

# Obituaries

EDWARD W. WAGNER (1924–2001)

Edward Willet Wagner, a professor of Korean history at Harvard for thirty-five years and founder of Korean studies in the United States, passed away at the age of seventy-seven on December 7, 2001. He leaves his wife, Namhi Kim Wagner; his two sons, Robert Camner and J. Christopher Wagner; his three stepdaughters, Yunghi Choi, Sokhi Choi, and Sanghi Choi; a brother, John Wagner; and four grandchildren.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1924, he was drafted in his sophomore year at Harvard during World War II and was on a troop ship heading toward Japan when the war came to an end. He served in Japan and in the military government in Korea after the war, and then returned to complete his B.A. and M.A. degrees in 1949 and 1951, respectively. He returned to Japan to do research for three years at Tenri University in Nara under Professor Takahashi Toru and then worked for five years at Seoul National University in Korea under Professor Yi Pyŏngdo. He returned to Harvard to teach Korean history in 1958 and earned his Ph.D. degree at Harvard in 1959 in Korean history.

His first publication in 1951 was a revision of his undergraduate senior honors thesis on the Korean minority in Japan, a work that pioneered many subsequent studies on that subject. His first book, *The Literati Purges: Political Conflict in Early Yi Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), was a challenging revision of the standard interpretation of the three purges of scholar-officials carried out by Kings Yŏnsan'gun and Chungjo in 1498, 1504, and 1519. Contrary to the conventional view that those purges constituted a contest between honest and upright Confucian moralists against tyrannical rulers supported by political appointees, Wagner argued convincingly that the purges were the product of an intense conflict between Korean monarchs, who insisted on obedience to their theoretically unlimited traditional authority, and members of the aristocratic yangban elite, who used Confucian ethics as a tool to limit and restrict the power of the throne. This insight provided the foundation for the rest of Wagner's scholarly pursuits and for later studies in the West on the history of the Chosŏn (Yi) dynasty. Those studies have helped to shift the understanding of Korean history from an example of Oriental despotism to a case of limited monarchy based on the continuing social, economic, and political power of the hereditary yangban.

Wagner promoted this shift of interpretation by directing a number of Ph.D. dissertations devoted to the study of primary sources like household registers, genealogies, and inheritance documents. These studies pioneered a growing awareness of the power and continuity of the aristocratic yangban, the burdens and debilities of the commoner peasant population, and the importance of hereditary slavery in both the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties. His own studies contributed to this. His study of private genealogies (*chokpo*) showed how important the record of family relationships was to the maintenance of the yangban. He found in the household registers of a suburb of the capital of Seoul in the mid-seventeenth century evidence that 75 percent of the population there was slaves. He also showed in his study of the *chung'in* or "middle people," consisting of legal specialists, interpreters, scribes, and accountants and the clerks of local district magistrates, that they had also formed a hereditary group of families. In short, he laid the groundwork for an awareness of basic differences

between Korean and Chinese societies over centuries, particularly in the continuation of aristocratic elite families to the end of the traditional period in 1910, the emergence of a slave society some time in the middle of the Koryŏ period to the mid-eighteenth century, and the relative weakness of the Korean monarchy compared to the despotic models of Ming and Qing China.

The last decades of Wagner's life were dedicated to the enormous task of identifying and recording all individuals recorded in the lists of every man who passed the highest-level civil-service examination in the Chosŏn dynasty (the *munkwa pangmok*) to provide a basis for an exact understanding of the continuity of the yangban elite. The list contained about eighty thousand names, including the fourteen thousand men who passed the examination and their "four relatives" (father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and wife's father). Since the yangban was an elite group that married, if at all possible, only their own kind, the list provides a basis for exploring the marital and social connections of most of the elite for five hundred years.

His collaborator on this effort was Professor Emeritus Song June-ho, of North Chŏlla University, the leading social historian of the Chosŏn dynasty in the Republic of Korea. When Wagner's effort to complete the project was tragically interrupted by Alzheimer's disease, Song June-ho was fortunately able to complete the task and produce a CD-ROM version of the complete list. Song brought to this collaboration his own insightful understanding of social history. Unfortunately, Wagner was only able to write a short article about the significance of these data near the beginning of the project, "The Ladder of Success in Yi Dynasty Korea," in *Occasional Papers on Korea*, vol. 1 (June 1972, reprinted April 1974), but that article is still one of the most important pieces in the field of Chosŏn social history.

