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**Tigers in the Tree: Korean Family Lineage Records**

**Hildi Kang**

Landed gentry, learned scholars, cabinet ministers, Prime Ministers—and a baby nursed by tigers. Men whose courage inspired armies and a queen who did so much for her country that the Emperor of China sent a letter of condolence when she died. And a baby nursed by tigers?

We found these people as we coaxed them from their hiding place in the page s of the Kang family register. Honorable Grandfather had mentioned these ancestors and convinced us that long ago our family had been important, but he never knew the details. These, of course, were in The Register that sits on the shelf and everybody knows about and nobody reads.

And then one day we awoke to our heritage. Our family has four volumes of ancestors dutifully logged in by a multitude of relatives and reaching back in time further than we can sensibly even imagine. We decided to reclaim this ancient family and bring them out of their dusty hiding place. And the very first entry stopped us with a jolt.

“Kang Hogyong (호경) was born in Kyongyang (경양) village in the Chin won area (진원). When he was six months old a rebellion erupted in the area and his parents rushed away to escape from the fighting. They left the baby in the bushes behind the house. When the civil war was over, they returned and found a pair of white tigers taking good care of the baby.1

What a story to come upon as we translated our Korean family register into English. Are these ancestors myth instead of reality? Shall we leave the tiger story out? It casts doubt over the entire record, making the whole thing seem ridiculous. After the initial shock had passed, we still could not explain [page 10] the tigers, but we realized our goal was not to challenge this record searching for verifiable ancestors, but to translate the record as it exists, thereby preserving it, and perhaps coming to understand it.

The problem of the nursemaid tigers was only one of the questions that began to haunt us as we worked on the translation. Just what is the family register and how did it happen that so many families have them? How reliable is the list? And since it sometimes goes back into the shadowy realms of the eighth century, at what point does fact begin to blur into legend or myth? And why did Koreans make such a fuss over their family genealogies in the first place?

Searching for answers, or even clues to answers, we moved gradually backwards into the depths of Korean history.

**ANCESTORS BY THE VOLUME –THE CHOKPO**

Present-day Americans, searching for their heritage, spend years following clues that lead them across continents and oceans. They grasp at every lead, prying into county offices, high school yearbooks, court records, passport offices, and newspaper articles in their search for the elusive ancestors.

Koreans searched in just the same way. Using basically the same type of records, they also pried and delved, rummaged and searched to find from whence they came, but there was a difference. Westerners search out of curiosity; Koreans searched out of necessity. And the searching that Westerners do today, Koreans did four, five, even seven hundred years ago. They searched, found, copied and published their lineage records with a fervor rarely matched in any other time or place.

This published record of a family tree, the chokpo (족보) traces a family through the father’s line. This family group is called a lineage or clan, and the clan is usually identified with the locality that was the native place of the lineage founder {pongwan, 봉완). Thus Koreans will say they are “Kim of Kyongju” (경주김씨) or “Kang of Sin Ch, on”(신천강씨).

The format followed by nearly all these chokpo is to list sons first and then daughters, daughters being recorded not in their own names, but by the names and ancestral seats of the husbands. Daughters typically were not included, because they were not considered permanent members of their birth clan. Nowadays some clans are beginning to register their daughters.

The oldest lineage records still in existence in Korea come from sometime in the 1200s. The oldest one in book form comes from the 1400s and belongs to the Gwon clan of Andong.(안동권씨). This book seems to have set [page 11] the pattern for all later chokpo.2

In ancient times each family kept track of its own ancestors, but gradually clans began to establish offices to keep track of the entire extended family. Our Kang office is in Seoul, and our family register currently takes up four large volumes. It was published in 1710, 1774, 1805, 1855, 1918 and 1979.

The care of the register was handed down from father to eldest son. Here in America we received the Kang family register as a gift from grandfather in Korea, and eventually we began the simple task of translating the records into English.

But simplicity is deceptive. The task was not simple. It turned out to be a bit like an Englishman, untutored, trying to read Chaucer. The older entries are written in difficult Classical Chinese, the language of the scholars, an archaic language sprinkled with idioms long ago lost to the casual reader.

We managed to translate some of the entries and from this we learned ancestor’s names, dates and occasional accomplishments, but the more we learned, the more questions arose. We began to search more deeply into the events through which they lived.

