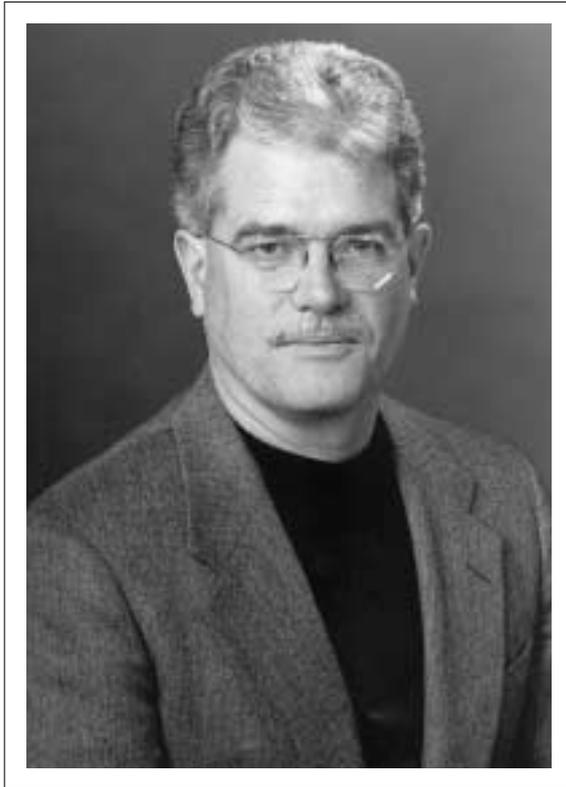


AN INTERVIEW WITH
BRUCE CUMINGS
1943 -



Professor of International History
and East Asian Political Economy
University of Chicago, USA.

Interviewed by
Michael D. Shin

The Review of Korean Studies, in cooperation with *Jeongsin munhwa yeongu* (Korea Studies Quarterly), features interviews with eminent Korean studies scholars worldwide. In this seventh interview, we introduce Prof. Bruce Cumings, Professor of International History and East Asian Political Economy, University of Chicago, USA. The interview was conducted by Prof. Michael Shin, Assistant Professor of Asian Studies, Cornell University, USA.

The Board of the *Review of Korean Studies* would like to express our deepest gratitude to Prof. Bruce Cumings for graciously agreeing to the interview. Further thanks goes to Prof. Michael Shin for his kind cooperation and contribution. - Editor

An Interview with BRUCE CUMINGS

Michael D. Shin*
Cornell University

Childhood and Early Influences

Q. In a recent interview, you've already talked about your intellectual influences and early career (*Yeoksa bipyeong*, spring 2001), so I'll try to avoid repeating material from that interview. There is a lot to discuss about your works and career, but I'd like to begin with some questions on your personal background. Where were you born? Can you also talk a little about your family background?

A. I was born in Rochester, New York in 1943, but I left after six months because it was too cold and snowing all the time. (laughs) Actually, my father had gotten his Ph.D. in Germanics from the University of Chicago, and his first job was in Rochester. Thereafter, my family moved to Danville, Indiana and then to nearby Greencastle, Indiana where my father was dean of DePauw University, and that's where I spent kindergarten and first grade.

My mother's family is primarily German. They immigrated from Germany in the nineteenth century and lived in Logansport, Indiana, just south of Chicago. My father's line goes far back, somewhat like my wife Meredith's line which goes back to the Goryeo Dynasty. My ancestor Isaac Cumings arrived at Ipswich, Massachusetts in 1632. Several of my direct ancestors fought on the American side in the Revolutionary War, including Benjamin Cumings, who fought at Bunker Hill. He was one of the several Benjamins after whom my wife and I named our younger son.

* I would like to thank John Keh of Cornell University for his help in the transcription of this interview.

My line of the family split off and went to Ohio, then known as the Western Reserve, when it was just opened up on the frontier in 1825. My great-grandfather bought land along Lake Erie and built a large farm which he and his kids farmed for the next seventy-five years. Around the turn of the last century, it was sold, except for ten acres of lakefront property, and that property still exists there as the Cumings Homestead.

Q. You were a young boy when the Korean War broke out. Did it make any special impression upon you then?

A. I was indeed a little boy when the Korean War broke out. It didn't make a special impression on me until Truman fired MacArthur. My family moved from DePauw to Coe College in Iowa, where my father was acting president for a year. I was walking down the streets of Cedar Rapids in April 1951 when Shriners held a demonstration, saying "Up with MacArthur, down with Truman!" Somebody broke some windows or caused trouble, and the police arrived. I ran home and told my father about this. He said, "It's just a bunch of right-wing reactionaries protesting President Truman's correct decision" or words to that effect.

I would say that I had a very typical American experience as a kid. I didn't pay much attention to politics. My knowledge of the Korean War consisted of building Saber jets and MiG fighters and bombers because I always liked to build plastic models. I read comic books where howling North Koreans and Chinese would be coming down by the million against a beleaguered handful of Americans, an image which was also usually false. I thought the Korean War must have been horrendous to fight against people like that. That kind of thing stayed in my head until the late 1960s when I was disabused of a lot of that kind of propaganda.

Q. Were you ever exposed to a critical perspective on the Korean War at the time?

A. One thing that many people always find surprising about me is that my father joined the CIA after his interim year at Coe College. Because of his German training, he was brought in by colleagues from the University of Rochester which in some ways colonized the Office of Strategic Services and

the CIA. My father found himself socked into operations which often did violent debriefings of the [General Reinhard] Gehlen gang. My father's sister spent her entire career in the agency. She was a Ph.D. in French from Bryn Mawr who went to the OSS during WWII. She then joined the CIA and remained there until she retired in the 1970s.

The point of this is that they all loathed Joe McCarthy, and what most people don't seem to understand is that McCarthy attacked liberals, especially in agencies like the CIA, and had them looking over their shoulders for the rest of their lives, worried that someone was going to call them a communist. That's when my father switched to the Democratic Party.

