring for me. So I transferred to the University of Maine, which is now the University of Southern Maine. It had seven or eight history professors, and I was able to teach just Asian history.

**Question:** It seems it wouldn't have been easy to find a Korean history job in the United States in the 1960's.

**Answer:** In fact, I in my job search before taking the job at the Norfolk State University, I interviewed with Columbia. They were interested in a twentieth century Korean historian, but my main interest was pre-modern traditional Korean history. They asked me if I would shift my interest to the twentieth century, but I said no



and I didn't get the job. (laughs) I really refused to compromise. Eventually, Frank Baldwin was hired as a modern Korean historian. He didn't get tenure later, as he got involved in the anti-Vietnamese War movement. He was a major activist, and he antagonized the Chairman of the Department at Columbia. Also because he hadn't finished his book manuscript, he felt that the atmosphere there was inhospitable. He was getting no cooperation, the faculty in charge was harassing him, and he didn't get tenure. He went to Japan right after that. He eventually abandoned his scholarship, but he did finish his dissertation on the March First Movement, which was a very good piece of work, although it was never published.

**Question:** What was the situation of Korean Studies programs at that time? And when did you get your job at the University of Washington?

**Answer:** I taught one year at University of Maine. One day, I got a phone call from my old friend Kenneth Pyle, who was teaching Japanese history at the University of Washington. He told me that professor Ko Pyŏng-ik came to UW as a visiting professor and taught Korean history. But when he returned to Korea, the University decided to look for another Korean historian. In the 1960s, Wagner at Harvard and Lediyard at Columbia were the only two professors who taught Korean history at American universities. Hugh Kang found a job at



Hawaii in 1966 or 1967, and Ch  e Y ng-ho became a professor at Hawaii after I got a job at UW. And when I came to UW, S  Tu-su was teaching Korean literature. At that time both Wagner and Lediyard had to also teach Korean language classes. Personally, it was greatly beneficial that I only had to teach history. Although Hawaii and UW started their Korean Studies programs later than Harvard or Columbia, they invested a lot into their programs. Political Science professor Glen Paige moved from Princeton to Hawaii. Princeton had gotten a half million dollars from the Ford Foundation to develop their Korean studies program, and thus had hired Paige and William Henthorn, who studied the late Kory  period. But for some reason, Princeton abandoned its plan for Korean Studies and returned the money to the Ford Foundation. So Paige moved to Hawaii and Henthorn also taught at Hawaii although not on regular basis.

**Question:** How did you develop the Korean studies program at UW? And when did professor Bruce Cumings join UW?

**Answer:** George Beckman arrived at UW from University of Kansas one or two years after I came to Seattle. He was a specialist in Japanese History and a good administrator. He became the director of the Far Eastern-Russian Institute at UW and wanted to promote Korean studies. And the next thing that happened was that S  Tu-su retired and I was able to convince Beckman to support the hiring of Bruce Cumings who was just getting his Ph.D. from Columbia. Bruce came here to teach and taught for ten years before moving to Chicago. In 1968 before I came to UW, I taught a Korean summer course at Columbia. I had only three students in the advanced class, and in the beginner's class I had just one. That one was Bruce. We had ten years together, the two of us, running a program with Fred Lukoff who taught language at that time. We did everything with our own resources. The Director of the Institute has some funding and he had put in a little bit of money for the program, but the fact is when I arrived, my position was a new creation. And up until a couple of years ago, we had only three positions: one historian, one social scientist, and one language and literature. Even Beckman didn't think that he could get more than

three. Three was enough to handle the Korean program. This was the way it has been since. So, that was our situation. Three professors teaching courses and we offered a Master's degree program.

**Question:** I forgot to ask you about professor Wagner. In what way did he train his students including you?

**Answer:** I was his first Ph.D. level student. Edward Wagner was an exceptional human being. I found him to be one of the most easygoing, friendly, and helpful mentors that anybody could hope to have in working for a Ph.D. His door was open to his students all the time. You could knock his door and have a lengthy discussion about any problem. He didn't mind being interrupted. When I first arrived at Harvard, he started reading a historical dictionary that had just recently been published. We made a class out of it. In fact, it wasn't even a formal class. We would meet once a week, check the sources used in the dictionary and had back and forth discussions. I learned a lot from this. We found a lot of defects and a lot of problems in the dictionary's explanations. I did that throughout my first year at Harvard. At that time I already had Master's degree from Yale, so I had a little bit of training and was able to use the Korean language. That was the first experience I had with him. Throughout all of my experiences, he was tremendously helpful. He was also a very meticulous scholar who paid attention to the details of primary source materials. The best lesson I learned from him was "You have an opportunity for creative interpretation in history." Working primarily on source material characterized East Asian graduate education at Harvard. The emphasis was on getting source materials even if your Korean, Chinese, Japanese language facility was not native. If you got primary source material, and was able to write a dissertation based on this source material, you had a chance for creative interpretation. I think that is one of the reasons why even though American scholars of East Asia are behind when they first start out, no way near the level of preparation of native students, the fact that they can go to primary sources gives them a chance for different interpretations. If you just read secondary materials, you would not be able to develop your own creative interpretation.

**Question:** Would you briefly summarize professor Wagner's academic contribution? How did he creatively interpret Korean history?

