

The Wagner-Song Munkwa Project and Its Legacy in the Research of Korean History¹

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As Carter Eckert is quoted as saying in the obituary of Edward W. Wagner (1924–2001) in *The Harvard Gazette*,² Wagner’s work “transformed our understanding of late pre-modern Korean institutions and society and laid the groundwork for all subsequent studies of Korean history.” Wagner did so, most importantly, through his use of higher civil service examination rosters (*munkwa pangmok*) and family genealogies (*chokpo*), both of which make up a large part of the Korean rare book collection at the Harvard-Yenching Library. When Wagner started using both these sources for his research and, in the former case, started computerizing them, almost no scholar in Korea paid serious attention to them except for his longtime academic partner Song Jun-ho (1922–2003). This chapter introduces the Wagner-Song Munkwa Project (hereafter the Munkwa Project), the foremost scholarly project of Wagner’s career, shows how my research has utilized genealogical records and the Munkwa database, and describes the kinds of discoveries I have made through the foundation that Wagner laid down for us. Although the Munkwa Project was a collaborative work between Wagner and Song, I only mention Wagner in what follows because the purpose of this chapter is to honor his academic work and legacy.

¹ This paper was prepared for the conference “Studies in Chosŏn Korea: A Conference Commemorating the Work of Prof. Edward W. Wagner,” organized by Asian & Near Eastern Languages Korea Section at the Brigham Young University, March 27–28, 2018, and was updated May 14, 2019. An earlier version of this paper titled “Edward W. Wagner and His Legacy: Toward New Horizons in the Research of Korean History,” was presented as Special Lecture for the Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Edward W. Wagner’s Appointment, organized by Harvard’s Korea Institute, September 29, 2008.

² Ken Gewertz, “Edward Wagner Dies at 77,” in *The Harvard Gazette* (December 17, 2001). See on-line *Gazette* archive at: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2001/12/harvard-gazette-edward-wagner-dies-at-77/> (accessed on June 27, 2018).

The Munkwa Project: A Brief History and Its Findings

Munkwa, the higher civil service examinations, were the primary means of recruiting officials for major central and provincial government posts during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). Wagner launched the Munkwa Project in 1966, in collaboration with the late Song Jun-ho and with support from the Harvard-Yenching Institute, Harvard’s Korea Institute, and other organizations.³ In a paper prepared for the 1976 meeting of the Social Science History Association, Wagner notes that the Munkwa Project is “an attempt to define and characterize the political-social elite component” of the Chosŏn dynasty “by analysis of the 14,600 men who passed the higher civil service examination.”⁴ The “Statement of the Munkwa Project” submitted to the Harvard-Yenching Institute on January 5, 1998 also states that the purpose of the project was “a thorough investigation of the elite structure of the whole Chosŏn dynasty” and “producing a comprehensive and well-organized roster of those elites,” primarily by computerizing data related to more than 14,600 men who passed the *munkwa* during the Chosŏn dynasty, as well as their close relatives.⁵

Raw data for the Munkwa Project come from several sources—most importantly, from a number of different editions of the *Kukcho munkwa pangmok* (Comprehensive Munkwa Rosters of the Chosŏn Dynasty) and from individual *pangmok*, the lists of successful candidates of a particular civil service examination. They contain vital information for most *munkwa* passers

³ For a brief history of the Munkwa Project and its status after the two researchers Wagner and Song passed away in 2001 and 2003 respectively, see Song Man-O, “The Wagner-Song Munkwa Project: Its Value for Historical Research,” *Chŏnbuk sahak* 32 (2008): 205–10.

⁴ Edward W. Wagner, “Quantification and Study of Yi Dynasty Korean Elites,” paper prepared for the meeting of the Social Science History Association, Philadelphia, October 29–31, 1976, available at the Gateway to Premodern Korean Studies: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/gpks/wagner-papers> (accessed on July 3, 2018).

⁵ Song June-ho and Edward W. Wagner, “Statement of the Munkwa Project” (January 5, 1998), Edward W. Wagner Personal Archive, 1942–1998, HUM 243, Harvard University Archives, Box 2, folder 17.

throughout the Chosŏn period, including each passer's name and clan seat, courtesy name, year of birth and death, status before the exam, positions held after the exam, residence, names of three paternal ancestors, and marriage relationship, including father-in-law's name and clan seat. The genealogies often provide additional data on a candidate's career, marriage relationships, residence, and scholarly membership in the course of relating the candidate to others of the lineage who played a significant role in Korea before and after the candidate's own time. The value of genealogies in verifying and augmenting information concerning the *munkwa* passers cannot be overemphasized because Wagner estimated that about 90 percent of the *munkwa* degree-holders could be located in genealogies. Other sources include *munkwa* graduates' genealogies called *munbo*, local gazetteers (*ŭpchi*), and a variety of obituary documents.⁶