My father did have a critical perspective, though he was a kind of scared but surviving liberal in the height of the cold war in the 1950s. But he always had the *Reporter* magazine, a liberal magazine at the time, on his coffee table and read it religiously.

Q. In the *Yeoksa bipyong* interview, you talked a little about your baseball career and college days. Is there anything else about your youth that might be relevant to understanding your work and career?

A. Living in the Midwest, especially Ohio and around Cleveland, I encountered people whom my parents hardly ever encountered—African Americans. There were many of them on the teams I played on.

Really, it was the music. I still remember the first time I heard Little Richard when my mother was making me scrub the kitchen floor. I quickly developed an interest in blues music and used to go to some of the black clubs in Cleveland where my girlfriend or my friends and I would be the only white people in the club. Before the Civil Rights movement or the Black Power movement in 1966-67, you were welcomed, and I saw Ray Charles, Ike and Tina Turner. I held the drinking fountain for Tina Turner after she got off the stage, sweating out of every pore.

About the time I went to college, my father basically lost what little money he had and went deeply into debt. I worked every summer for five years to put myself through Dennison College with minimal help from a baseball grant and

financial aid. For three summers, I worked in Republic Steel in Cleveland in the coke plant, which is the dirtiest work. That is why blacks were there as permanent employees. I did three years of very hard labor, going out on top of the coke plant where the temperature was 130 degrees and we had to take salt tablets in order to survive. But it was a lot of fun. If things went well, you could finish the day's work in five or six hours, and I would sit around and shoot the bull with the guys there. They made a huge impression on me in the early and mid 1960s.

Peace Corps in Korea

Q. You first went to Korea as a member of the Peace Corps. What was your first impression of Korea? What did you learn about the political situation?

A. My first impression of Korea was a lasting one. Many others seemed to think it was a poor country; I found it to be a very lively, dynamic, and fascinating country while also very poor. At that time, I thought it had a very lively civil society under the first seven years of Park Chung Hee (Bak Jeong-hui)'s rule. You could sit in a *dabang* and hear Park Chung Hee ripped up one side and down the other and how stupid various other politicians were. I wouldn't say it was a wonderful experience; it was a difficult but interesting experience.

I lived with a family in Seogyo-dong in a schoolteacher's house. I found out that not all families had to be dysfunctional; their family was a very loving family, a lot more functional than my own.

I got a lopsided view on how Americans behave, especially those who are part of some official presence like the military, the embassy, the AID groups, and the UN groups. By and large, they stayed on their compounds and would venture out into the economy in official cabs that would take only Americans. They would ask me absurd questions like "Is gimchi really edible?" "Do their kids sleep with their parents? Oh, how horrifying." It was shocking to me at the age of twenty-two because I was steeped in observing if not participating in the civil rights movement in the south. I wish I had, but my political awareness was nowhere at the time. I thought we were running an occupation in Korea, and I still think we're running an occupation. I used to go onto the Yongsan base, and from the inside of the base, I got to see the generally utter contempt that most

Americans had for Koreans. It's not possible to exaggerate this.

It seemed to me that the political situation was very different from later on, but then I didn't know much. My Korean friends told me that if Park Chung Hee ever got defeated in an election in 1963 or 1967, he would declare martial law. That proved to be right when he declared martial law and made himself president for life after Kim Dae-jung did, in effect, defeat him with forty-six percent of the vote in 1971. But I did not see people being dragged off to jail, the way you did after the Yusin Constitution and martial law was announced in 1972.

Graduate Studies at Columbia: 1960s

Q. How did you end up going to Columbia for your Ph.D.?

A. I went to Columbia for my Ph.D. primarily because of professors at Indiana University who urged me to go there. I played baseball and basketball at Denison University and generally fooled around until my junior year, and I ended up with a grade point average of 2.94, I think, which made a Harvard professor laugh out loud when I applied there. So I went to Indiana University, where my grandfather had taught in the Geology department for decades. I learned a great deal in two years of master's degree work from Kim Il Pyong (Kim Il-byeong), who later taught at Connecticut, and Bernard Morris, who was a colleague of Herbert Marcuse and taught a year-long course on international communism.

In 1967, after I had gotten into Columbia, Lyndon Johnson developed a rule that you lost your student deferment if you switched from one school to another. This was part of the attempt to get graduate students off the campus and into the war since so many working class kids were fighting in Vietnam.

I was always aware of my privilege. I had guys from high school, guys on my football team who were fighting in Vietnam. I felt very privileged to be able to study. That's why I joined the Peace Corps, and I listed Korea first because I wanted to go to a country that used Chinese characters in the language or had a significant Chinese minority like Indonesia because I was, at that point, interested in modern Chinese politics.

After less than a year in the Peace Corps, I left and went to Columbia in the fall of 1968. By that time, I was so disgusted with the war that I was willing to take whatever consequence the draft board threw at me. But when I enrolled at Columbia a couple months later, along came a student deferment. I've never understood why that happened. If I hadn't gotten it, I don't know what I would have done, but I definitely wouldn't have gone to the military.

Q. When you were at Columbia, you met some of the first generation of Koreanists—namely, Gari Ledyard and Frank Baldwin. What did you learn from them, and what were they like as teachers?

A. What I wanted to do was to major in East Asian Studies and American foreign relations, and that's essentially what I've done in my career. Because people wanted to divide everything up into discrete subjects to study, it's very hard today and only mildly less hard than to steep yourself in the history, language, and culture of a place that you presumably want to become an expert on like Korea. Columbia was very good for that. I worked more by far with historians such as Gari Ledyard and C. Martin Wilbur. Dorothy Borg was a particularly important influence on me. She was a scholar of American-East Asian relations and really the grand old dame of the East Asian Institute—a wonderful woman, a wonderful person.

The first person I met at Columbia was Frank Baldwin, who remains a close friend of mine. Frank was a historian of modern Korea finishing his dissertation on the March 1st Movement, still one of the very best studies of that movement. Frank was simultaneously a very good professor, colleague, and friend. He was a real taskmaster. He put enormous pressure on students, and I've always been grateful for it.