**Answer:** His monograph on the literary purges during the Chosŏn dynasty challenged conventional wisdom on the political history of Chosŏn period. The literary purges were typically interpreted as the result of confrontations between merit subjects and the young *sarim* scholars. But he viewed the purges from the perspective of tension between the royal authorities and subjects. He wrote individual articles, too. He was a perfectionist and didn't publish a lot of materials, but the work he did publish was, I would say, very important in changing the perspectives on the Chosŏn dynasty. One of his major contributions was his work on social changes during the late Chosŏn period. Contrary to the conventional view of rapid social mobility from the common class to *yangban* class, he found that opportunities to pass the civil exam to become bureaucrats had declined rather than increased. Contrary to popular belief, there were more social mobility opportunities in the 15th century than in the 19th century. And another major contribution he made was the study of Chosŏn government policy towards the Northern provinces of P'yŏng'an and Hamgyŏng. Contrary to conventional thinking, he found that the government actually instituted provincial quotas for the civil system. People from the northern provinces were passing at the same level as those from the southern provinces, but the problem was that they did not rise up in the same way in the bureaucratic system. Another important article he wrote was based on household registration documentation of the northern part of Seoul and suburban areas just outside of Seoul in 1669. He found that 75 percent of this population were slaves, which I would say was a devastating and entirely unexpected finding. It reminded us that during the Shilla period, Kyŏngju had a large slave population. And Susan Shin, one of his students, is another person who was able to show that the social system in Chosŏn might not have been as rigid as most people thought. She found plenty of evidence of downward as well as upward social mobility. I think their finding of downward mobility was much more significant than upward mobility. Wagner's findings were later reinforced by his colleague Song Chun-ho

at Chōnbuk University.

**Question:** Professor Martina Deuchler received her Ph.D. at Harvard approximately at the same time that you received your degree. You and she chose the same period for your respective dissertation topics. Was this Fairbank's influence? And Wagner, you, Deuchler, and your former student John Duncan at UCLA share unique views on the continuity and longevity of the Chosŏn society, which many scholars label as the Harvard school. How do you think about this labeling?

**Answer:** It didn't work that way. Martina didn't work with Wagner. They were quite separate. In 1958, Wagner wasn't there. I hardly ever saw her, in fact I don't think I met her once at Harvard. She was primarily working with Fairbank, and his office was located in a different building, while Wagner was located in the Yenching Institute building which was on the other side of the campus. As for the interest in the late 19th century, that's what everybody did at that time. The Soldier's Riot of 1882 was my research paper in Fairbank's seminar. Twelve to Fifteen people in that class. But I was basically alone while I was at Harvard. Marshal Phil came later, but he dropped off for a while. Although Martina later came to share a similar view on Chosŏn society, it is not appropriate to categorize her, Wagner, and me as the Harvard school only because we all did our Ph.D.'s there. But it is true that people who worked with Wagner did the same type of genealogical social history stuff.

It is also true that scholars in the West emphasize the continuity and firmness of the social status system. Such opinions are, however, a minority in Korea. Only Song Chun-ho shares this view.

**Question:** In order to cleanse any remains of Japanese colonialist thoughts on Korean history, Korean historians have tended to stress historical development and change rather than continuity. Some Korean scholars think you are a stagnationist because you emphasize continuity rather than development and change, and because you reject theorizing on the historical roots of capitalism. How do you feel about this kind of criticism?

**Answer:** I never thought or wrote that Chosŏn was caught in a trap of stagnation. Professor Kim Yong-sŏp and many others have done passionate research on the socioeconomic development of Chosŏn. I appreciate their findings and teach them in my classes, too. But I also do not think that the economic development of the late Chosŏn period was sufficient to be characterized as roots of capitalism. Those who have labeled me as a stagnationist must have not read my books. Most critics of Cumings actually have not really read his books. Cumings presents a very subtle argument that considers various factors. But to eyes colored with preconceived notions, those subtleties are often missed or meaningless.

**Question:** You seem to argue that although Chosŏn was not caught in a trap of stagnation, it failed to achieve fundamental social reform. How would you explain the longevity of the Chosŏn dynasty despite its lack of major social reforms?

**Answer:** I think that the *yangban* of the Chosŏn dynasty had two aspects: a bureaucratic and an aristocratic aspect. Checks and balances between the *yangban* bureaucrats and the royal authorities did not allow for either side to seize hegemony in order to initiate fundamental reform. Instead, marginal adjustments and temporary measures were enacted to maintain the sociopolitical system. Contrary to the stagnationist interpretation, the slavery system became weak in the late Chosŏn period as evidenced by the disappearance of public slaves and out-resident slaves. This was because the *yangban* found that a tenant system would be more profitable than maintaining the slave system. However, this change did not necessarily lead to the collapse of the social hierarchical system. In the 19th century, upward mobility into *yangban* status was essentially closed and the *yangban* system was strengthened rather than weakened. Stagnationist arguments allege that there was no change at all, and that Koreans lacked the ability to develop. I don't buy this. Because there were definitely significant changes during the late Chosŏn period, and the stagnationist theory is undoubtedly wrong. But we do also need to have a comparative historical view. However, I don't think that socioeconomic development in

late Chosŏn was much further behind than that of the Western European feudal societies of the early modern period which had sprouts of capitalism.

