Hyung Il Pai (June 14, 1958--May 28, 2018)

By Lothar von Falkenhausen

Hyung Il ("Lee") Pai 裵炯逸 and I became friends from the moment when we met for the first time at Harvard in September 1981. As beginning graduate students and fellow advisees of the late Kwang-chih Chang 張光直 (1931-2001), we spent a large part of the following three years in each other’s company. It was an intense and exhilarating time. Hyung Il had graduated from the prestigious Ewha Girls’ High School 梨花女子高等學校 and obtained her BA in Korean history from Sŏngang University 西江大學校, an academically rigorous Jesuit-run institution in Seoul. Having lived in Malaysia for several years in her teens--her father was a medical doctor attached to the Korean diplomatic community there--she was comfortable in English, familiar with negotiating cultural differences, and curious about conceptualizing them theoretically through the lens of anthropology. She had little trouble adjusting to American ways. In this respect she was quite different from the other Korean students at Harvard, many of whom were male and (due to military-service requirements) older--nice people, interesting and fun to be with, but often astonishingly conservative in their attitudes.

Socially as well as academically, Harvard with its diverse international constellation of highly driven graduate students was the right place for her. Had she stayed in Korea, then still under a repressive military dictatorship, her outspokenness would likely have got her into trouble sooner or later. She sometimes shared stories of student demonstrations during her college days, from which some of her fellow students had emerged crippled for life due to police brutality. I never asked her why she had chosen to switch fields from history to anthropology, though one reason may have been that anthropology at the time was being regarded (all too briefly, as it turned out) as a kind of hegemonial super-discipline that would eventually imprint itself upon the totality of the Humanities and Social Sciences. More pragmatically, I believe, Hyung Il was looking for new, untapped bodies of evidence and more rigorous--or perhaps just different--methods of analysis that would help her develop a broader perspective of early Korea than she had hitherto encountered. In particular, she was obviously seeking to escape from the doctrinaire nationalism then pervading Korean academia.

Even though anthropology was completely new to her, she took to it like a fish to water. Together, we broke our teeth in archaeological method and theory under the late Stephen Williams (1926-2017); suffered valiantly through Erik Trinkaus’s
(b. 1948) osteology class, mandatory for archaeology students; and struggled to hold our own in the formidable Gordon R. Willey’s (1913-2002) seminar on the Early Classic Maya. No one on the Harvard faculty at the time knew much about Korean archaeology as such, but K. C. Chang was the most supportive adviser imaginable. He gave Hyung Il a completely free rein in developing her expertise, insisting only that she master Japanese and Chinese, which she did. Probably, the Harvard anthropologist who came to exert the strongest intellectual influence on Hyung Il was Peter S. Wells (b. 1948), whose sophisticated anthropological modeling of the nature and effects of contacts between late prehistoric Central Europe and the Mediterranean world provided her with an excellent framework for conceptualizing early Korea-China interactions. For her first summer in Graduate School, Harvard’s Anthropology Department sent her to the University of Arizona’s long-running archaeological field school at Grasshopper Pueblo, where she acquired first-hand acquaintance with the realities of archaeological fieldwork.

Hyung Il’s influence on me during those years was considerable. She was almost single-handedly responsible for kindling my fascination with Korea. In the summer of 1983, she persuaded me to accept an invitation from our older fellow student Choi Mong Lyong 崔夢龍 (b. 1946) from Seoul National University, who was then just finishing his PhD at Harvard, to join his archaeological field project in Korea. I was hooked and returned to Korea the following summer; I even started to study Korean. Although I eventually resisted K. C. Chang’s suggestion to switch my primary interest within East Asian archaeology from China to Korea, my Korean experience left deep and enduring intellectual marks. I don’t think I ever adequately expressed my gratitude for this to Hyung Il while she was alive.

She, too, participated in Prof. Choi’s field project in Korea—at Tohwari 桃花李 (Peach-Blossom Village) near Ch’aech’ŏn 堤川 in Chungch’ŏng Pukdo 忠清北道 province—during the summer after our second year at Harvard. She had come to explore possibilities for starting an excavation of her own on which she might write her PhD dissertation. But at that point it was becoming clear that any plans she might have had to pursue her professional career in Korea were not going to work out. For Hyung Il would not put up with the way male professors and older fellow students were treating her socially—calling her agassi (“girlie”) and insisting on being served by her at drinking parties—and she was understandably frustrated that they would not take her seriously as an intellectual. No Western scholar of Korea, male or female, would have had to contend with such behavior. Of course, if she had been willing to make
compromises, some solution might have been worked out. But one cannot blame her for persisting in her refusal to accommodate herself to the “Old Boys”--even though this came at the expense of becoming an outsider and jettisoning her opportunities of conducting fieldwork in Korea and of eventually returning to Korea as a professor.