Gari Ledyard was trained at Berkeley and was a dyed-in-the-wool Sinologist of the first rank and very erudite. I've always admired that kind of erudition, even though I didn't set out to acquire it myself. Ultimately, I fagged out in classical Chinese. Not that I didn't do well, but I just couldn't see spending my career and social life among Sinologists. I don't say that in a disparaging way; in many ways, it's just a generational thing.

Gari Ledyard and Frank Baldwin were both very friendly, warm people and

very good teachers. I studied first-year Korean in an intensive course with Jim Palais. Then I studied second-year Korean with Ledyard, third- and fourth-year Korean with Baldwin, and then my fifth year, Gari and I did a Directed Readings related to my dissertation on the liberation period.

Frank Baldwin, in particular, was a real role model to me because he was one of two professors in the East Asian Institute (the other was Carl Riskin) who were willing to speak out on the war, and they were both junior. Carl was later denied tenure; Frank left before they had a chance to deny him tenure.

The point is Columbia was thoroughly and totally politicized in the late 1960s. As a student that meant you had a learning experience inside and outside the classroom. It was hard not to get an education at Columbia then.

Q. While you were at Columbia, you also became a member of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars. What influence did the Vietnam War have on you and your experience with the CCAS?

A. Frank Baldwin, Alan Wolfe, a few other people, and I were the charter members of the CCAS at Columbia in the fall of 1969 when Mark Selden arrived to proselytize on behalf of this group. Some of my best friends remain those people whom I met in CCAS. I edited the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* from 1977-80, and that legacy is carried on in one of the best journals of Asian Studies, *Critical Asian Studies*.

That was a real wide open time; we were always debating everything. We had Maoists in the group and people like Frank Baldwin who thought they were all wrong. For all of us, the Vietnam War was an enormous influence, and I learned more about the Vietnam War at that time than since.

Dissertation Research in Washington, DC and Korea: 1970s

Q. When did you first to go the National Archives in Washington, DC? What was that experience like?

A. I went there in the summer of 1971 to prepare to go to Korea for a year of

dissertation research. I was very lucky that the records of the American military government were held at the National Records Center, just outside of the District of Columbia. At that time, they would let researchers go down into the archives and open boxes by themselves. You were required to submit notes on lined paper to a supervisor. I sat there, watching my supervisor, with his feet up on the table, talk about the latest football and baseball games while I was going through these materials. This guy would vett a hundred pages of my notes, typed in a really small font, in about five minutes because no one thought what went on during the American occupation in Korea could possibly be of any damage to American security. I was very lucky to get in on the ground floor, so to speak, as the first unofficial scholar to use those materials.

After I came back from Korea, I continued working all through the 1970s and well into the 1980s in the archives and all the relevant presidential libraries. I happened to be in the National Records Center again, down in the stacks where they hold these materials, when Jack Saunders, an archivist who had also been in the Peace Corps in Korea rolled a huge wagon full of about fifty dusty boxes up to me and asked if I could tell them what was in them. It turned out to be Record Group 242, "Captured Enemy Documents," by far the best archive on North Korea from 1945-51. The army and intelligence had scooped up everything they could find. You can open a box and find a license for a boat in North Korea. The boxes contained all kinds of secret materials from North Korea from the very top levels down to local towns and villages; there were thousands of documents on the people's committees, land reform, and labor unions.

Charles Armstrong based his excellent book on the North Korean revolution that came out last year on those materials, and Wada Haruki also was researching there at the same time I was for his books on North Korea and the Korean War. Not many people have used them, and not many people can read the materials, but they're very, very valuable. In some ways, they're more valuable than a declassified archive because nobody was there to declassify them. They were just captured.

Q. When did you go back to Korea for research? Where did you do your research? And whom did you work with?

A. I went there under a Ford Foundation-Social Science Research Council

grant in the fall of 1971 and stayed there until August 1972. I found a great deal of material in Korea. I started out at the Asia Research Center (Asea munje yeonguso) in October 1971, when Park Chung Hee issued his garrison decree. As a result, several tank formations busted through the gates of Korea University and bivouacked on the campus while blowing off virulent tear gas, probably the kind the US used to use to flush Viet Cong out of tunnels in Vietnam. I was at the far end of the campus, but when that stuff started wafting through the windows, I got out with a very kindly older woman professor. We ended up on the roof of a gas station somehow, and someone had to get a ladder to get us down. I never went back to the Asea munje yeonguso except to check out books.

Thereafter, I worked at a small place called Hanguk yeonguwon or Korea Research Center that was located in Seodaemun. It was near my apartment in Hongje-dong. Everyday, I took the bus down there, did my work, and ate *jjajangmyeon* with the only other researcher there, one of Edward Wagner's students from Harvard.

The only time anyone ever noticed me was when I was sitting in the Hanguk yeonguwon, reading a book with the big title *Chinilpa* (The Pro-Japanese Faction). A Korean was across the room, and if looks could kill, I would have been dead in an instant. Later on, I reflected that it wouldn't be surprising if he were angry. Here was an American studying the *chinilpa*, the very group that was the *chinmipa* (pro-American faction) in the late 1940s. How could I ever come to understand what it was like under the Japanese period?

The researchers there were very kind to me because they thought I couldn't read any of the books I was pouring over everyday. They would give me anything I wanted. I couldn't work at the larger libraries, like the Central National Library, because whenever I pulled out a book in Korean, students would gather around and ask me to pronounce a certain word or something. That was very nice the first few times it happened, but I really remember my days of solitude, months in and months out, at the Hanguk yeonguwon. It was an amazing time for me, because no one in the US then or now even seemed to know there was a three-year (really a five-year) American occupation of South Korea after WWII, and yet, that shaped postwar Korea more deeply than any other foreign influence.

University of Washington and Relationship with Prof. James Palais

Q. In the *Yeoksa bipyeong* interview, you mentioned how Jim Palais brought you over to the University of Washington. Can you talk a little more about how your relationship developed?