**Question:** Another of your arguments that Korean scholars often criticize is your definition of the late Chosŏn society as a slave society. Late Chosŏn was a period in which Korean scholars are eager to find sprouts of capitalism. Then you suddenly label it a slave society. Isn't this difference of opinion what leads them to call you a stagnationist?

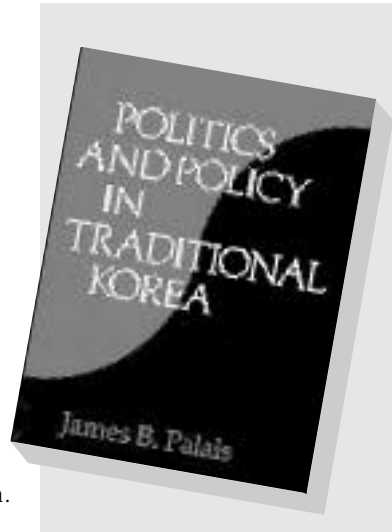
**Answer:** Maybe. Korean scholars who want to stress developmental aspects of history would certainly not like my argument. A curious thing about slavery is that its existence has never been in dispute. Nobody has ever really noted that a slave society has existed. The basic reason for that is that those people who are committed to the thesis that Korean history is an illustration of continuous progress don't like the idea. Basically since the colonial period, almost all Korean scholars I know of have devoted themselves in one way or another to disproving the stagnation thesis suggested by Japanese colonialists that Koreans are completely incapable of progress. Influenced by Marxist historiography, Korean scholars tend to think of slave society as a feature of the early stages of historical development right after communal society and just before feudal society. Due to Paek Nam-un's famous book published in 1939, which argued that the entire historical period from Shilla up until late Chosŏn belongs was feudal, many Korean scholars share this thinking. They think you can't have a slave society in the midst of feudalism, even though plenty of scholars recognize, through the analysis of household registers, that from the 16th century about 30 percent of the population were slaves. It didn't even occur to them to define a society with slaves as 30 percent of the population as a slave society. I think 30 percent of the population is characteristic of many slave societies in human history. You don't have to have 100 or 80 percent in order to have a slave society. Professor Hong Sŏng-gi suggests 50 percent as a criterion for a slave society, but I think this number is too high. I think that almost all of features of slave society were there. I'm not a Marxist and I don't buy Stalin's theory of the five

stages of the economic development. I also do not think that feudalism existed in Korean history if we use the definition strictly, with the exception of slight possibilities in the late three kingdoms. Both South and North Korean scholars admit that there a lot of slaves existed in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, but they haven't changed their overall verdict on feudalism. I believe that up until the mid-eighteenth century, Korea was a slave society. I also view the South in the United States before the Civil War as a typical case of slave society. English economic historians such as Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst are Marxists, but they argued that slaves can exist in any mode of production. In the late Chosŏn society, tenancy and small peasant holdings were the predominant mode of production. However, if we classify this period according to the composition of the population, it definitively should be characterized as a slave society. *Sirhak* scholars such as Yu Hyŏng-wŏn and many others have criticized the problems of the slave system, but they have never argued about the abolition of slavery itself. They just criticized the inhumane treatment of slaves that violated Confucian norms. After reading Yu Hyŏng-won's work, I solidified my belief of Chosŏn as a slave society.

**Question:** Your first book, *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*, is based on your dissertation. What aspects of Taewon ġun and King Kojong's reign led you to choose this period for your topic?

**Answer:** During King Chŏljong's reign, just before the rise of the Taewon ġun, royal authority became very weak and the dynasty faced serious challenges from the bottom, as evidenced by the nationwide rebellions of 1862. After he seized power, the Taewon ġun rebuilt the Kyŏngbok Palace to restore royal authority and put into place institutional reforms. At the core of these reforms were issues surrounding the so-called three administrations: land tax, military service tax, and the state granary system. The most serious problem among these was the breakdown of the military service tax system. In the early Chosŏn period, the *yangban* took military duty, but as time passed, the yangban avoided and became practically exempted from military service. At the time of the Japanese Invasion in 1592, about one third of the popu-

lation was slaves. Slaves had to pay tributes to their owners, but were exempted from state levies and taxes. So the burden on commoners increased. To expand the tax base and the military, the Taewon gun attempted to levy a military service tax regardless of their status. This reform provoked vehement resistance from the yangban. He further antagonized the local *yangban* by abolishing private academies. The grain loan system was the direct cause of the nationwide rebellions of 1862. The idea to loan relief grain to poor peasants was good, but local magistrates and clerks who managed the system usually imposed higher interest rates than what was the legal rate. The unpaid high interests



Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea.  
*Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.*

were again added to the original loans. It's what the Mafia is doing. The Taewon gun tried to write off the debts of peasants that had been carried over for years and generations and to transfer the responsibility of managing the grain loan system from the hands of local magistrates and clerks to *myŏn* council composed of local *yangban*. This reform was obviously beneficial to the peasants and created stability for another generation until the dynasty faced a massive peasant uprising in 1894.