Wagner used the information obtained from these sources to develop the database known as the Munkwa Project, which was designed to allow more than thirty different kinds of information to be entered for each successful candidate. When he initiated the project in 1966, computer technology required vastly different methodology and procedures than is the case today, including creating a coding system, key-punching computer cards, assigning meaningful numbers, and so forth. In the report on the project made to the twenty-second annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in 1970, Wagner explains the processes he used to computerize data extracted from the rosters and other primary sources, and how he had solved various difficulties he encountered. He provides a number of sample images concerning his project—in particular, data related to the successful *munkwa* candidate Yun Hyoson (1431–1503), whose

⁶ Concerning sources for the project, see Wagner, “Quantification and Study of Yi Dynasty Korean Elites,” 2–3.

assigned identification number was 0947—to illuminate the complexity of the project.⁷ In the aforementioned 1976 paper as well, Wagner discusses how he resolved encoding issues regarding Chinese characters, Chinese character variation in Korean personal names and place names, and cyclical dates.⁸ Although a number of different editions of database printouts became available from the 1970s on, one of the end results of the Munkwa Project was a commercially available website named “Wagner & Song Munkwa Roster of the Chosŏn Dynasty” developed by Dongbang Media, which allowed users to search and trace data and get the results in the blink of an eye (as of July 2018, however, the website seems no longer to be available).

By the mid-1970s, Wagner had begun to publish a number of important findings from the Munkwa Project.⁹ Most notably, he emphasized the relative openness of the *munkwa*, which resulted in a “marked diversity” in the composition of the Chosŏn elite and thereby contributed to the stability of the system and the longevity of the Chosŏn dynasty. In relation to the northern provinces in particular, he found that due to the openness of the system, “many ambitious lineage groups in the north were striving to acquire the education and emulate the life-style of the southern yangban.”¹⁰ Indeed, northerners in the late Chosŏn period became very successful in obtaining the *munkwa* degree, to the extent that they outnumbered their southern counterparts.

A close analysis of the distribution of successful candidates from the northern provinces reveals that P’yŏngan Province produced almost 70 percent of the north’s successful candidates from about 50 percent of the total population of the north. More interestingly, a few places

⁷ Edward W. Wagner, “A Computer Study of Yi Dynasty Civil Examination Rosters,” a paper read at the 22nd Annual Meeting, Association for Asian Studies, San Francisco, California (April 3, 1970). I consulted a copy in the Harvard-Yenching Library.

⁸ Wagner, “Quantification and Study of Yi Dynasty Korean Elites,” 3–6.

⁹ See Edward W. Wagner, “The Ladder of Success in Yi Dynasty Korea,” *Occasional Papers on Korea* 1 (Apr. 1974): 1–8, and idem, “The Civil Examination Process as Social Leaven: The Case of the Northern Provinces in the Yi Dynasty,” *Korea Journal* 17.1 (Jan. 1977): 22–27.

¹⁰ Wagner, “The Civil Examination Process as Social Leaven,” 26.

within each northern province show a heavy concentration of successful passers. For example, Haeju and P'yŏngsan in Hwanghae, Hamhŭng and Anbyŏn in Hamgyŏng, and P'yŏngyang and Chŏngju in P'yŏngan Province boasted a remarkable concentration of successful candidates. The success of candidates from the town of Chŏngju, just north of the Ch'ŏngch'ŏn River in P'yŏngan Province, was most striking. Chŏngju, whose population was less than 4 percent of P'yŏngan and less than 2 percent of the total population of the northern provinces, produced 282 successful candidates—27 percent of the P'yŏngan total, and 18.7 percent of the overall northern total.¹¹

What are the social and political implications of the northerners' phenomenal success in the *munkwa*? Although Wagner acknowledged that northerners were discriminated against in their bureaucratic advancement at the central court, he concluded that “the longevity of the Yi dynasty is substantially owed to its ability to ensure physical and psychological contentment in the lives of all major components of its population, not merely to a favored few.”¹² However, in light of northerners' success in obtaining the *munkwa* degree, the connection between the openness of the *munkwa* and the longevity of the dynasty requires further examination. One critical weakness of Wagner's thesis becomes apparent when we consider the Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion of 1812, whose geographical base was northern P'yŏngan Province, with Chŏngju County as the rebels' stronghold. Why did this large-scale anti-dynastic rebellion break out in the place that produced so many *munkwa* degree-holders in the late Chosŏn dynasty? Wagner

¹¹ Wagner, “The Civil Examination Process as Social Leaven,” 24. For in-depth discussion of regional discrimination against the northerners, see Sun Joo Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea: The Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion of 1812* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007); and Sun Joo Kim, “Introduction: Thinking Through Region,” in Sun Joo Kim, ed., *The Northern Region of Korea: History, Identity, and Culture* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2010), 3–17.

¹² Wagner, “The Civil Examination Process as Social Leaven,” 27.

suggested that the *munkwa* had the effect of creating stability in society. Did the *munkwa* degree-holders participate in the rebellion? If not, what were their attitudes toward the rebellion?