A. When I was working on my dissertation, Jim Palais gave me a call and asked if I wanted to teach in the summer school at the University of Washington in 1973. I developed two courses—one in modern Korean history and politics, the other in US-East Asian relations. Those have been the core courses and core fields that I've taught ever since, even though I have taught and written about other topics.

Jim Palais was a wonderful mentor to me in providing an example of what it means to be seriously committed to one's scholarship while being unassuming. He is one of the funniest guys in the world, a person who only puts pressure on you in the right ways.

Jim had come there in 1968 when the Wittfogel hegemony was still in full swing. Karl Wittfogel had brought in a whole host of people working on Russia and China to the Far Eastern and Russian Institute. Wittfogel tried to reproduce himself in liberal America which was, of course, impossible, and so you got various abortive versions of Wittfogel. Washington had the biggest collection of organic reactionaries in Asian Studies when Palais arrived. I think three of the professors there had testified against Owen Lattimore when almost the entire field had supported him. George Taylor, Karl Wittfogel, and Nikolai Poppe all testified against Lattimore.

Jim was working all the time on Yu Hyeong-won. Almost every day at lunch, he would tell me another story about Yu. I watched him as he gathered together the energy necessary to produce a 1,500-page book on Confucian statecraft in the Joseon Dynasty. He's ten times more erudite than the other Sinologists and Japanologists in the US. He sight-reads classical Chinese and translates it onto a typewriter at eighty words a minute. He reads all the relevant sources on a given question, like the land situation in Korea, before coming to a conclusion. Jim and I are very much alike in that we need to know everything

relevant to the subject we're studying even if it takes a long time to write a book on it.

Anyway, Jim and I played on the softball team, annually defeating the graduate students because of Jim's sleight-of-hand pitching. We played basketball together, Jim having been in the backcourt of the Brookline High basketball team with Mike Dukakis. Jim is a natural athlete. If he were taller, he probably would have been a professional athlete.

Q. When you were at the University of Washington, it was a seminal time for the development of Korean studies in the US since Palais was beginning training the students who now hold many positions in the field. How did you and Palais work as teachers?

A. Basically, a good cop-bad cop routine, a one-two combo. We did all the M.A. and Ph.D. oral exams together and often had a lot of fun doing it. It's true that Jim has produced most of the historians of Korea working in America. Mike Robinson was there, just finishing up when I arrived in Seattle. Carter Eckert took my seminar in modern Korean politics. Don Baker came in while I was there and has been teaching at the University of British Columbia since. Of course, all of us remain friends.

Probably the person I knew best and was closest to at that time was John Duncan. My first wife and his wife were very good friends. We saw each other socially a lot. John had a very hard time because he didn't have financial support after he finished his classwork. I've always admired him for sticking it out, and he ended up as a tenured professor at UCLA. There are others whom I'm leaving out unintentionally. Until recently, Jim, in many ways, populated the field of Korean history in the US.

The Origins of the Korean War

Q. Now let's turn to *The Origins of the Korean War*. To put it in very simplified terms, the thesis of *Origins* is that the war was civil and revolutionary in nature. At what point in your research did your thesis begin to take form?

A. It's so funny where the idea came from. It began when I went to Seoul in 1971, and the National History Compilation Committee just published *Daehan minguksa*. Where does it start? September 1945. There was, at that time, a classified study of the Korean War in multiple volumes done by the Korean government called *Hanguk jeonjaengsa*. Where did it start? 1945.

When I read the old stuff from the forties, I got a sense of the unity of the period from 1945-48 and how different it was from what came later. For instance, the left wing was so strong in the south. And North Korea was a very potent force because it was part of the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions. What is more important than those than the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions in the 1940s? It became clear to me that the Americans and American scholars had completely misconceived the war by focusing on which side started it and assuming it started on June 25th.

There is a book by Richard Roy Grinker that I read while working on my upcoming North Korea book. He has my theory of the beginning of the Korean War exactly right. He summarizes in three paragraphs what I said in a much longer work. He says that I am trying to get away from assuming this war had a single cause and from blaming somebody for starting the war.

I think in South Korea, hardly anybody understands what I think about the start of the war. Since 1990 or so, many younger Koreans, who are doing excellent historical work, have a much better grasp of what I really said in my books, but I do think the war originated fundamentally in that five-year period, but, of course, it has roots in the colonial period, especially in the 1930s.

Q. As you know, *Origins of the Korean War* is usually characterized as “revisionist.” That term must rankle you, one, because it's inaccurate and, two, because it's mainly used derisively. Of course, the implication is that your work is ideologically driven or, at the very least, skewed by your politics. By now you must be really tired of having to respond to people calling your work revisionist.

A. Any historian who isn't revisionist is not doing his job. Number one, if I produce a book that doesn't revise the existing understanding of history, then what is the point of doing it? Number two—what history was I revising? Was there a definitive South Korean history of the Korean War before 1981?

Absolutely not. Anyone who reads the official history understands it to be a nationalist historiography that nobody outside of South Korea would ever believe, and the same is true for North Korea. There wasn't, in any sense, a primary source base history to revise on the Korean War when I started writing. There were people like William Stueck who had started to use diplomatic documents. But frankly, he's written three books on the Korean War and subtracted from the sum total of knowledge on the war.

What I always felt was that if I told the truth as best as I could understand it with the best documentation available, sooner or later fair-minded people would come to agree with me, and I still believe that. Because the US is still stuck in a cold war mentality among historians, people call me a revisionist, saying my work is ideologically driven. But in Korea there is a whole bunch of new work on the origins of the Korean War, the 1940s, the colonial period, and the war itself that is first-rate history by open-minded people. I feel vindicated, but I had complete confidence in my work as I saw documents that nobody else had. Koreans at the time couldn't see a document that was classified as top secret or higher; therefore, Koreans didn't know what was going on in their occupation.

I think my work in the first volume will stand the test of time, but I consider the second volume to be a better book. It's a more difficult book, but it's a more mature book and a different kind of book in some ways.