**Question:** How do you evaluate the isolationist policy of the Taewon gun?

**Answer:** There were two factors for his seizure of power for ten years. First, King Kojong was too young and politically incapable. Second, his isolationist policy was welcomed by conservative *yangban*. Although the Taewon gun was the de facto regent, his status was not protected by law. When King Kojong proclaimed his personal rule in 1874, he had two alternatives: to launch a coup and nullify his son's seizure of personal rule or to resign. He chose the latter. Now we might evaluate his isolationist policy from a different perspective, but we have to remember that the policy was firmly supported by most yangban. The diplomatic relationship between Korea and Japan prior to 1866 was based on a false story. Diplomatic documents were exchanged between the Korean king and the Japanese king, but in Japan there was an emperor and the Shogun, but no king. After the Meiji Restoration in 1866, the emperor came to the fore, and sent diplomatic documents under his name. The Taewon gun refused to accept them because the documents did not fit to established rules. The Meiji leaders felt humiliated and discussed a plan to invade Korea. The domestic policy of the Taewon gun was met with resistance by the *yangban*, but his foreign policy was firmly endorsed by the conservative elite. After the retirement of the Taewon gun, Kojong adopted a more moderate foreign policy. But by this time, the *yangban* who had cooperated with the king to kick out his father turned their backs on him. Kojong changed some of his father's policies, but basically his rule stood on the solid basis that was established by his father.

**Question:** Do you think that the direction of the reform launched by the Taewon gun was generally sound?

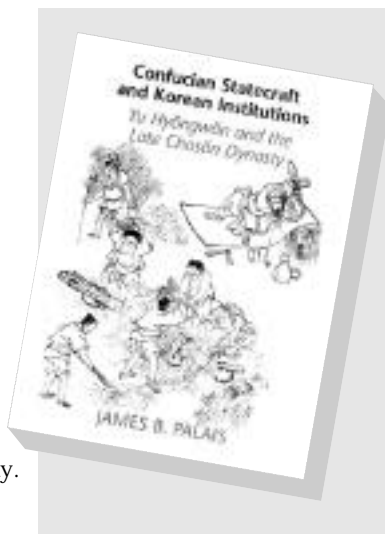
**Answer:** Yes. His conservative reform had the right direction in the context of traditional Chosŏn society. But in the international context of East Asia, it was wrong. First the French and next the Americans occupied Kanghwa Island and each retreated voluntarily for their own reasons, but the Taewon gun and conservative yangban believed that they

had defeated the foreign invaders.

**Question:** In 1996, you published your second book, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏng-won and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*. It's over one thousand pages. What about the life and works of Yu Hyŏng-won attracted you to write this ambitious book?

A: After reading articles by Chŏn Kwan-u and Chŏng Ku-bok, I became interested in Yu Hyŏng-won. His book, *Pan'gye surok*, is the most well-written book that I've ever encountered. It discussed all the major problems of his period in detail and suggested alternatives. Writing *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions* took over twenty years, although there was an unexpected interruption. For the first five years, I read the *Pan'gye surok* very carefully and translated the entire

Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions:  
Yu Hyŏng-won and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty.  
*Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.*



text into English. Yu was extremely well versed in the Chinese classics and more than a half of the examples cited in his book were about ancient Chinese institutions. If time and other conditions allow, I'd like to publish the English translation of the *Pan'gye surok*, or at least an abridged version.

**Question:** Your specialty is the Chosŏn period, but you also have close interests in modern history and have actively participated in current affairs. When Kim Dae-jung was sentenced capital punishment in 1980, you were very active in the effort to save his life. Would you please tell the readers about that?

**Answer:** In the early 1980s, I frequently contributed articles on Korean politics to newspapers. Sometimes I was requested to write an article by editors, and sometimes I sent articles in letter to the editor form. With Bruce Cumings, I attended rallies and demonstrations to protest against the military dictatorship. Korean students as well as Korean-Americans organized these demonstrations. The demonstrations were not that big, maybe from 25 to 50. The general atmosphere of the Korean-American community in Seattle was very conservative. Even Paul Shin, who was my first graduate student and now as a Washington state senator, was reluctant to attend the rallies because of his personal relations with the Korean Association. I remember there were 15 to 20 demonstrations from 1980 to 1986. But local Korean-American newspapers did not report these anti-dictatorship rallies.

**Question:** Among the long list of your work, one item is very unique. Most of your works are scholarly ones regarding the Chosŏn society, but *Human Rights in Korea* published by Asia Watch in 1986 looks quite different. Did you write most part of this over 300 page report?

**Answer:** The report consists of two parts. Cumings wrote the North Korea part and I wrote part 1, South Korea. As you know, it was impossible to access North Korea, and thus part one took up more than 80 percent of the report. To write this report that deals with the human rights situation of Korea from 1980 to 1985, I visited Seoul in June 1985 and conducted research and interviews for several weeks. At the Christian Council at the 5th Street, Chongro, I could get whole bunch of materials. I interviewed so called *chaeya insa* such as Kim Kŭn-t'ae and Yi Pu-yŏng. Both of them have now become leading politicians. That time was just after Kim Kŭn-t'ae had been severely tortured by

police. I also visited factory areas such as Yöngdüngp 0, Kuro-dong, and Karibong-dong to investigate the working and living conditions of workers. At a small steel plant in Kuro-dong, I asked a manager to show me the work place, but he kicked me out. The housing conditions of workers were terrible, but the neighboring district was a fancy residential area for the upper middle class. I was shocked to see the dark and the light of Korean economic development. I also visited Kwangju and had a group interview with fifteen-some young female workers. At Kangjin, I met 20 peasants. Although my stay in Korea for this project was not long, it was very intense. I also visited demonstration sites and attempted to have interviews with students who were engaged in sit-in-strikes. Students did not positively answer my questions because this was a time of growing anti-Americanism. Planning, preparation, research, and writing the final report for this project took an entire year. Meanwhile, I put aside my academic research on Yu Hyöng-won and dedicated myself to this project. However, research on Yu Hyöng-won was so time-demanding that I could not spare further time for human rights activities.