One of the major results of the study of the examination rosters has been to demonstrate the power and continuity of the yangban to the end of the dynasty, a finding that directly contradicts the favorite view of historians in contemporary Korea that the social structure of the Chosŏn dynasty broke apart in the last half of the dynasty after Hideyoshi's invasions of 1592–98 and that the yangban declined and commoners rose to become new yangban in a far more open society than in early Chosŏn. Wagner's interpretation also shows that Korea never underwent the transition from an aristocracy to a gentry society that occurred in China either with the fall of the T'ang dynasty in 906 or the fall of the Northern Sung in 1125. Not only was this conclusion a major reinterpretation of Chosŏn social history, but the data in the study will provide the basis for important studies of the yangban in the future.

Finally, a personal note on Edward Wagner the man. He was the perfect mentor to me. In scholarship, he was a man dedicated to the use of primary sources to find out what happened in the past and use that as a basis for interpreting the nature of historical phenomena. He was meticulous to a fault in his own work and in reviewing and guiding the work of his students. He was a guide and a friend who left his door open to all and was overly generous with his time to his students and throughout life to those who became his colleagues. He sacrificed much of his own research time in translating the textbook of his colleague and friend, Professor Yi Kibaek (Ki-baik Lee), *A New History of Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). He was easygoing, not formal and aloof; he broke the mold at Harvard on this score. He was modest and self-effacing, totally without ego, and set a model for how scholars should behave as human beings. He was my life-long friend and my companion on chats about all aspects of Korean history and culture that lasted into the wee hours of the

morning. I learned from him how to treat my own students and tried my best to follow his path.

Edward Wagner dedicated his life to the understanding and elucidation of Korean life, and his loss will be felt deeply by all who knew him and worked along with him in that endeavor.

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### MAY KYI WIN (1947–2002)

Daw May Kyi Win, associate professor and curator of the Donn V. Hart Southeast Asia Collection in the Northern Illinois University Libraries, died February 23 at her home in DeKalb. She was born in Rangoon, Burma in 1947 just after the end of World War II. Her father was a successful businessman.

May Kyi Win received her Bachelor of Science degree in 1971 and her Diploma in Library Science in 1973 from the University of Rangoon. She was U Thaw Kaung's student, one of his first diploma graduates from the newly constituted Library School at the University of Rangoon. According to John Badgley, University of Washington, she acquired her impressive command of English by listening to the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) during a period when the teaching of English was banned in Burma. She served as Division Chief of the University Central Libraries and a part-time instructor in the Department of Library Studies at the University of Rangoon from 1974 to 1989.

In 1990, May Kyi Win was hired as curator of the Southeast Asia Collection at Northern Illinois University. She was the only native Burmese curator in the United States and was a member of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies as well as the Center for Burma Studies at Northern Illinois University. She also was a member of the Board of the Burma Studies Foundation.

During her tenure at Northern Illinois University Libraries, she contributed to the Burmese collection and the mainland Southeast Asia collection through her expertise in languages (Burmese, Thai, and Pali) and her knowledge of the literature of the region. The Burmese collections at Northern Illinois University are among the world's largest outside Myanmar. In addition to her duties as collection development and reference librarian in the Southeast Asia collection, she was the chief cataloger of Burmese language materials. "May Kyi Win worked tirelessly to improve the collection, to secure additional funding, and to provide first-rate service. Her passing is an immeasurable loss to the University libraries, the Northern Illinois University community, and international scholarship," commented Arthur P. Young, dean of University Libraries.

May Kyi Win was the author of two books, *Historical Dictionary of Thailand*, with Harold E. Smith, and *Historical Dictionary of the Philippines*, with Artemio R. Guillermo. She was working with Smith on a revised edition of the Thai dictionary at the time of her death. Since 1995, Win was editor of the *Bulletin of the Burma Studies Group* of the Association for Asian Studies and published an annual bibliography on Burma. She also was compiling an on-line topical bibliography of