Q. This leads right into the next question I want to ask you. Volume two of *The Origins of the Korean War* is both a continuation and extension of the work you did in volume one. One big difference that I noticed was volume two's analysis of the political economy of American foreign policy. Can you talk about the differences you see between the two volumes.

A. I had the idea of doing a book on the origins of the Korean War from 1971 onward, but I didn't know it would be two volumes. The reason it became two volumes is that the North Korean material became available in 1977. It was as simple as that. In 1971, I thought that this project would be definitely be over by 1974, but it was not over until 1988, which was the last year I did any serious research on the Korean War.

I felt that volume one established, for my own purposes, a fuller understand-

ing of the nature of the South Korean state. When I read the documents, I was hardly surprised by any fundamental differences between the state that got going in 1945 when the Americans were there and the state in 1948-49.

But I had much more documentation on North Korea than I had for the first volume; therefore, I feel I was able to write four or five chapters based on the captured documents that broke entirely new ground on North Korea on issues such as the nature of the regime and the guerilla movement in the south.

Q. One of the most fascinating chapters is the one on the North's occupation of the South.

A. Right, I consider that to be one of the best chapters in the book, because no one had ever written about it in an objective and documented way and because I feel there are five or six books that could be written just on the basis of the North Korean's occupation of the south from those materials. I didn't do more than just scratch the surface. I also think that in my chapter dealing with North Korea's relationship with China, I was the first person to nail down that China was a bigger influence than Russia on North Korea using the North Korean documents mainly.

As far as the analysis of American foreign relations, I just learned a lot from volume one to volume two and found things in the archives that just astonished me. The way Dean Acheson and a handful of other people constructed a post-war era that would be dominated by the US was in itself fascinating. I came to have great respect for Acheson based on reading his papers and all of that. I also found things on the attack on Acheson and Truman by the right wing. I realized that in some ways, the modal foreign policy theory of the right wing Republican Party is a gigantic conspiracy theory that internationalists and the United Nations are secret socialists who want to submit the world to a socialism government; to them, the only American for policy should be a unilateralist one or an isolationist one. I tried to come to an understanding of that without any guidance, nobody else except maybe Franz Schurmann and a couple of others had any idea of what could be found in the archives.

I think that's a major contribution, but it has been ignored by political scientists who don't know how to read history. The field of International Relations in

the US basically consists of ten people who quote each other all the time. Among historians, John Lewis Gaddis, in particular, was so upset with what I wrote about American foreign relations that he conducted a campaign for years to discredit me. In 1995, I figured I would just once say what I thought about Gaddis, and I wrote an article in *Diplomatic History* that scandalized all the diplomatic historians because I told the truth about Gaddis as a minor historian.

Serious intellectuals like Immanuel Wallerstein would pay no attention to scholars like Gaddis because they are such limited people, but they have dominance as consensus historians in the United States. Gaddis has done some good work, but his primary orientation has been an ideological one—to attack revisionists his entire career. The “ideology” that a person like Walter LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, or me has consists of thinking that the political economy might have something to do with American foreign policy whereas diplomatic historians completely ignore that element. The minute you start talking about it, they call you a determinist, a Stalinist, a Leninist, and it just shows the bankruptcy of theory in that field of diplomatic history.

Q. What do you think about the materials that have been discovered in the archives of the former Soviet Union? Your critics seem to view it as their Holy Grail.

A. I had a rough decade in the 1990s because people were just constantly shooting at my work using Soviet documents which had been unavailable to me. But now the Soviet documents in their fullness are coming around to a perfectly predictable understanding of the Soviet impact on North Korea, so I feel better about my work today than at any time in the past except when it was first published.

People expect that I am continuing to work on it as if I’m going to do the Korean War my whole life, but I wrapped it up in 1988, put my files into boxes, and really haven’t look at it since. Because it took from 1988-90 to get my second volume out because it was so long.

Q. Turning to another aspect, the publication of volume 1 of *Origins* marked the beginning of a very difficult relationship with the Park and Chun (Jeon) regimes. Can you talk about the ways in which they tried to cause problems for you?

A. The Park regime caused me problems beginning in 1974 because I published an article on the liberation period in Frank Baldwin's book, *Without Parallel*, and I had also criticized the Yusin constitution. I hadn't tried to get a visa from 1972-74 because I was writing my dissertation, but I believe that at any point from 1972-85, I would not have been able to get a visa. When I finally applied for one in 1979, my application was denied. I protested and threatened to make it public and have a news conference and all of that. They let me into Korea for three days, following me all over the place. The only other time I came to South Korea was as part of the foreign delegation that accompanied Kim Dae-jung back from exile.

The Park and Chun regimes also paid tens of thousands of dollars to people in the United States like Richard Allen and many others who would rip me every chance they got and never publicly. One of the interesting things for Koreans to know is that not one serious historian has ever charged me saying that the south started the war because that historian knows that he would get smashed in an academic journal. When I was at the University of Washington, Jim Palais and I were constantly harassed in one way or another by the local consulate, Koreans, and Korean Americans. We were called every name in the book.

The problem with that kind of slander and libel is that intelligent young people will then go get my book and realize that I'm the one telling the truth and Chun Doo Hwan (Jeon Du-hwan) and his people are the ones telling all the lies. That's one of the greatest strengths of a liberal political system. It's that kind of authoritarian and ignorant behavior that I have always hated among academics, but it happens all the time. When critics can't refute your work, they don't talk about it and call you names.

But I should say that I have never suffered the kind of discrimination that Korean scholars who went against Chun Doo Hwan did. I've never suffered the kind of discrimination that Noam Chomsky did where people would refuse to even discuss him.

Q. How did you find out that the Chun regime had banned your book?

A. It was in the *Donga ilbo*. There were a bunch of about 60 books banned, including two or three excellent books by leading Marxist European scholars

whom every intellectual ought to read.

Relations with South Korean Scholars

Q. I know that over your career, you've enjoyed very stimulating relationships with scholars such as Paik Nak-chung (Baek Nak-cheong) or Choe Jang-jip. Can you talk about how you got to know them and what type of relationship you've had with Korean scholars?