**Question:** Wasn't it around this time that you had a stroke?

**Answer:** Yes. The human rights report was published in January 1986, and I returned to my research on Yu Hyöng-won. But the stroke came in March. I was sitting alone at my office when I had a stroke. Fortunately, the door was open, and somebody who was passing by saw me. He noticed that something was wrong and asked me if I was okay. I could not say anything, but I barely shook my neck. He asked if he should call an ambulance, and I nodded. So I was brought to a hospital. I was very fortunate because to be able to go to a hospital just after I had the stroke, but my condition was quite serious. Two or three weeks after the stroke, I had a language ability test. I could not remember antonyms at all, and for I could answer only 20 to 30 percent of the synonym questions. I could not understand sentences with double negatives at all. It was so difficult to read even newspapers that I dared not read Korean material. It took a long period of time to recover my language ability. [At dinner after the interview, Mrs. Palais noted that com-

pared to other patients, he recovered quickly.] After the stroke, my memory has been quite bad. I think it took about two years to be able to write a normal English sentence. Sometimes I can't remember very common phrases. When you have a stroke, there is a barrier between your memory and consciousness. Professor Wagner is now suffering from Alzheimer disease. The symptoms are similar to my stroke, but his condition is much more serious.

**Question:** When I was at UW, I heard hundreds of times from you that you had bad memory. But you never forget students' study habits or mistakes.

**Answer:** (Laughs)

**Question:** Anyhow, I am glad that you have recovered your health from the stroke. Your book on Yu Hyöng-won, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, took very long because of an unexpected interruption. But it was praised highly and you received many distinguished awards.

**Question:** Yes. With this book I received the John William Hall Prize from the Association for Asian Studies in 1997. I also received the Yongjae Prize from Yonsei University in celebrating George Paik (Paek Nak-jun: Yongjae is his Korean pen-name). This year, I was honored with a special award from the AAS, given for the first time to a Korea specialist. It was a great personal honor, but I was even more gratified by the recognition of Korean studies by the Asian studies community.

**Question:** You have a great reputation not only as a scholar but also as a teacher. You produced the most active number of Korea specialists in the United States. Is there any secret in your training of students?

**Answer:** It's not that many. The number of students who got their Ph.D. under my mentorship is about fifteen. Only eight or nine out of them remain in the academic community. One recent Ph.D. found a job at the CIA, and another candidate who was at the last stage of his

dissertation went to the CIA without consulting me. I lost two of my students to the CIA. Those who teach at the university level are Carter Eckert at Harvard, Michael Robinson at Indiana, John Duncan at UCLA, Donald Baker at British Columbia in Canada, Michael Allen at Australian National University, and Kim Sun-joo who recently was given a job at Harvard. In Korea, you and Park Jun-shin at Sungshil University. Paul Shin, though he doesn't teach any more, was my student, too. The answer for my secret is the quality of students. I was lucky to have very good students. All of these people have their own talents.

**Question:** However, your mentorship was very impressive and helpful. For my dissertation, you wrote more than one hundred single-space typed comments. You have spent a great deal of time for your students.

**Answer:** It's only because I type so quickly. What I did as an advisor was take a look at their dissertations, and make a few suggestions. Sometimes, they had to rewrite, other times not much. All I can do is suggest which courses to take, or maybe a few additions for a reading list to start steering them. I do my best not to dictate a topic, but try to get them to do their own work. It's not good to tell students to do this and that. Once they get knowledge, they can make their own decisions, write a bibliography, etc., etc. They start doing their reading, and you try to point them to where they can use primary sources as much as other reading materials. One of the drawbacks in Western education is the trouble in learning a language. I advise them to use their wits to interpret history from a new perspective. The utility of writing a dissertation is very limited if it just confirms conventional wisdom. An emphasis should be placed on changing people's common understanding. But I cannot make them creative. They do their own work. Reading a dissertation draft is, as a matter of fact, my responsibility. It's the time when an adviser can teach his student. In reading a dissertation draft I try to point out whether or not he loses sight of his aims, whether or not a statement of interpretation is there, whether or not there are inconsistencies, etc. This is when professors can help in cre-

ating acceptable dissertations. I think guiding dissertations is a primary duty for professors. I didn't get help when I was at Harvard. My impression was you had to do everything on your own. Professors usually became your critic rather than your helper. They tried to destroy instead of taking responsibility. At a dissertation defense, you now face three or four critics. I don't think this is good. Professors should help students before they have their defense. I call my students before they go through the formal defense. I try to tell them in advance to fix up their problems. But also criticize too much, you know. My parents used to say that when I was a kid, I always asked them, "Where is the evidence?" And my father would say, "Stop asking for evidence!" I have always challenged other people's ideas.