Back at Harvard, she underwent something of a makeover. She refashioned her intellectual orientations as well as her personal style so as to fit the academic job market in the US. Whereas she had been content, until then, to concentrate on her own relatively marginal specialty, she now made a point of becoming conversant with the big issues and core methodologies of the anthropological discipline. And whereas she had sometimes coquetted with the role of the exotic ingénue, she now became more edgy and less hesitant than before to inhabit the anger that young female academics of our generation justifiably felt--especially at Harvard--about their prospects in life. In other words, she learned to “walk the walk and talk the talk” in the same way as her American contemporaries. She embraced feminism, deconstructionism, and post-colonial theory; she sought out senior female academics as mentors; and she built a strategic network of professional relationships in and beyond her own academic cohort. Working as a Teaching Fellow for a wide range of courses in Anthropology and in East Asian Languages and Civilizations, she acquired the pedagogical skills necessary to relate to American undergraduates; she even lived for a time as a resident tutor in one of Harvard’s undergraduate “Houses” (dormitories). To her great credit, she managed to do all these things without ever becoming unfaithful to her original self, remaining every bit as warm, spontaneous, and opinionated as she had always been.

Hyung Il received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from Harvard in 1989. In her dissertation, “Lelang and the Interaction Sphere in the Korean Peninsula,” she applied to the Korean case the concept of “Interaction Sphere,” pioneered in the field of North American archaeology by Joseph Caldwell (1916-1973) and adapted by K. C. Chang to late Neolithic China. The dissertation covered the time from the late first millennium BC to the middle of the first millennium AD. The Chinese commanderies that existed during part of that period in the northern part of the Korean peninsula--Lelang [K. Nangnang] 樂浪, near present-day P’yŏngyang 平壤 (North Korea), being the most important--were and remain a highly controversial topic in East Asian archaeology. Although they are unambiguously attested by both historical texts and archaeological finds, many Korean scholars regard them as a blemish on the national dignity or even roundly deny their existence. By daring to follow her own scholarly interests and to address such a topic--and by mentioning Lelang in the very
title of her dissertation—Hyung Il was taking considerable risks, signaling her intention to stand apart from the scholarly community of her homeland.

For all of us specializing in East Asian archaeology in the 1980s, the search for an academic position proved difficult. In Hyung Il’s case, although anthropology was her home discipline, anthropology departments would not consider her because she could not offer to take students into the field in Korea; and also because they tended to regard East Asian archaeology, especially when concerned with historically documented periods, as somehow outside the purview of anthropology. For her first year after the PhD, she had no job offers. To tide herself over, Hyung Il took an administrative job in Harvard’s Dean of Students’ Office, where she was in charge of enhancing racial diversity and cultural inclusion. Learning to get her way in a bureaucracy was no doubt a useful professional experience. Yet concurrently she continued her academic work and affiliated herself as a Research Associate with Harvard’s Korea Institute, John K. Fairbank Center, and Arthur M. Sackler Museum.

In 1990 Hyung Il was appointed Assistant Professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). Her position was initially shared between the Departments of East Asian Languages and Cultural Studies and History. Her experience exemplified the in-built vicissitudes of junior-level split appointments: for even though she was uncomplainingly shouldering much more than a 50% workload for each of her two departments— in addition to which came pressures on minority female faculty members such as herself to serve on more than their fair share of university committees— in the end neither department felt that she was doing enough, and she came within a hair’s breadth of being denied tenure. It was Ronald C. Egan (b. 1948), a former teacher of ours at Harvard, who, as chair of UCSB’s Department of East Asian Languages and Cultural Studies, almost single-handedly rescued her career by moving her entire line into that department and seeing through her promotion to Associate Professor in 1998. Following the completion of her second book, she became Full Professor in 2012.

During her a quarter-century or so at Santa Barbara, Hyung Il taught a wide range of courses on the history, archaeology, and anthropology of Korea as well as East Asia generally. Resolutely interdisciplinary in orientation, she pioneered the teaching of subjects new to East Asian Studies, such as heritage management, tourism, and popular culture. By all accounts, she was a popular teacher, her liveliness and caring more than compensating for her occasional lack of organization. She headed UCSB’s Korean Language program from 1998–2007. Another highlight of her service to the profession was three years (two thereof as Chair) on the Executive Board of the Committee on
Korean Studies under the Northeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies (2001-4). From 2004 to the time of her death, she was a member of the Editorial Board of the International Journal of Cultural Properties for Cambridge University Press. Moreover, she served on several national and international fellowship committees.