Complicating the Link between the Civil Service Examinations and the Stability of the Chosŏn Dynasty

My own research on the Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion has found no clear evidence that verifies the participation of any *munkwa* degree-holder in the rebellion. As Table 1 shows, however, there were quite a few cases in which close relatives of *munkwa* degree-holders did lend a hand to the rebel leadership. For example, a government report shows that Kim Iksu (?–1812), the rebel army’s chief commander of Kasan County, was Kim Sŏkt’ae’s (1764–?) youngest uncle.¹³

Searching the on-line Wagner & Song Munkwa Roster using the name “Kim Sŏkt’ae” in Korean as the search word produced the information that (1) Kim Sŏkt’ae passed the *munkwa* in 1790; (2) this Kim family’s clan seat is Sunch’ŏn; and (3) they resided in Kasan, in northern P’yŏngan Province. The genealogy for the Sunch’ŏn Kim of Kasan lists Kim Sŏkt’ae and Kim Iksu just a few pages apart.¹⁴ Further examination of the two sources, the *munkwa* database and the genealogy, reveals that Kim Iksu—a rebel who died inside the walled town of Chŏngju while he was resisting the government campaign—was a younger brother of Kim Kŏnsu (1790–1854), who passed the *munkwa* in 1762. As Figure 1 shows, the family that descended from Kim Iksu’s great grandfather produced nine *munkwa* passers in the late Chosŏn period—a remarkable accomplishment.

¹³ *Kwansŏ p’yŏngnallok* [The Record of the Pacification Campaign of the Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion], 5 vols., edited by Han’gukhak munhŏn yŏn’guso (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1979), 3: 123.

¹⁴ *Sunch’ŏn Kim ssi Ch’ŏrwŏngong-p’a sebo* [The Genealogy of the Sunch’ŏn Kim, Ch’ŏrwŏngong Branch] (Seoul: Sunch’ŏn Kim ssi Ch’ŏrwŏngong-p’a poso, 1980), 680–94.

In an ordinary genealogy, Kim Iksu’s name would not appear because he was a “traitor.” The reason his name was recorded in this genealogy is most likely his grandson Kim Yu’s later success in the *munkwa* in 1849. Sometime after the rebellion, Kim Iksu’s name must have been cleared from the list of rebels, given that so many of his close blood associations earned the glory of a *munkwa* degree after his disastrous involvement in the 1812 incident. A biographical essay on Kim Sökt’ae in the genealogy testifies that Kim Sökt’ae was wealthy and played a key role in feeding hunger-stricken people of Kasan County during the post-rebellion period.¹⁵ This benevolent act probably helped the family erase the terrible memory of its affiliation with the rebel side from popular memory as well as from public and private records.

Table 1. *Munkwa* Degree-Holders and Rebels

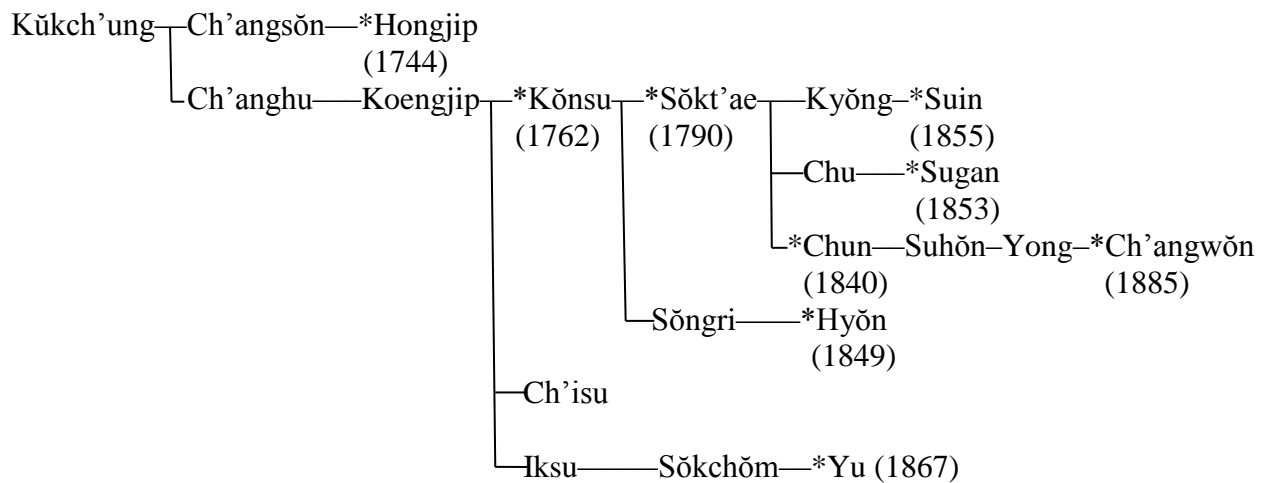
Name (Residence)	Relation to the degree-holder	Role played in the rebellion
Kim Iksu (Kasan)	Kim Sökt’ae’s (<i>munkwa</i> in 1790) uncle and Kim Könsu’s (<i>munkwa</i> in 1762) younger brother	Chief commander of Kasan
Kim Kukpȫm or Ch’angbae (Kwaksan)	His brother, Kim Ch’angje, passed the <i>munkwa</i> in 1810	Strategist, and a member of the vanguard cavalry
Kim Sayong (T’aech’ön)	Kim Ch’ijȫng’s (<i>munkwa</i> in 1783) remote relative. Kim Ch’ijȫng was a candidate for magistrate of T’aech’ön under the rebel administration; Kim Sökt’ae of Kasan (<i>munkwa</i> in 1790) was the father-in-law of Kim Ch’ijȫng’s daughter	One of the core leaders
Kim Namch’o (Chȫngju)	His son, Kim Insu, passed the <i>munkwa</i> in 1819	Supervised military affairs under the rebels, but fled after four days
Kye Namsim (Sȫnch’ön)	His grandfather, Kye Tökhae, passed the <i>munkwa</i> in 1774	As a master of occult arts, devised a strategy to occupy Ŭiju
Sȫng Ilsul (Chȫngju)	Sȫng Ido’s (<i>munkwa</i> in 1675) close relative, and Sȫng Kyȫnghang’s (<i>munkwa</i> in 1786)	Granary supervisor