**Question:** When I first took your class on Modern History of Korea, I was often embarrassed because you lectured only on the first day and from the second day on, you only asked questions to provoke discussion. And you always asked questions to students who were poorly prepared. Furthermore, you asked questions for a viewpoint opposite to those of the assigned reading material. But in Pre-modern Korean History, your true specialty, you do not use this teaching method and instead give lectures. What is the reason for this?

**Answer:** Actually, I learned that process of teaching at the Carnegie program. At Norfolk State College, where I had my first job, the university had a policy that all new faculty had to take a summer course on teaching techniques. There is where I learned this inductive method. Instead of giving lectures to the students, I raise questions, and make students search for their own answers. I make questions and assign reading materials in advance, and distribute them to students. In the class, I play devil's advocate to stimulate discussion. When there is an active discussion, I just disappear and do not intervene. Although it is not always the case, Korean students tend not to actively participate in the discussion, though some of them loosen up. 1.5 or Second-generation Korean students are little better in this regard, but still they are not so active. Perhaps it is because of their initial socialization at home.

**Question:** In the Korean Studies field in the U.S.A. currently, a growing number of young scholars come from the 1.5 or the second generation of the Korean-American community. You pointed out that in general Korean-American students are not very active. Do you think this affects the course of Korean Studies in the U.S.A.?



**Answer:** I don't think so. Many of them are very active. In general, Korean-American students take Korean history courses because they wishfully thought that the courses would be easier for them. Some of them studied Korean history at elementary or middle schools before they migrated to the U.S. However, the contents they had to study at the university level are quite different. They are embarrassed and sometimes don't do any work in the class. So I get a lot of poor Korean-American students. However, there are also excellent ones. Now we have a growing number of Korean-American Korea specialists with good English language skills as well as strong Korean cultural backgrounds. I think this tendency will grow even stronger. I was born into a Jewish family and when I was a kid, I was surrounded with Jewish culture, like religious school on Sunday. There are a lot of Jewish scholars in Judaic Studies and Jewish history as well. But for a completely different reason, I chose to study Korean history. I thought, how objective could I be in studying my own people? When I decided to study Korean history, I knew absolutely nothing. I wanted to study Korean history without any preconceived notions. When Americans study American history, you have the same problems. You are surrounded by all types of pressure; pressure from the left and right. You have difficulty maintaining objectivity.

**Question:** You played a leading role in the publication of *Occasional Papers on Korea* in the 1970s and *Journal of Korean Studies* in the



1980s. Would you please tell the readers how these journals were published?

**Answer:** *Occasional Papers* was my first venture. When we prepared its publication, we had absolutely no money whatsoever. We just went out on the street, found a local printer and asked him to publish it. So both the printing and the formatting were terrible. And I had to round up articles from students from various graduate schools. I didn't know how to do a journal and only tried to find the cheapest way. At that time, Ms. Margery Lang was working as chief editor at the publishing office of the Jackson School at the University of Washington. The office published a number of good academic books, especially on Chinese history. She became a co-editor of *Occasional Papers*, and it was reborn as *Journal of Korean Studies*. The University of Hawaii had already started a journal, *Korean Studies*. At that time, there were only a handful of Korea specialists, and it was not easy to collect enough articles to publish a journal. Thus, the editors of *Korean Studies* published all the articles that they received. I didn't like this uncritical process and tried to establish strict standards for publication in which articles would be screened by outside reviewers. In publishing *Journal of Korean Studies*, I wanted to create a journal that maintained high standards. Since it was difficult to get articles that satisfied our standards, publications were sometimes delayed. This is why the journal was not published every year.

**Question:** Did you get any financial support for the publication of those journals?

**Answer:** At that time Kenneth Pyle, the editor of *Journal of Japanese Studies* and professor of Japanese history at U.W., had a non-profit organization independent from the University of Washington to publish *Journal of Japanese Studies*. Likewise, I set up a non-profit corporation in the state of Washington. Margery Lang was paid by the University of Washington, and Kenneth Pyle, who was in charge of the publication office, allowed her to spend some of her time for editorial work on *Journal of Korean Studies* for two years. This was great indi-

rect financial support. But *Occasional Papers* and *Journal of Korean Studies* were basically based on subscription money. I edited the first to the fifth issue of *Journal of Korean Studies*, then I had the stroke. So Michael Robinson of the University of Southern California became the editor and he edited the sixth to the eighth issues. After he transferred to Indiana University, John Duncan at UCLA was in charge of the ninth and tenth issues and is now looking for a way to publish them with a lower budget.

**Question:** In the 1980s, the South Korean government established the Korea Foundation and through it donated funds to Korean Studies institutes in foreign countries. As the University of Washington has been a core center for Korean Studies in the United States, the Korea Foundation offered to donate a great amount of money, but you turned it down. Why did you refuse to accept the Korea Foundation funds?