She traveled all over the world—to Asia, Europe, Latin America, and even, in 2009, to Australia—to lecture and to present papers at conferences. Her research was underwritten by a series of prestigious fellowships, which enabled her to spend considerable chunks of time away from Santa Barbara. In 1992 she received a grant from the Social Science Research Council to do research at the Tōyō Bunko 東洋文庫 in Tōkyō. She spent the 1993–94 academic year at the Center for Korean Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, as a Korean Foundation Postdoctoral fellow. Twice she was invited to spend a year (2000–1 and 2007–8) at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyōto. In 2004–5, the Japan Foundation sponsored her for six months as Visiting research professor at the Department of Archaeology at Kyōto University; during that academic year, she also held a Korea Foundation fellowship and did research at the National Research Institute of Cultural Properties in Tōkyō and at Tōkyō University’s Institute for Oriental Culture. A six-month Fulbright Fellowship in 2010–11 underwrote her research at Seoul National University’s Kyujanggak Institute. (This enumeration may be incomplete.)

Her work kept her extremely busy, but not too busy to have a personal life. In 1995 she married culinary artist Alex José, who made a loving home for the two of them, and who cared for her all the way to the end.

* * *

Ever since the 1990s, Hyung Il intermittently suffered from the cancer that eventually killed her on May 28, 2018. She faced her situation with tremendous courage and determination. Considering her ever-precarious health, her productivity as a scholar is all the more impressive.

The oeuvre she leaves behind comprises two single-author books, one edited book, and some two dozen article-length pieces (see the attached bibliography; as with most scholars, there is a certain amount of overlap as some of her articles became chapters in her books). All of her work was inspired by the dual impetus (1) to reconfigure the study of early Korea by placing it in a more sophisticated theoretical and methodological framework, and (2) to contribute to some of the grand themes in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Her most precious assets in pursuing these goals were her well-developed
scholarly imagination and her absolute fearlessness. Hyung Il never hesitated, when warranted, to think "outside the box," and she did not shy away from articulating radically unorthodox ideas. Indeed, I believe she positively enjoyed challenging the established consensus, and she did not care whether others would agree with her or not. In retrospect, her self-confidence seems to have been largely justified: many of her published opinions have had considerable staying power.

The study of the early periods of Korean history is difficult not only because of the many different languages it requires, but also because it necessitates entering a veritable minefield of political controversy. Hyung Il aimed above all to eschew the stultifying hypernationalistic discourse that has characterized the work of post-World War II scholars of the Humanities and Social Sciences in both North and South Korea, and which always becomes especially strident when anything concerning Japan is ever so slightly touched upon. The book she co-edited with Tim Tangherlini, Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute for Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1998), broke with numerous taboos. For one thing, it insisted on the fact (completely uncontroversial to those acquainted with contemporary anthropological theory, but threatening to ideologues) that Korean national identity is a modern construct, and its constituent chapters, including her own, told facets of the story of how that construct came about.

Hyung Il addressed the same problématique at greater depth in her first single-author book, Constructing "Korean" Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography and Racial Myth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000). Once again, even the title, with "Korean" in quotation marks, was a provocation. As befits a book dedicated to K. C. Chang, the book analyzes anthropological phenomena such as cultural contact, ethnogenesis, and state formation as exemplified by protohistoric and early historic Korea; the insights into Lelang from her dissertation are included as a case study. Weighing the archaeological record against the many-layered historiographical preconceptions accumulated in more than a century of scholarship, Hyung Il compellingly points out the baseless yet mutually-reinforcing nature of many of the historians' claims; she exposes the blind spots and hidden assumptions in the work of numerous famous Japanese, Korean, and Western scholars; and she explains the reasons why they went wrong. While she uses the language of postmodernist criticism, her presentation of the data is matter-of-fact, even workmanlike. The book amounts to a devastating critique of the entire intellectual basis of Korean archaeology during the first half-century since independence from Japan; yet it also sketches
out a new paradigm, grounded in the methods and theories of contemporary American anthropology, for a more defensible historical interpretation of the Korean archaeological record.

Inevitably, Constructing “Korean” Origins touched on every imaginable raw nerve of nationalist sensitivity in Korea, Japan, and— to some degree—China. Moreover, the book was by no means error-free. But it raised issues that, in the long run, no one could afford to ignore, and it is my impression that it is being found useful by today’s new generation of scholars. In a Korean frame of reference, it stands as a monumental and startlingly original achievement. To its American readership, it not only delivered a well-informed synthesis of a body of archaeological evidence rarely treated in English, but also provided a welcome addition to the growing scholarly literature reflecting on nationalism and history from the perspective of the history of scholarship.

