

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on May 2, 2006 the following Minute was placed upon the records.

### **EDWARD WILLETT WAGNER**

Born: August 7, 1924  
Died: December 7, 2001

Edward Willett Wagner, Professor of Korean Studies at Harvard for thirty-five years and founder of Korean studies in the United States, passed away at the age of 77 on December 7, 2001. He left his wife, Namhi Kim Wagner; two sons, Robert Camner and J. Christopher Wagner; three stepdaughters, Yunghi Choi Wagner, Sokhi Choi Wagner, and Sanghi Choi Wagner; a brother, John P. Wagner; and four grandchildren.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1924, Ed Wagner 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. Afterwards he did research for three years at Tenri University in Nara, Japan 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 in History and East Asian Languages at Harvard in 1959.

Ed's 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 signature early work, *The Literati Purges: Political Conflict in Early Yi Korea* (1974), was a challenging revision of the standard interpretation of the three purges of scholar-officials carried out by Kings Yŏnsan'gun and Chungjong in 1498, 1504, and 1519. Contrary to the conventional view that these purges constituted a contest between honest and upright Confucian moralists against tyrannical rulers supported by political appointees, Ed argued convincingly that the purges were the product of an intense structural and institutional conflict between Korean monarchs, who insisted on obedience to their theoretically unlimited traditional authority, and members of an 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 Ed's scholarly pursuits and for later studies in the West on the history of the Chosŏn dynasty. Those studies 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 a hereditary aristocracy.

Ed promoted this shift of interpretation by supervising 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 later studies also contributed to this. His examination of private genealogies (*chokpo*) showed how important the record of family relationships was to the maintenance of *yangban* status. He found in the household registers of a

suburb of the capital, Seoul, in the mid-seventeenth century evidence that 75 percent of the population there were slaves. He also showed in his study of the *chungin* or “middle people,” consisting of legal specialists, interpreters, scribes, and accountants and the clerks of local district magistrates, that they formed a hereditary social structure. 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 families to the end of the traditional period in 1910, the existence of hereditary slavery from 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 more despotic models of Ming and Qing China.

The major part of Ed’s later scholarly life was dedicated to the enormous task of identifying and computerizing all individuals who passed the highest-level civil-service examination in the Chosŏn dynasty (*munkwa*). This list contained about 80,000 names, including 14,600 examination passers and their “four relatives” (father, grandfather, great-grandfather, maternal grandfather). Since the *yangban* constituted an exclusive group whose members married generally amongst themselves, the list provides a basis for exploring the marital and social connections of most of the elite and thus its continuity for five hundred years.

Ed’s collaborator on this effort was the late Professor Song June-ho of Chŏnbuk University, in his time the leading social historian of the Chosŏn dynasty in the Republic of Korea. When Ed’s effort to complete the project was tragically interrupted by Alzheimer’s disease, Song June-ho was able to complete the task and produce a CD-ROM version of the complete list. Unfortunately, Ed himself wrote only a number of short articles about the significance of this data before the disease incapacitated him; nevertheless they are highly significant explorative pieces. And the Wagner-Song Munkwa Project, which is now available online, has opened up new vistas for researchers in Korean 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 a 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 the Japanese 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. Ed’s interpretation also demonstrated that Korea never underwent the transition from aristocracy to gentry that occurred in China with the fall of the Tang dynasty in 906 or the fall of the Northern Song in 1125. Not only was this conclusion a major reinterpretation of Korean history, but the data in the study has provided the basis for numerous subsequent studies.

In an effort to make a comprehensive overview of Korean history available to his students, Ed also translated Yi Kibaek’s (Ki-baik Lee) well-known Korean-language textbook into English under the title: *A New History of Korea*.

In scholarship, Ed Wagner was a man dedicated to the use of primary sources. He was meticulous to a fault in his own work and in reviewing and guiding the work of his students. In the classroom and office he was an informal, encouraging, and witty presence, and his door was always open. In addition to his scholarship and teaching, he left an enduring institutional legacy at Harvard through his development of the Korean language program in the Department of East Asian Languages and

Civilizations and the Korean collection in the Harvard Yenching Library, and as the first director of Harvard's Korea Institute.

Respectfully submitted,

Martina Deuchler  
James B. Palais  
Carter J. Eckert, Chair