**Answer:** Even without that money, my students got their Ph.D. degrees. Before the Korea Foundation offer, the Park Chung-hee government suggested donating money to our program, but I refused for three reasons. First, I did not think it was good to accept money from a dictator. Second, Korea is a divided country. If I accepted money from one half of a divided nation, it would undermine the objectivity of the institution. If you receive money from someone how can you criticize him? Third, the South Korean government obviously wanted to buy influence by donating those funds. It would pressure us not to say anything critical about the South Korean regime and while not doing North Korea any favors. For example, in the early 1980s, Bruce Cumings and I showed a North Korean movie on the campus. The South Korean Consul General in Seattle held a party at his house at the same time and invited all the Korean students to prevent them from seeing the film. Later, the consular staff even made phone calls to Korean students and told them not to take courses offered by Cumings or by me because we were Reds. And then, suddenly the South Korean government was going to give us money. How could I accept that without any suspicion? In British Columbia, Don Baker also had a problem with Korea Foundation funds. Since he was critical of these funds, the

money went to the president who set up a committee to handle the money. The committee consisted of all Koreans, but none of them was a Korea specialist. All the members were supporters of the military dictatorship, and they did not spend a cent for Korean Studies programs. Instead, they used that money to invite their friends from Korea for non - academic colloquiums, so they essentially threw the money away. When Don Baker criticized the administration, they began to persecute him.

Some people said that it was okay to accept the money if there were no strings attached. But actually there were many invisible strings attached. When you criticize the South Korean government after you accept the money, then the government must withdraw its financial support. If you have expanded your program using the funds and wanted to maintain the program, you have to keep quiet. In the East Asian tradition of mutual reciprocity, it is the way things are. As a Korea specialist who was familiar with Korean culture, I couldn't accept the money.

**Question:** Although South Korean society has yet to reach a satisfactory stage of democratization, its situation has improved a lot in comparison to the period of military dictatorship. You were very active in the "Save Kim Dae-jung" movement in the 1980s, and now he is the President of Korea. Would you please explain why you still refuse to accept the Korea Foundation funds?

**Answer:** Since the June Democratic Uprising in 1987, the democratic transition that Korea has achieved is really remarkable. But the division of Korea is still ongoing. I appreciate the Kim Dae-jung government's efforts to improve inter-Korean relations, but many students, workers, and activists are currently in prison because of the National Security Law. If the National Security Law has been abolished and South Korean society is fully democratized, American academic institutions would freely accept Korea Foundation money. I am going to retire soon, and the one who will be in charge of the Korean Studies program at the University of Washington will decide whether to accept the money or not. As of now, I don't think the situation is matured

enough. [In a recent phone conversation, Dr. Palais told the interviewer that he had requested Korea Foundation support for the Korean Studies program at UW. After his retirement, the UW administration has not actively recruited Dr. Palais 'replacement due to recent budget reductions. Dr. Palais said that maintaining the program's position as a core center of Korean Studies in the United States is much more important than his personal stance.]

**Question:** In the 1990s, many scholars suggested that Confucianism was the secret behind the economic success of East Asian countries. Although these voices became weaker after the foreign exchange crisis at the end of 1997, still this Confucian capitalism argument can be found. As a specialist in the Confucian politics and society of the Chosŏn dynasty, what do you think about this theory?

**Answer:** I just finished writing an article on that issue. I just don't see Confucianism contributing to capitalism. The followers of Confucian capitalism borrowed Max Weber's thesis proposing a leading role for the Protestant work ethic in the capitalist development of the West. But they do not pay attention to a significant point: the Protestant work ethic changed to incorporate capitalist development. Originally *the Bible* taught that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. However, after the Reformation, the accumulation of "clean" wealth became legitimate. During the process of capitalist development in East Asia, Confucianism never went through this sort of change. If you look back at the Chosŏn dynasty, Confucian scholars disliked anything dealt with the private sphere. This doesn't mean that they didn't want to become rich. They invested in gold mines and so on, but they did it secretly. They couldn't publicize their economic activities. The government did not encourage commercial activities. To become a successful businessman, you probably would have had to violate Confucian norms. Although many Korean CEOs are talking about Confucian values, I think it is just a strategy for controlling their work force. By emphasizing Confucian ethics, they want their workers to be loyal and not to cause any trouble. The Japanese also used Confucianism as

a control mechanism. I find it difficult to see how Confucianism has contributed directly towards economic development.

**Question:** At the Berkeley Conference held last week, it was once again confirmed that is still there a great gap between Korea-based scholars and America-based scholars. In the field of modern Korean history, “nationalism bashing” by America-based scholars is most conspicuous. In Korea, a growing number of scholars, mostly social scientists, also criticize the problems caused by nationalism. But Korean historians still tend to have strong nationalistic beliefs. What do you think about this issue?

**Answer:** Well, I think the expression “nationalism bashing,” is inappropriate. I think it is quite understandable that Korean scholars have strong nationalist tendencies. Korea has been under the Japanese colonial rule for 35 years. During that time Koreans were not able to write their own history and instead had to read distorted history books written by Japanese colonialist historians. It is natural that Korean historians after the liberation thought that their most urgent task was to reverse the verdicts of Japanese colonialists on Korean history. This led Korean historians to an overemphasis on nationalism. In the United States, historians are also apt to become nationalistic. The reason why I chose Korean history rather than American history is that I wanted to distance myself from American nationalism. However, there is a big difference between Korean nationalism and American nationalism regarding their former enemies. Korea is in a weaker closed off state. For a long period of time after liberation, no Japanese history courses were offered at the university level in Korea. Sincere academic study of communism was also impossible because of ultra-anti-communism. On the contrary, studies of former enemies, i.e. Japanese militarism and German Nazism, were flourishing in the United States. Koreans, as individuals and as a nation, never forget insults and offenses. They have to redress their memories of grievance any way they can. In the factional politics of Chosŏn dynasty, punishment on bodies of the dead, punishment of honor, or posthumous rehabilitation of one’s ancestors have always been central issues. Grievances of the past are