¹⁵ *Sunch’ön Kim ssi Ch’örwȫngong-p’a sebo*, 70.

	close relative	
Sŭng Chŏnghang (Chŏngju)	Sŭng Ryun's (<i>munkwa</i> in 1774) remote relative	Rebel military officer

Source: Sun Joo Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea*, 62–63.

Figure 1. Kim Iksu and *Munkwa* Degree-Holders from His Immediate Family



* *Munkwa* degree-holder, with the year of the degree in parentheses
 Source: *Sunch'ŏn Kim ssi Ch'ŏrwŏngong-p'a sebo*, 669–98 and 760.

In addition to cases such as those of Kim Iksu and others shown in Table 1, two *munkwa* passers, Paek Kyŏnghae (1765–1842) and Han Houn (1761–1812), seem to have been initially sympathetic to the rebel side but changed their position later on.¹⁶ Furthermore, a number of lower civil service exam degree-holders, military exam degree-holders, and former officials who held centrally appointed posts participated in the rebellion.¹⁷ These facts cast doubt on the stabilizing role presumably played by the civil service examinations.

¹⁶ Sun Joo Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea*, 57–60.

¹⁷ Sun Joo Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea*, 61–65.

If no *munkwa* passers supported the rebellion outright, were any of them actively involved in putting down the rebellion, either by mobilizing militia forces or donating material resources to the government side? Existing sources do not lend this much support. The central court recognized the so-called six loyal subjects from the region—Han Houn, Paek Kyōnghān (?–1812), Che Kyōnguk (1760–1812), Hō Hang (?–1812), Kim Taet’aek (?–1812), and Im Chihwan (?–1812)—who died during the battle or were killed by the rebels for various reasons. They were solemnly enshrined in the P’yojōlsa (Temple of Illuminating Loyalty) after the rebellion. Of these six, only Han Houn was a *munkwa* passer, and one other, Paek Kyōnghān, was the brother of Paek Kyōnghae, a *munkwa* degree-holder. Im Chihwan, a descendant of a military commander who died during the Manchu invasion in the early seventeenth century, was a local scholar from Anju, P’yōngan Province, who had been pursuing Confucian scholarship when he volunteered to fight against the rebels. Che Kyōnguk, who was from Seoul, had held a minor provincial post and was a descendant of a war hero from the time of the Japanese invasion in the late sixteenth century. The other two of the six loyalists were local military men at the time.¹⁸

Table 2. Militia Leaders during the 1812 Hong Kyōngnae Rebellion

Name	Residence	Occupation or Social status
Ch’a Kyōngjin	Sōnch’ōn	Former Changnyōng (third inspector of the Office of the Inspector General), <i>munkwa</i> in 1789
An Myōngryōl	Anju	Local yangban (<i>hyangin</i>)
Kang Inhak	Ch’angsōng	Kwōn’gwan (outpost officer, Jr. 9)
Pak Taegwan	Ch’ōrsan	Literary licentiate degree-holder (<i>chinsa</i>)
Kim Kukch’u	Ch’ōrsan	<i>Hallyang</i> (military man without a post)
Ham Ŭihyōng	Hūich’ōn	<i>Hallyang</i>
Song Chiryōm	Kanggye	Yangban scholar (<i>sain</i>)

¹⁸ For more detailed discussion on these six loyalists, see Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea*, 148–49.