**A LITERATE GOVERNMENT — PUBLIC RECORDS**

Keeping written records was something ancient Koreans did well. The ruling class was literate and educated. As early as 372 AD Koreans established a National Confucian Academy, 3 wrote volumes of history in 350 and 545 AD, and kept government census records as early as the 700s. They published such a wide variety of books that in 1091 the Sung government of China sent to Korea for works not available in China.4

These publications, however, were essentially official government copies of such things as yearly chronicles, protocol records, and international records.

Other public documents kept track of the people, their possessions and their accomplishments. In addition to the census there were official histories and gazetteers, local histories, literary collections of members of the clan, literary collections of associates who composed obituary notices, rosters of the Civil Service Exams and tombstone rubbings.5

With so many well kept public records, why did Koreans feel the need to keep detailed private family records? What happened in Korean culture or history to make the family records so complete and so important? [page 12]

**THE NEED FOR FAMILY LINEAGE RECORDS**

“You never miss the water till the well runs dry.” Twist that a bit and read it, ‘‘You, 11 never miss your lineage records till you can’t find them.” Meet Ki Taek, a hypothetical teenager in 1598, wandering, dazed, staggering out alive after the attacking Japanese army has swept through his neighborhood.

Our young man pokes among the total destruction and thinks grown up thoughts. When this war is over, he is in big trouble. The census taker will come and ask who he is and who his family is, and there are no records left to submit his lineage. He was about to take the civil service exam and without his lineage scroll to prove the importance of his grandfather and great grandfather, he won’t even be allowed into the examination hall. Wait! It’s worse. Without that scroll he can’t even prove that this land on which he stands belongs to him—they’ll take him for a commoner or worse yet, a slave. And whatever will he do when the autumn festival comes round? He’s the only one left in his family, so he must read the prayers at the ancestors’ shrine. Four generations, two grandparents each, eight names to recite to perfection. It’s up to him to honor each ancestor, and he can’t remember all those names, and the wooden tablets containing their names are all part of the ashes around him. He is doomed. Without his lineage scroll he cannot save his own property or get his hoped-for job or honor his family or show appropriate respect to all his ancestors. He will never be the Confucian superior man.

It wasn’t always this crucial to have lineage records. In earlier Korean history, the census, aristocracy, civil examination and ancestor worsnip all existed, but they were much more free-form and Koreans had their own ways of doing things. However, Confucian influence grew continually from its introduction around 300 AD to its complete hold on society in the 1600s, and it gradually developed into a rigid and legalistic structure. As Confucianism grew stronger, the need for lineage records grew along with it.

It is not by accident that our hypothetical young man was a wealthy, educated property owner. Family records were always more important to the upper class than to the commoners. In fact, this clan consciousness originally was limited to only about ten percent of the population. For the other ninety percent, mostly peasants and farmers, family descent was not important; many of them did not even have a family name.6. 7 However, for those to whom it mattered, it mattered greatly.

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**CENSUS REGISTRATION**

Long before genealogy became important, the Korean government tallied its population. A researcher discovered a portion of a Korean census taken as early as 755 AD. It shows that, even back then, a census was taken every three years and required more than the usual vital statistics. Cattle, horses, mulberry trees and nut trees were all counted, apparently to pad the list of things that could be taxed.

Lineage records soon entered the picture, however. Later references to the census show the government’s interest in family as well as population. By early Koryo times (around 1, 000 AD), “society attached great importance to lineage background, and indeed aristocratic families were listed on separate census registers from those that recorded the commoner population.”9 As Confucian ideas took hold in the Yi dynasty (1392-1910), census registration gradually came to require that “lineage records, together with the usual vital statistics, be submitted by each household”10 People needed to know their ancestors in order to face the arrival of the government census officials.

**PROOF OF ARISTOCRATIC BIRTH**

Knowledge about one’s family was also important in the ruling circles because of the class system common in early Korean society. When the Confucian beliefs arrived from China and required all people to know and maintain their proper place in society, the Korean ruling circles found this easy to accept. Confucianism simply strengthened and organized the existing pattern.