A. Korea University has always welcomed me when they were able to welcome me. I had my first position there in 1971, and in the late 1970s, I got to know Choi Sangyong (Choe Sang-yong), who did a dissertation in Japan on the occupation which was very good, and I invited him to the University of Washington as a visiting scholar. He had been tortured by the KCIA while they read to him from parts of that dissertation in the early 1970s. He had promised backing from Korea University and people associated with the university, and he has been a political science professor there ever since and was Kim Dae-jung's ambassador to Japan. I think he's a wonderful person and like him very much.

Choe Jang-jip said something about my book that is one of the most humbling things that anyone had ever said. When I worked Seoul in 1971-72, I was friends with Kim Yong-ok who was graduating from Korea University at that time. We saw a lot of each other, and I found him a fascinating person. Kim Yong-ok knew Choe Jang-jip, and when Kim Yong-ok went to Harvard to work on his Ph.D., Choe Jang-jip was in the Political Science department in Chicago. He sent a letter to Kim Yong-ok saying he just read a masterpiece, which was my book, and then Kim Yong-ok sent me that letter. I was, of course, very interested in Choe Jang-jip and read his dissertation which was the finest study of labor done during the Chun Doo Hwan period. He's always been very supportive and kindly invites me to conferences every year.

I met Paik Nak-chung after I came to Chicago when, I believe, Norma Field invited him to come to campus. Then I hosted him and got to know him and his wife. Since then, he's published a lot of my work in *Changjakgwa bipyeong*, and he did a big interview with me around 1990 or so and has also been very supportive. Paik Nak-chung always wants me to do more with the Korean intellec-

tual world. But at any given time, I always have so much on my plate both my own work and that of my graduate students, teaching, family responsibilities, that when I go to Korea, I'm overwhelmed really with interest and attention which, on one hand, is very nice, but on the other, makes my life impossible. When I go to see my in-laws, I go secretly because I just don't want all the attention.

Views on Asian Studies and Approach to Teaching

Q. As you've told me before, you do not consider yourself to be a Koreanist, in the conventional sense of the term. Would you characterize yourself as an international historian or an East Asian historian?

A. What I would say is that I work in modern Korean history, East Asian political economy, and American relations in East Asia more generally. The last thing I would want is to have a label or a cubbyhole that people could put me into. I would recommend the same to any young scholar because, when you spend thirty or forty years in a field, you want to have a lively intellectual field.

Modern Korean history, when I joined it, was the opposite of a lively field because Korean historians could not write on it. They would write general survey histories of Korea and ten pages on the twentieth century, nor were they free to write about it although someone like Kang Man-gil did, at great cost and risk. But in my field, in my view, and I don't mean this in any arrogant way, there are only a certain percentage of very good books, and the rest are sort of pedestrian books you would read if you wanted to know everything about that subject. The idea that you would know a field completely and everything there is to know about it and read all the practitioners of the field strikes me as a way to lose interest in a field.

Q. That brings up another question I wanted to ask, that idea of you have to know everything about a particular country is definitely part of that whole "area studies" approach to East Asia. When you went to the University of Chicago, you want to go to a place that is explicitly critically of that approach. Can you talk a little about that and your general approach to teaching students as well?

A. When I switched to Indiana to Columbia, I also interviewed at Harvard, and I talked with Tom Bernstein who was temporarily at Harvard, and I told him I want to learn Korean and Chinese and study both China and Korea. He looked at me and said, “How do you think you can learn everything there is to know about China as well as learning everything there is to know about Korea?”

It’s a flawed epistemology, but it is the epistemology of the East Asian field in the US. You find Japan specialists who don’t know a thing about Korea, they’re not interested either. You find China specialists who don’t know a thing about Korea or Japan. You end up with country studies, not even area or regional studies. It’s one of the great intellectual barriers to the development of a genuine scholarly understanding of the East Asia experience. I had thought that for the long time, but I really hadn’t articulated it in my work so much, but when I went to Chicago, that was what Harry Harootunian thought. Chicago had Akira Iriye, Bernie Silverman, and Tetsuo Najita. They all are experts on modern or early modern Japanese history, but we had no Heian period historian. Meanwhile, on the China side, you always have people who think you need a historian for every major dynasty.

If you look at Yale over the entire postwar period, there is no modern Korean historian there because the China people won’t agree to it. Why? Because the China people want a historian of the Tang or Ming Dynasty or another dynasty, and they see Korea as some sort of variant of China that’s not worth studying. It’s an intellectually flawed viewpoint, and it’s a scandal that Yale doesn’t have modern Korean history.

Q. As your student, I know that your approach to teaching students is to give students as much freedom as possible and as much intellectual stimulation as possible in class and to be generous in office hours. Can you talk a little about your approach to teaching?

A. I think the worst thing is to give a dissertation topic to a student or act like John Fairbank and say, “If you do the dissertation I want you to do, I’ll get you a good job, and if you cross me I’ll cross you off my list.” I met Fairbank, and I like him very much. He made a huge contribution, but his basic idea was to build an empire of Chinese history.

Because I grew up in an academic family, I think I was disabused of any mythology of professors being smarter than anybody else. I've always hated disciplinary and authoritarian professors who were usually also stupid. When I dealt with grad students, I always felt that they should come to their own awareness of what they want to study. The way to do that is to give them a menu of books from different perspectives on whatever subject I'm teaching and always give them examples of really good dissertations that became even better books.

I also feel deeply in an old Confucian value of leading by example. You know much more about the kind of example that I set than I do, but I try to continue to be a productive scholar, treat my students fairly, and show them that I'm available to them, but I don't sit around wasting my time. My door is shut most of the time when I don't have office hours because I can't get any work done if it is open. All my books have been written in some library study or at home because I don't see how a scholar can concentrate when you're sitting in your office.

Research after *Origins*: 1980s-1990s

Q. After *The Origins of the Korean War*, there were a number of directions you could have taken your career. As you said, you could have spent your entire career on the Korean War, but rather than doing that, you expanded your research into South Korean economic development and democratization and also North Korea. Can you talk about that aspect of your career?