Kye Unhae	Kanggye	<i>Hallyang</i>
Kim Chonguk	Kilchu	<i>Hallyang</i>
Kang Chip	Kwaksan	Chwasu (director of local yangban association)
Wŏn Yŏngjŏng	Kwaksan	<i>Hallyang</i>
Kim Chihwan	Kusŏng	Former Manho (sub-area commander)
Kim Kyŏngno	Pyŏktong	Yangban scholar
Yi Sibok	T'aech'ŏn	Yangban scholar
Ch'oe Sinyŏp	Ŭiju	Military officer
Hong Yŏil	Ŭiju	Former Ch'ŏmsa (army second deputy commander)
Chŏng Naehong	Ŭiju	Yŏngjang (chief commander)

Source: Sun Joo Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea*, 150.

Table 2 is a list of prominent militia leaders who mobilized troops, joined the government campaign against the rebels, and were later recognized by the central court. Most of them were local elites who were pursuing either Confucian scholarship or a military career, and they included only one *munkwa* passer, Ch'a Kyŏngjin from Sŏnch'ŏn (first row).

What about those who donated material resources to help out the government side? As Table 3 illustrates, *munkwa* passers did not chip in much. An Sagwon' son An Kŭbin (?–1772), from a very remote county, Pyŏktong, passed the *munkwa*, but only after the rebellion, in 1815.

Table 3. Donors to the Government Camp

Name (Residence)	Social status	Amount	Reward
Hong Tŭkchu (Ŭiju)	Confucian scholar (<i>yuhak</i>)	1,218 <i>sŏm</i> of grain and 5,200 <i>yang</i>	Entry-level office
Ch'a Hyŏnggi (Sukch'ŏn)	Local yangban (<i>hyangin</i>)	2,000 <i>yang</i>	Military office in border region
Pak Kyŏng (Anju)	Local yangban	1,500 <i>yang</i> and 8 <i>sŏm</i> of grain	Military office in border region
Kim Kyŏngjung (Anju)		1,000 <i>yang</i>	<i>Pondo chŏllang</i> (local post)
Ch'a Hyŏnggyu (Sukch'ŏn)	Literary licentiate degree-holder (<i>chinsa</i>)	30 <i>sŏm</i> of grain, 35 <i>yang</i> , and 7 cows	Provincial award as wished

An Sagwŏn (Pyŏktong)	Local yangban, father of An Kŭbin (<i>munkwa</i> 1815), and grandfather of An Kyohŭi (<i>munkwa</i> 1854)	100 <i>sŏm</i> of rice	Provincial award as wished
Kye Chinhŭng (Chŭngsan)	Military officer	20 cows	Provincial award as wished
Yi Hyŏnt'aek (Sakchu)	<i>Hallyang</i>	15 <i>sŏm</i> of rice and 10 cows	Provincial award as wished

Source: Sun Joo Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea*, 151.

To further contextualize these findings, Table 4 shows the number of *munkwa* passers from P'yongan Province throughout the Chosŏn period. From this table, we know that there were hundreds of *munkwa* passers from P'yongan Province from the late eighteenth century to the 1812 rebellion, many of whom might have been alive at the time of the rebellion. To make the numbers make more sense, the total number of P'yŏngan people who passed the *munkwa* from 1770 to 1811 was 126. From Chŏngju alone, which was the rebels' stronghold, there were 78 *munkwa* passers in the same forty-year period, and we can assume that many of them were alive at the time of the rebellion and resided in the county (see Table 5). Yet very few of them contributed to putting down the rebellion.

Table 4. *Munkwa* Passers from Northern and Southern P'yŏngan Province by 50-Year Periods

	1392 – 1450	1451 – 1500	1501 – 1550	1551 – 1600	1601 – 1650	1651 – 1700	1701 – 1750	1751 – 1800	1801 – 1850	1851 – 1900	Total
Northern P'yŏngan				2	3	26	57	160	147	202	597
Southern P'yŏngan	5	9	8	14	26	47	63	78	85	151	486
Total	5	9	8	16	29	73	120	238	232	353	1083

Table 5. *Munkwa* Passers from Chǒngju by 50-Year Periods

	1392 — 1450	1451 — 1500	1501 — 1550	1551 — 1600	1601 — 1650	1651 — 1700	1701 — 1750	1751 — 1800	1801 — 1850	1851 — 1900	Total
Chǒngju						12	26	90	81	73	282

What kind of conclusions can we draw from these data? The *munkwa* certainly was open to a relatively large population, including northern literati. Despite social and cultural prejudice and resultant political discrimination against northern residents, northern residents were not only allowed to sit for the civil service examinations but did very well on them. Were northern exam passers and their close relatives, as well as those passers with obscure backgrounds, unambiguously satisfied with the fact that they had earned the great honor of entering the pantheon of degree-holders, and did they thus develop a feeling that they were part of the ruling elite of the dynasty? Was it almost automatic that they pledged their loyalty to the dynasty? Or were they resentful that their chances of political and bureaucratic advancement were blocked because of their less prominent pedigrees and their native places of origin? Consequently, would they have accumulated so much resentment, frustration, and feeling of deprivation—because their talent was not rewarded in fair ways—that they harbored treasonous thoughts against the existing rule?