Gradually, however, people in this hereditary ruling class (yangban, 양반) began to need more accurate knowledge of their lineage. It was crucial to the yangban gentlemen to establish and maintain their place in the “in” group, because members of this group enjoyed all political power, economic well- being, and social prestige. The chokpo developed as one clear way to record the lineage and accomplishments of these genuine, practicing yangban families.11

In the early days, this list of ancestors was written in brush and ink and kept in the house of each eldest son (changson, 장손). The changson was in charge of this scroll (ka-song, 가성), and he kept it in an honorable niche in his home; our Elder Sister in Seoul actually remembers such a niche in their North Korean ancestral home. The scroll recorded the preceeding five or six generations of ancestors with the highlights of their accomplishments. This was immediate and mobile proof of lineage, and in case of calamity the [page 14] changson protected this document, tied safely around his waist, to retain proof of his family’s status.12

**ACCESS TO CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS**

During the Silla dynasty (668-935 AD) the Korean ruling class had remained within the narrow grasp of three main families (Kim, Pak and Suk). When that dynasty fell in 935 AD, the new rulers attempted to shift the power base away from these hereditary families to men who could prove their ability to govern. Again, the teachings of Confucius fit right into the need.

Confucius believed that man is made perfect by learning, and in particular, by learning the moral teachings of Confucius. China developed a Civil Service Examination based on these teachings and thoughtful Koreans eventually urged their leaders to do the same. They borrowed the examination system from China in 958 AD and then, theoretically, anyone could take the exam and enter the power base of the country.

As Korea moved into the new Yi dynasty in 1395, however, the list of qualifications needed to sit for the exam became more and more restrictive.13 Natural selection, limited the exam to the wealthy, as only the wealthy could afford the time and money it took to have a son spend his life studying, and an imposed selection limited the exam to those with an impeccable list of “family’” as no son of a concubine, no illigitimate son, no one born below a certain rung of society could even sign up to take the exam.14

And so the exam, begun as a way to break the hold of heredity, gradually developed its own heredity. By the 1500s, every candidate was required to record at the head of the exam paper the names and ranks of his father, grandfather and great grandfather, and the name, title and clan seat of his maternal grandfather15 In addition, the candidate must prove that these ancestors were men of distinction and achievement if he himself was to take the government exam and remain in the circle of power and prestige. The chokpo became a ready reference for the names and distinctions of the family.

**ANCESTOR RITUALS**

Confucian ideas of government and education fit comfortably into the Korean life style, but the Confucian rules for family and private life met decades of resistance. When these ideas finally took hold, however, they brought the biggest changes and the most sweeping need for lineage records.

The new dynasty of 1395 was securely Confucian and the king dictated [page 15] ancestor worship into law in 1400. Koreans had many ways to show respect for their families, but the new rules were much more specific, and not always comfortable.

Confucius taught that deceased relatives needed continued support from their descendants, and emphasized proper worship before the ancestral tablets. That apparently was not a problem, but the rites also brought a new element — the importance of the male sons.16 The rules said that the rites could be offered only by the ancestor’s qualified heir, and “qualified” meant sons, preferably only the first son. Now Korean custom of the times gave mothers, fathers, sons and daughters all equal importance in family affairs, and so for many years people simply rotated the rites among all family members, showing a kind of passive resistance to the new male-only laws. This worked for about a hundred and fifty years, but by 1555 people began to be arrested if they failed to conform. As necessity became a way of life, it began to show in the lineage records. A daughter was pushed to the end of the list and registered only by her husband’s name. Lineage records became a list of the family’s sons.

In addition, the new rules required that upper class families offer the rites to four generations of ancestors, and even commoners were told to join in with rites to at least one generation, so now those lineage records took on increased importance. They became a necessity, not just for the inner circles or the exam seekers, but for every family. People scrambled to verify generations of their families. The 1500s show a major jump in the publication of genealogies and by the 1700s and 1800s nearly everyone was documenting the importance of his family. The proper recording of ancestors became a national pastime.

**FACT OR FANCY—IS THE CHOKPO RELIABLE?**

People of any age go along complacently following tradition until some outside event disrupts their comfortable pattern of life. These disruptions become markers of what is important to them and provide for us who follow some clues to understanding the changes. Each of our steps backward in time is marked by one of these disruptions.