A. In the 1980s, I was very concerned about the nature of Korean authoritarianism along with a lot of other scholars like Choe Jang-jip. Was it bureaucratic authoritarianism as Guillermo O'Donnell had characterized Latin America? Was it related to the nature of economic development in Korea? That got me into an entirely different field, and probably my first impact in that field was a 1984 article on the East Asian political economy in a journal called *International Organization*. That article has been by far the most influential article I wrote on any subject because American scholars were just getting interested in how Japan did, how South Korea was doing it.

In the 1990s, South Korea became a very different place than it had before,

and it was both amazing and very gratifying to see the enormous development of civil society. I think as a foreigner, I was one of the early ones to write about it in my article in *Changjakgwa bipyong* in 1994 or 1995. When I go to Korea now, there are young people all over the place all belonging to some civic association or another. The internet has expanded this. The kind of active engaged politics that Koreans do now is far more developed than it is in this country. It's much more active politically in every sense of the word than this country is. To me, that is something worth applauding, writing about, and figuring out.

Q. Your 1999 book, *Parallax Visions*, represents yet another departure you made in your career.

A. *Parallax Visions* contains a number of essays that focused on the epistemology of area studies in this country and US-Japan relations, US-China relations, and the way in which Korea tells you so much about the whole postwar international experience and yet most people who write on US-Japan or US-China don't know it. I wrote the first chapter of that book on the genealogical and archeological approach to understanding modern East Asian history originally around 1994-95 and then kept adding things to it. That was completely different from anything previously I had done.

It reflects my beginning to read Nietzsche when I was about forty. Basically I read Freud when I was an undergraduate, I read Marx when I was a graduate student, and I began to read Nietzsche partly because I was getting into middle age. (Both laugh.) What I found in Nietzsche's work was a brilliant anticipation of the twentieth century and modernity, of what individualism really meant for the atomization of society. I still consider him to be the most brilliant philosopher of the modern. His approach to history and to social science and questions of objectivity was far more brilliant than anything I have ever read before and, not to mention, correct. He was utterly fearless toward sacred figures like Immanuel Kant; referring to Kant's philosophy, he would talk about Konigsburg swamp gas. (Both laugh.) Of course, Foucault was deeply influenced by the genealogical history that Nietzsche did in *The Genealogy of Morals*, and for me, that was a way to get away from the western liberal progressive idea that we are heading upward to some future Valhalla and that progress is the name of the game. Instead, I began to think about history as a series of accumulations of a descent from the past such that all history is a history of the present and not of

the past.

Meanwhile, people in the Asia field assumed that Harry and Tets and others at Chicago were brainwashing people and that I was becoming more post-modern and post-structural when in fact I had read all of Nietzsche's work in Seattle. When I read post-modernism and deconstruction, I saw that a lot of it was an elaboration of Nietzsche's work, and Foucault was honest enough to say that he was basically an interpreter of Nietzsche before he died. This was something I generated entirely myself and was a major departure for me. It's probably one that most Koreans don't know much about or haven't read much about.

Q. I have a quick question on your studies of North Korea. It really seems to me that your approach to studying North Korea is a common sense one. You try to explain the rationality behind the behavior of the North Korean regime, yet somehow the major mass media in this country ignores your existence. Even *The New York Times* just quotes so-called North Korea experts, who just happen to say what it thinks is acceptable to say about North Korea.

A. Actually, most of the time, they aren't even experts on North Korea. They are people like Scott Snyder of the Asia Foundation who has no major scholarly work, Marcus Nolan who is essentially an economist and an ideologue who thinks North Korea is a stupid place because they haven't read Adam Smith or Milton Friedman, and Nicholas Eberstadt, an ideologue on the right wing at the American Enterprise Institute, who has been saying for fourteen years that North Korea is going to collapse.

The media discourse on North Korea is just atrocious. It's far worse than it is in South Korea. Any kind of charge has currency as long as it is really nasty and puts the North Koreans in the worst light. It's a completely controlled discourse even though nobody is controlling it. *The New York Times*, even though it's our paper of record, has been one of the perpetrators of this. But among scholars, there has been a lot of very good work on North Korea recently by Han Hongkoo (Han Hong-gu), Charles Armstrong, Wada Haduki, Hazel Smith, who lived in Pyongyang for the last several years. Because so many NGO's have gotten into North Korea, they have been able to see in their work what I could see in the archives: ordinary Koreans going about their business of setting up a socialist state and becoming a policeman or a teacher or a party official or a farmer,

having collectivization.

One of the books on North Korea that really influenced me a lot, strangely enough, is a completely unknown monograph done at Rice University in 1976 by Mooneun Lee. It's a very fine study of the agrarian transformation of North Korea coming from the standpoint of someone who is just interested in the daily life of North Korea. Who are they marrying now as opposed to the colonial period? A party official, but they don't want them to marry a *yangban's* kid, let alone collaborators' kids. How did the nature of work in the countryside change during collectivization? What's going on in the industrial sector? What's it like in the cities?

One thing that I could hardly say on American TV without them shutting me up is that the North Korean are very nice people. They are isolated, but they have sincerity, innocence, a friendliness, and genuine collectivism. Regardless of what one thinks of the regime at the top, there are a lot of genuinely decent people in North Korea. They been through hell in the last eight to ten years, but in the 1980s, North Korea never struck me as much of a communist society. It's a highly nationalistic form of socialism with a kind of nauseating way of treating their leaders. But the average North Korean is very decent fellow and in many ways just like the average South Korean—devoted to his family, devoted to educating his children, and living in a period of national division which is perhaps the most difficult period in Korean history for hundreds of years. Most difficult in terms of the country being divided.