passed on through generations, and you could never forget them. In the United States, humiliation and grievance in the past were not as important because American society was built on immigrants. More important were present discriminations and the struggle to overcome them. Whenever there was an influx of new ethnic groups, there was a harsh reaction against them, and they were seen as criminals. However, regarding their former enemies from the Second World War, Americans had the wisdom to make them close allies.

**Question:** Wasn't this a result of Cold War politics?

**Answer:** Of course, the Cold War was a very important factor. But it cannot explain everything. In World War I, the basic concept of the Allies in the post-War reconstruction of the world order was to punish those who provoked the War by imposing extremely heavy indemnities. The economic difficulties that Germany faced due to these indemnities, however, paved the way for the rise of Hitler. From the lessons of this nightmare, American policy-makers behaved differently. They didn't want another Hitler. Instead of punishing former enemies, they made them friends. Think about the US occupation policy toward Japan before the Cold War began. So I would say that the basic reason for a tolerant attitude was that Americans learned the lessons of World War I. The United States, a superpower based on immigrants, tends to have a very short historical memory. Korea, on the contrary, adheres too much to the problems of the past. Of course, in the contemporary period, the Korean ruling intentionally destroyed the memory of mass killings during the Korean War or atrocities committed by Korean troops in Vietnam. The young generations, both in the United States and in Korea, have very short memories about history. It's a characteristic of youth culture in the post-modern era.

**Question:** You are in charge of editing *Cambridge History of Korea*. When will we see the set be published?

**Answer:** I am the general editor of the four-volume set of *Cambridge History of Korea*. Volume one deals with the ancient period.

The second volume edited by John Duncan is dedicated to the Koryŏ period. The third volume, which I am editing, is on the Chosŏn period. The last volume is on the twentieth century and is edited by Bruce Cumings. The last volume is almost done, but the other three volumes are waiting for the submission of one or two more chapter manuscripts. Marshall Phil was supposed to write a chapter in volume three on the literature of Chosŏn, but unfortunately he passed away before he could finish it. Not many people are specialists in that field and I haven't been able to find a scholar who could replace Marshall. I haven't finished my own chapters because I had to take on more than I wanted when some historians abandoned their chapters to volume three. It is also not easy to find prepared authors for volume one. This ambitious enterprise began in the early 1990s, but what I told you is the current situation. I think it will take two or three additional years. But the situation is not that pessimistic. The publication of *Cambridge History of Japan* took more than twenty years even though the field had a much larger pool of scholars. *Cambridge History of China* has not been completed although it has been started even earlier.

**Question:** You are going to retire at the end of this quarter. What are you going to do after that?

**Answer:** Yes. However, I have a contract with UW to teach two courses per year for three more years. So the basic pattern of my life of research and teaching will not change much. I am worried about the Korean history position at UW. I think it is good for UW to invite a senior scholar because of the leading role of our program in the United States. But it is much more difficult to find a senior historian than to find a junior scholar. Now most major universities in the United States have one or two Korean Studies positions, but programs that can train pre-modern historians are rare indeed. I want a pre-modern historian to replace me, but the University would prefer a modern historian. After retirement, I would devote myself to finishing manuscripts. I have to write four chapters for volume three of *Cambridge History of Korea* and another one on land ownership for volume two. I also have to write a chapter on Korean-Chinese relations for *Cambridge History of China*.

Recently, I made a contract with the Columbia University Press to write a manuscript of a guidebook to Korean Studies. In addition, I am supposed to write the Korean portion of a general history textbook of East Asia. The Korea part would be 120 pages out of the total six hundred pages of the book. It is true that Korean Studies in the United States has grown rapidly, but descriptions of Korea in school textbooks are terrible. They are no better than the notorious Japanese textbooks. This is because there is no Korean history book that is well-known by the American public. If *Cambridge History of Korea* and a new standard East Asian History book that contains a fair amount of information on Korea are published, there would be some improvement from the current situation.

**Question:** Thank you very much for the lengthy interview.

## Chronology

- 1934 Born in Boston, USA.
- 1956 BA in American History at Harvard University.
- 1956 Joined the Army, sent to the Army Language School at Montray, California.
- 1957-1958 Stationed in South Korea.
- 1960 MA in Japanese History at Yale University.
- 1960-1962 Ph.D. Program at Harvard University.
- 1962-1963 Research in Japan.
- 1963-1965 Researcher at Kyujangsak.
- 1967 Ph.D. in East Asian Language and Civilization at Harvard University.
- 1967-1969 Professor, Norfolk State College and University of Maine.
- 1970-2001 Professor, University of Washington, Chairman of the Korean Studies Program.



## Publications

*History of Korea*; four volumes. General Editor. Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming.

*Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏng-won and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.

“South Korea.” In *Human Rights in Korea*. Asia Watch Committee, 1986.

*Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.