We have a mixed picture from the evidence presented so far. To a large degree, the relative openness of the *munkwa* did stabilize the society, fulfilling the ambition and at the same time neutralizing the anxiety of local elites. Yet, as many social scientists have argued, the production and existence of a large pool of unemployed educated degree-holding elites is

unhealthy for the stability of society, whether or not those marginalized elites directly engage in subversive activities. Especially when state institutions have been too rigid to absorb aspiring elites who have therefore suffered financial trouble, marginalized elites have tended to channel their discontent into open defiance of the state, leading to social and political chaos and, ultimately, to regime changes.¹⁹

In this respect, one of Wagner's remarks is worth citing. He said, "The importance of this phenomenon for determining the course Korea took in the period of transition from traditional to modern society must not be overlooked. In the light of the role of Chŏngju residents in late traditional Korea, the fact that the famed Osan Chunghakkyo (Osan Middle School) was established there takes on new meaning."²⁰ Although Wagner did not elaborate on this point, he was aware that many people from P'yŏngan Province, Chŏngju and P'yŏngyang in particular, became leaders of Korea's modernization by rather swiftly turning their attention to Western education and Western ideas.²¹ Such a turn to various modern apparatuses may have sprung from accumulated frustration and unfulfilled aspiration due to their marginalized status despite their success in *munkwa* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Reconstructing Social Networks of Chosŏn Elite

The *munkwa* database, combined with other sources such as genealogies, is a useful tool for reconstructing social networks of Chosŏn elite. An example is the case of Yi Sihang (1672–

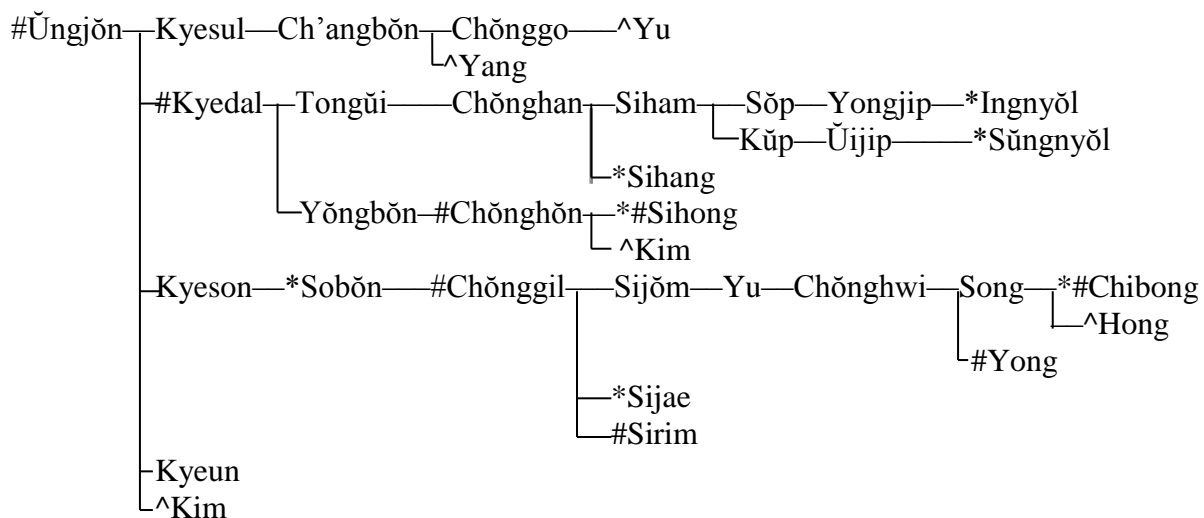
¹⁹ Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

²⁰ Wagner, "The Civil Examination Process as Social Leaven," 27.

²¹ For an examination of exemplary northerners who stood out as pioneers in various emerging modern sectors, see Kyung Moon Hwang, *Beyond Birth: Social Status in the Emergence of Modern Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 248–89.

1736), who passed the *munkwa* in 1699.²² Yi was a member of the Suan Yi lineage from Unsan County, located northeast of Chŏngju but a hinterland of northern P’yŏngan Province. The Suan Yi descent group produced 26 *munkwa* passers, 23 of whom resided in the northern region. Among those 23, seven passers hailed from Unsan and belonged to the particular family line descended from Yi Ŭngjŏn, a sixteenth-century ancestor of Yi Sihang (see Figure 2), confirming Wagner’s finding that *munkwa* passers tend to be concentrated within a small segment of a descent group.²³

Figure 2. *Munkwa* Passers of the Suan Yi Descent Group of Unsan



* *Munkwa* degree-holder

^ Last name of sons-in-law who either held an exam degree or had degree-holders among their immediate descendants