I don't have sympathy for North Korea, but I have empathy for them in part because my country tried to totally destroy them for three years during the Korean War and nearly came close to doing it. I think that North Korea is much better understood among people who are willing to inquire than it was ten years ago. We have much better work both in terms of the history of the regime and the contemporary nature of North Korea. There are scholars like Selig Harrison, Leon Segal, myself, and others who have written articles. I have plenty of outlets for my work; I don't feel like anyone is trying to suppress me. In writing over the last decade about the North Korean nuclear crisis, I think we've been right, and all the pundits in Washington have been wrong. It was proven during the later period of the Clinton administration; Bush has made a mess of things, but sooner or later, he or a successor will come back to engage with North Korea

because there is nothing else he can do with it.

Current and Future Projects and View of Korean Studies Today

Q. What projects you are currently working on, and what are your future plans?

A. I took a leave year to go to the Center of Advanced Studies in Stanford in 2000-01 to do research and reading on the western history of the US, the political economy of the west coast from San Diego to Seattle since 1941, and the structure of American power in the Pacific including the CinCPac [Commander in Chief, US Pacific Fleet] Headquarters of Pearl Harbor, Okinawa, and Korea. My emerging argument is that American foreign policy since 1945 has been more influenced by what could be called a Pacificist orientation than an Atlanticist orientation. This project is a way of educating Atlanticists and international affairs people in this country—scholars like Henry Kissinger who don't know anything about Asia and anticipate that China or Japan (most likely China) will eventually be the great antagonist to the United States in this century.

Look at Bush's foreign policy—he's running our entire global foreign policy the way other presidents have always run our East Asian policy, which is to deal unilaterally with each country. There is no union in Northeast Asia, and we have a huge military emphasis there. Fifty-eight years after we defeated Japan, we still have 100,000 troops in Korea, Okinawa, and Japan proper. The objective of my research is to understand this sort of concentration of enormous military power and enormous economic power and the fact that this is a continental political economy that has opened to the Atlantic, to the Pacific, to Canada and to Latin America. There has never been a hegemonic country like this in the world, except for maybe the Roman Empire, but that had a very different political economy. Japan was going to be the hegemonic power of the twenty-first century; now you can hardly say that without laughing, but I always thought it was laughable. Japan is an island country like England, and we're no longer in the heyday of formal empires. Even today, Japan has no idea how to get along with its neighbors—and specifically with Korea and China. It's a big project, but it will be a relatively short book of about 300-400 pages.

I was hoping to get a leave this year to finish that book, and along came the

North Korean crisis last fall. I decided to write a book on North Korea and the crisis which will be out in November. I'm also doing a book for The New Press of collected essays on international relations and international history that I've done since about 1989, examining whether or not they stand in the light of history.

Finally, I have a contract with The New Press to do an abridged version of *Origins of the Korean War*; and at that time, I will deal with all the recent literature on the Korean War even though the book will be about 350 pages long. There is excellent new work on North Korea by Charles Armstrong, Andrei Lankov, and also a Hungarian scholar whom I saw in Budapest in June. I'm very happy that open minded scholars who are willing to use primary material and can read the relative languages are coming to produce a unified history of the Korean War which, I think, in another decade will be as good as it can get in terms of knowing the origin and history of the Korean war until North Korean and South Korean archives are fully opened as well as the Chinese archives and American intelligence archives which are still not open.

Q. Lastly, although I know that you don't define yourself as a Koreanist, what is your view of the current state of Korean studies?

A. I think that in the United States, Korean studies is much better off than it used to be because of younger scholars. The genuine interest of people who are might be interested in theory or cultural history in Korea both and in Korean Americans. In your generation and maybe the succeeding generation to you, there are students who are tremendously well educated—broadly, not area specialists. I think Korean Americans and Koreans and others of all ethnicities really interested in Korea now in American universities will make so-called Korean studies into a very broad field that nobody will be able to master ten or twenty years from now.

As for Korea itself, there's tremendous work going on by historians in Korea whether older ones like Kang Man-gil or younger ones. Every time I go to Seoul, I come home with a shopping bag full of books; some day I'll get to read all of them. There's a lot of good work going on, and I meet people at conferences who are doing interesting work. For instance, Kim Seong-nae, from Seogang University, did this brilliant article on the way the Jeju rebellion animated the lives, dreams, and minds of people. Last April, I went to a conference at Harvard

on the Jeju Rebellion where I met all kinds of historians I hadn't met before.

The younger generation is much better than my generation, but among those of us who were trying to form an alternative caucus in the Asian field, we have done much better than the competition who was always criticizing us. John Dower won National Book Award, and Herbert Bix won the Pulitzer Prize for his book on Hirohito. Dower has done more on Japan than anyone else, and yet he was the one they were always complaining about. In the China field, a person like Maurice Meisner has written about five books that are better than almost any other five books you could randomly choose in the field of modern Chinese history, and the same is true of Arif Dirlik. They are treated like pariahs by mainstream historians because the mainstream historians are generally not very good. The people who tried to control Asian Studies thirty-five years ago would be flabbergasted that people like Arif, Maurice, John Dower, Herb Bix, Mark Selden, and a whole bunch of other people have the presence that we do in the intellectual life of this country. To me, that's a huge victory. I think the younger generation is free of all the cold war problems and McCarthyism and is therefore free to do work without feeling that someone is breathing down their neck or ready to chop their head off.

I feel like the kind of work I was interested in twenty-five to thirty years ago is now in very capable hands because these are the people who ought to be doing this history but couldn't at that time. That's all very gratifying, and Korea has truly become a democratic society that the elites can't fundamentally control anymore. If they could, Roh Moo-hyun would never have become president.

Chronology

1943	Born in Rochester, NY
1965	BA in Psychology from Denison University
1967-68	Served in US Peace Corps; stationed in Seoul
1965-67	MA from Indiana University
1975	Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University
1975-1977	Assistant Professor, Political Science, Swarthmore College
1977-1987	Professor of International Studies, University of Washington
1987-1994	Professor of East Asian and International History, History

- Department and Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago
- 1994-1997 John Evans Professor of International History and Politics, Departments of History and Political Science, Northwestern University; Director, Center for International and Comparative Studies
- 1997 Norman and Edna Freehling Professor of International History and East Asian Political Economy, Department of History, and Member, Committee on International Relations, University of Chicago
- 1999 Elected as a Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences

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