**RELIABILITY BACK TO 1500 — THE NEED TO CLARIFY AND STABILIZE RECORDS**

During the 1590s a catastrophe occurred that upset and then invigorated [page 16] the status quo. At the end of the 1500s the Japanese invaded Korea under their leader, Hideyoshi. Everything was ruined—houses, palaces, crops and people, and in the chaos nearly all government records and many lineage records were lost or destroyed.

Before this catastrophe, it had been common for a family to consult a variety of official records in order to reinforce the clan’s own family records. When peace returned in the mid 1600s, people scrambled to prove their family lines by the use of any public records they could find.17 They reorganized, clarified and solidified records for the entire clan and by the 1700s began publishing the registers as regular books. Buddhist monks made money for their monasteries by writing multiple copies of the books for private families.18 The chokpo tradition had taken a firm hold.

Professor Edward Wagner of Harvard believes that during this time the compilation process adhered to the most rigid standards of fidelity. The values shared by all yangban clans demanded integrity. These values came from the Confucian ideology with its emphasis on the ‘princely man, ‘ the patriarchal family unit, and the overriding importance of maintaining unbroken the lines of ritual (chesa, 제사) descent. “Deliberate falsification of family records was, I feel sure, unthinkable to those who took upon themselves the often awesome burden of compiling and publishing a chokpo.”19

The chokpo may fail to mention real accomplish that today would be considered historically valuable because its primary mission is simply the recording of lineage sequences. Wagner argues that the reliability of a chokpo may be gauged as much by this information that it does not offer as by the information it does. Page after page goes by filled with a dreary list of names and dates with occasional brief mention of a life marked by some modest accomplishment. “There are scores of thousands of names recorded in a good-sized chokpo, but the number for whom even the meanest achievement is claimed is reassuringly small. In this respect, I believe, the chokpo is a faithful mirror of life.”20

**RELIABILITY BACK TO 1100 CONTINUOUS RECORDS**

Prof. Wagner speculates that “at some point in Koryo dynasty time, perhaps during the 1100 or 1200s, the chokpo begins its continuous lineage listing with a genuinely historical first ancestor.”21 Why the twelfth century?

Hundreds of years before the twelfth century, as we have seen, Koreans were reading and writing in a very civilized manner. There were volumes of histories and geographies, chronicles and biographies, but not many of these [page 17] early works survivea.22 “A large number of historical records... were destroyed in holocausts and other catastrophies when the dynasties fell into ashes ... Detailed records must have been in existence, but most were lost in war, fire, and turmoil.”23

Beginning with the 1100 and 1200s, however, records become increasingly plentiful and complete. Wagner gives as an example, the Kim clan of Kyongju, whose founding ancestor was a semi legendary character in AD 65 but whose seventh generation descendant was a king of Silla. Now those kings are well known, yet the compilers of the Official Chokpo in 1784 believed that existing records could not establish a conclusive link between the founding ancestor and the Silla king. To show their uncertainty, they began renumbering their descent at a point where it could be verified — from a Koryo official in the 1100s.

Our Kang chokpo, first published in 1710, follows that same pattern—renumbering starting at a date estimated to be 1190—but a different explanation is given. Ancestor Number One, “Founding Ancestor, “ has a birth date tentatively set around 700 AD. Ancestor Number Fourteen, “Intermediate Ancestor, “ has a reasonably probable birthdate of around 1190, yet with him the numbering begins all over again with another number one. The two systems continue simultaneously throughout the rest of the book. Our family members do not question this dual numbering system, accepting the explana- tion given in the chokpo. “(He) has the honor of being called the Intermediate Founder of the clan because the home he established on his royal land-grant gradually developed into the ancestral seat and the ancestral graves became concentrated there.”24

So now we have two possibilities, and quite likely both are correct and interwoven. Perhaps renumbering begins at the point where it could be verified, or perhaps an ancestor is renumbered because he is the one who received the land grant and established a permanent clan home. In any case, both ideas coincide with the Confucian lineage consciousness that grew steadily more important during the 13th and 14th centuries.

**RELIABILITY BACK TO 700 AD. — LEGEND AND HISTORY, A TWISTED CABLE**

Pushing back further in time, we realize that history at some point fades into the mists of legend, or, just as likely, legend may be masking actual history. In our Kang chokpo we have arrived back at that first entry, the startling story of the nursemaid tigers. “(Kang) Hogyong was born in Kyong [page 18] Yang village... his parents returned and found a pair of white tigers taking good care of the baby.”