Men whose spouse had close relatives who held exam degrees

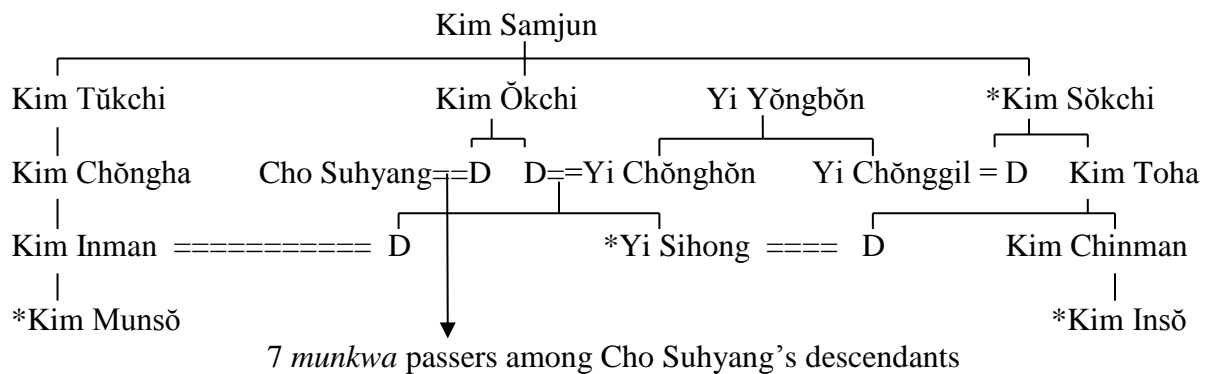
Source: Sun Joo Kim, *Voice from the North*, 24.

²² The following discussion is based on Sun Joo Kim, *Voice from the North: Resurrecting Regional Identity through the Life and Work of Yi Sihang (1672–1736)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

²³ Wagner, “The Korean Chokpo as a Historical Source,” paper presented at the World Conference Records and Genealogical Seminar, Salt Lake City, Utah (August 5–8, 1969), 13.

An examination of the Suan Yi's marriage ties shows that they formed multiple marriage ties with the Yōnan Kim of Chōngju, which produced the highest number of *munkwa* passers from Chōngju—a phenomenal 51 of them. The Paech'on Cho family of Chōngju, who produced the second highest number of *munkwa* passers (29), is also closely related to the Suan Yi by marriage (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Marriage Ties among the Suan Yi (Unsan), Yōnan Kim (Chōngju), and Paech'on Cho (Chōngju) Descent Groups



* *Munkwa* degree-holder

== marriage relations

D Daughter

Source: Sun Joo Kim, *Voice from the North*, 32–36.

This is only a representative sample of the emerging social and cultural networks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that we can reconstruct from the *munkwa* database and genealogies. From this discovery, we learn that the local elite society was very tightly knitted together through marriage ties. Such close networks must have had a strong bearing on the

continued success in the *munkwa* exam among in-group network members. In addition, as members of illustrious families, they certainly became leaders in various local matters, including control of wealth.

Genealogies as Historical Source

One of the premodern sources that Wagner utilized to a great extent as he worked on the Munkwa Project was family genealogies, the published records of a patrilineal descent structure. In conventional historical study in Korea, genealogical records have been largely discredited for their fraudulent content, namely, fabrication of records. Wagner, however, from early on asserted the usefulness of genealogy as a historical source, as his 1969 essay on genealogies and other works illustrate.²⁴

In terms of the reliability of genealogy, Wagner points out that “deliberate falsification of family records was unthinkable to those who took upon themselves the often awesome burden of compiling and publishing a *chokpo*.” He continues to say that *chokpo* prefaces often inform the reader of the pains taken to research and verify material of doubtful authenticity submitted to a compilation committee. Basically, he thinks that the *chokpo* is “a faithful mirror of life” and that outright forgery is not a serious problem in using *chokpo* as a source because such cases are easily discovered upon close examination.²⁵

In the late Chosŏn period, a written, published genealogy was not just a record of a family’s past and present but an important site of memory—one that defined the status of its

²⁴ Edward W. Wagner, “The Korean Chokpo as a Historical Source.” Also see his essay, “Two Early Genealogies and Women’s Status in Early Yi Dynasty Korea,” in Laurel Kendall and Mark Peterson, eds., *Korean Women: View from the Inner Room* (New Haven, Conn.: East Rock Press, 1983), 23–32.

²⁵ Wagner, “The Korean Chokpo as a Historical Source,” 4.

commemorators, as well as of the living members of the lineage, at the time of compilation. The greatness of ancestors, whether invented or not, affected the level of status of their descendants. A genealogy is clearly a private record, yet its public nature cannot be overlooked.