It was, of course, in no small measure thanks to her status as an American university professor that Hyung Il could claim the authority and cultural distance to address such central issues in her field. If she had returned Korea, this would have been unthinkable. In her later career, she broadened her scope even further. As she moved from “armchair archaeology” and ancient history into the emerging field of Cultural Studies, her background in anthropology continued to serve her well as a fountainhead of theoretical approaches and methods for research.

As an extension of her previous work on archaeological materials as such, she now trained her focus on the history and current situation of cultural-heritage administration in East Asia. Her book on that topic, Heritage Management in Korea and Japan: The Politics of Antiquity and Identity (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press 2013) is both solid and timely. It offers an unbiased, matter-of-fact presentation of Japanese colonial institutions and their continuing impact on the contemporary practice of archaeology and cultural-heritage management in Korea. Hyung Il demonstrates that present-day cultural-heritage work in the two countries rests on a shared intellectual basis, which she traces back to a seminal group of scholars during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In conducting her archival research in both Japan and Korea, she deployed great persistence and considerable diplomatic skills to obtain access to important troves of records and documents that had not previously been adequately tapped by scholars. Moreover, she conducted numerous interviews with stakeholders. She was particularly proud of having spoken at length with Prof. Arimitsu Kyōichi 有光教一 (1907-2011), the last director of the Keijō Government-General Museum (now the National Museum of Korea) during the Japanese colonial period, at the end of his long life.
Needless to say, her second book as well was controversial. What especially enraged those of her Korean colleagues who were willing to sacrifice historical truth to patriotic emotions was Hyung Il’s willingness to give due credit to Japanese scholars and administrators for bringing the very notions of prehistory, archaeology, and cultural-heritage protection to Korea; for establishing the first museums devoted to Korean antiquities; and for making substantial contributions to both conservation and scholarship. Japanese scholars, on the other hand, were predictably eager to acknowledge the importance of her work. Thanks in particular to her friend Professor Yoshii Hideo 吉井秀夫 at Kyôto University, Hyung Il became well-acquainted with the Japanese archaeological community, and she was able to build bridges to colleagues across the disciplines. Had she lived longer, this work could have been extended into a variety of possible directions.

Hyung Il’s article-length contributions appeared in all the three main languages relevant to her research: English, Korean, and Japanese. The topics range from state formation in Korea and culture contact and culture change to archaeological heritage management, museum studies, anthropological photography, postcards, and the study of cultural tourism. One of her final projects was on her hometown, Seoul, and its conceptualization as a city of culture during Japanese colonial times and in independent Korea. She once told me that she was planning to retire to Seoul. Alas, it never came to that.

With Hyung Il’s passing, the academic community—UCSB, the University of California, scholars of East Asian archaeology and cultural-heritage studies, and the transnational republic of scholars at large—has lost a true original, an authentic person who could always be counted on to have an opinion, who cared deeply about right and wrong, and who would have done anything for her friends. Now that she has prematurely left us, all that remains to do for us who survive her is to remember her well and to continue her important work as best we can.

Bibliography


---. “Culture Contact and Culture Change: The Korean Peninsula and its Relations with the Han Dynasty Commandery of Lelang.” World Archaeology 23.3 (1992): 306-319


--. "Kyŏngju yujŏk ŭi nangman: Ilche shingminji shidae kogohak sajinsa wa kwan’gwang imiji" (慶州 遺蹟의 浪漫：日帝 植民地 時代 考古學 寫真史와 觀光 이미지) (The romantic quality of the ruins of Gyeongju: Archaeological photographs and touristic images from the Japanese colonial period). In Tong Ashia kwan'gwang ŭi sangho shisŏn: Kūndae ihu Han-Jung-Il kwan'gwang chihyŏng ŭi pyŏnhwa (東アジア 觀光의 相互視線: 近代 以後 韓中日 觀光 地形의 變化) (Mutual perceptions in East Asian tourism: Changes in the touristic landscapes of Korea, China, and Japan since the onset of the modern age), Mun Ok-p’yo (ed.), pp. 124-169. Sŏngnam 城南: Han’gukhak Chung’ang Yŏn'guwŏn Ch’ulp’anbu 韓國學中央研究院出版部, 2016.


--. “Teikoku no meishōchi wo shikakuka suru: Chōsen shokuminchi koseki no shashin bunrui to kankō sangyō” (帝国の名勝地を視覚化する：朝鮮殖民地古跡の写真分類と観光産業) (Visualizing imperial destinations: The photographic classification of ruins and the tourist industry in colonial Korea). To appear in Chōsen kodaishi kenkyū to shokuminchishugi no kokufuku (朝鮮古代史研究と植民地主義の克服) [preliminary title], Li Sŏngshi 李成
市 and Arnaud Nanta (ed.). Tōkyō: Waseda University Press [publisher may change], forthcoming.