Genealogy is surely one of many manifestations of the Confucian emphasis on ancestor worship. Commemoration of ancestors took many forms, such as performing ancestral worship rituals, compiling genealogy and exam rosters, erecting tomb inscriptions and guardian statues, dedicating ancestors' biographies, and publishing ancestors' literary writings. Yet to view all these cultural practices, including compiling and publishing genealogies, as simply a way for elites to fulfill the Confucian value of filial piety is not satisfactory, because only a small fraction of the people recorded in a family genealogy may have been true practitioners of Confucianism, including ancestor rituals. Rather, a genealogy was a document that was instrumental in proving one's status—yangban elite status in particular—thus qualifying a man for state examinations or for membership in the local yangban association. If these were the main reasons for genealogical records, there is one big question that begs an answer: Why does a genealogy retain so many names?

Although genealogy in general reflects hierarchical patrilineal structure, it also has egalitarian features because a majority of members share the same kind of entry in a genealogy. As Wagner mentions, most individuals recorded in a genealogy have plain records of birth and death year, wife's family name, and the location of their tomb; a few prominent ancestors, such as *munkwa* degree-holders, have more embellished entries; and others have nothing recorded but their name.²⁶ Why did the compilers use such a format? And why was there a surge in genealogical compilation and publication in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Why were

²⁶ Wagner, "The Korean Chokpo as a Historical Source," 4–5.

certain kinds of people interested in compiling genealogies?

I suggest that we regard the genealogy as an economic document.²⁷ In the late Chosŏn, military taxation was a heavy financial burden and was also stigmatized as a non-*yangban* obligation. Local elites and their extended relatives employed every means possible to avoid being listed in the military roster. Genealogy provided one useful space for such a purpose. The function of genealogy or kinship organization evolved as social and economic conditions changed over time. That is, as the taxation system changed in the late Chosŏn from a per capita tax based on one's status into a quota system for certain units of administration, villagers, including *yangban* elites, found themselves pressured to meet an assigned amount of taxes. Genealogical records in this case may have provided a base for sharing the tax levy among lineage members, who oftentimes lived in the same village, ward, or sub-district area. All of these factors partly explain the surge in genealogical compilation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

What was the use of the information about the location of ancestral tombs? In Chosŏn Korea, the forest surrounding a tomb belonged to the descendants of the tomb's occupants. Forests yield a number of important resources, including fuel. In light of the increasing number of litigation cases over forest rights and stealing tomb sites (*t'ujang*) in the late Chosŏn dynasty, genealogical records on tomb locations probably provided some proof of ownership of particular forest lands.²⁸

²⁷ This point is inspired by Michael Szonyi, who has persuasively argued that economic factors generated strategies of kinship organization in late imperial China, from his examination of the people of the Fuzhou region in South China. Michael Szonyi, *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

²⁸ For specific criminal cases involving stealing tomb sites, see Sun Joo Kim and Jungwon Kim, comp. and trans., *Wrongful Deaths: Selected Inquest Records from Nineteenth-Century Korea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 47–54 and 129–203.

Lastly, for northern residents, genealogies provided another tool to authenticate their status origin. Like people of Fuzhou in South China who wanted to fashion their origin from North China for various reasons, northerners used the genealogical record—its prefaces and postscripts in particular—as a site in which to encode their origin, explain when and why their apical ancestors had moved to the place in the north where their descendants had then lived for centuries, and make connections to their southern brethren.²⁹

In sum, this chapter briefly has examined the history of the Munkwa Project. For a few decades from the 1960s on, Wagner meticulously read, analyzed, interpreted, and digitized information found in *munkwa* rosters and genealogies. There is no doubt that his unparalleled insight and tireless diligence had a great influence on many students and on their scholarly endeavors. I have shown a few ways in which my research has utilized the *munkwa* database to illustrate the link between the civil service examinations and both dynastic (in)stability as well as elite social networks. Other contributors to this book also demonstrate the efficacy of the *munkwa* database in further understanding the nature of Chosŏn elites and society. As the famous statement in the *Analects* says, “If one keeps cherishing one’s old knowledge so as to continually be acquiring new, one may be a teacher of others.”³⁰ In this way we learn from the past, and on the basis of that groundwork we advance our knowledge further. The Munkwa Project, the product of an extraordinary visionary, will continue to inspire and benefit researchers who seek to deepen our understanding of Chosŏn society and culture.

²⁹ For more discussion on the reliability of northern genealogies, see Sun Joo Kim, *Marginality and Subversion in Korea*, 181–84.

³⁰ 子曰、溫故而知新、可以為師矣. *The Analects*, Wei Zheng 11 at: <https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng> (accessed on July 5, 2018).

Character List

changnyǒng 掌令

chinsa 進士

chokpo 族譜

ch'ōmsa 僉使

chwasu 座首

hallang 閑良

hyangin 鄉人

Kukcho munkwa pangmok 國朝文科榜目

kwōn'gwan 權官

manho 萬戶

munbo 文譜

munkwa 文科

Osan Chunghakkyo 五山中學校

pankmok 榜目

pondo chōllang 本道殿廊

sain 士人

sōm 石

t'ujang 偷葬

ūpchi 邑誌

yang 兩

yōngjang 營將

yuhak 幼學