What should we make of this? Imaginative nonsense? Worthless? Dr. Rogers of the University of California, Berkeley25 gives some clues into a famous family of this period, and by a twist of fate, into our own family as well. Again it appears that an outside threat disturbed the complacency of the time and again it is the twelfth century that is the significant starting point for our understanding.

**A KING’S DILEMMA**

In the years 1146 through 1170 there was a king named Uijong (의정) whose rule was a little shaky. International upheavals were taking place on the continent to the north, and witnin the peninsula two factions were pulling against each other in his government. A military group was anxious to oppose the Jurchen to the north and expand in that direction, and another group, content to remain at home, still felt a kinship with the peaceful, scholarly days of the Silla rulers. Our king supported this latter group and searched for ways to enhance their position.

He set out to demonstrate the truthfulness and sacredness of his own lineage, reminding people that the dynasty had been founded by a man strong in the Silla tradition, with ancestors who walked with the very gods themselves.

**THE ROYAL ANCESTORS**

To do this, he collected history of the dynasty’s founder, Wang-gon (왕건). His book begins with a quote from the ‘‘Veritable Records of T’aejo” (Wang-gon’s official name) which states that in 919 Wang-gon honored three generations of his ancestors with posthmous titles. Immediately following this entry is a long quotation from a work by a man named Kim Kwanui (김관의) who was active during the reign of our King Uijong. Kim, saying that he based his work on privately preserved writings., supplies three earlier generations to Wang-gon’s lineage, taking it back six generations to what must have been the early 700s.

When he reaches ancestor number one, he begins, ‘There was a man named Hogyong (호경) who claiming to be songgol (성골)...”26 and with a jolt we realize that in this official history we are suddenly reading about Hogyong, the very same person listed as the founding father of our Kang family chokpo. [page 19]

How can this be? It is indeed a twist of fate that as this twelfth century King Uijong gathered and preserved the stories of Wang-gon’s ancestors, he inadvertently did the same for us. There is a point in Wang-gon’s lineage where it inexplicably shifts to the mother, and at this point it becomes our lineage also. Instead of listing Wang-gon’s great grandfather, it lists his great grandmother. We will not concern ourselves with that scholastic puzzle, but rather with the help it turns out to be for us. The grandmother mentioned was a Kang, and so the King’s three earliest ancestors are also our three earliest ancestors, and our ancestor number seven is a cousin to the Wang-gon, the King’s ancestor number seven. Thus the entries that we have in our Kang chokpo for ancestors one, two, three and four are echoed and extended in the official genealogies (Koryosa) of Wang-gon.

**FACT OR FANCY—DOES IT MATTER?**

This six generation lineage recorded for Wang-gon was variously challenged and accepted, believed, ignored and revised as different Korean scholars examined it. In 1451 the reigning king gave instructions to prepare an Official History of the Koryo Dynasty (Koryosa, 고려 사). The compilers, proper Confucian historians, accepted the three immediate ancestors (“In the present instance we take the Veritable Records’ notice of the posthmous appointment of the Three Generations as the proper version”)27 and scoffed at the earlier three, calling them “spurious interpolation.”28 Nevertheless they kept these three “substandard” generations at the head of their official dynastic history—spurious perhaps, but also important enough to retain.

The truth of the matter may be at either of these extremes or somewhere in between. “The ancestor stories should not be taken too seriously as documentation for ninth and tenth century relatives, “29 but at the same time, even as legend they need not be dismissed. Rogers30 puts these early entries into perspective. Legend is not myth. “Legend... is associated with specific identifiable localities, and is generated by historical personages and the important

events in which they played a role. Legend brings us into the shadowy part of history where fact is overlaid and fleshed out with fantasy in a way that is by no means haphazard.”

Our Hogyong legend deals with people who may well have been real. The embellishments were for a purpose. The ancestors, as proof of their sig- nincance, required an intimate experience with the sacred, and the sacred throughout the Koryo period was the native shamanistic tradition, where [page 20] tigers were the messengers sent direct from the spirit world. The tigers found caring for the infant, Hogyong, came as proof that the gods considered the baby to be extraordinary, and as a sign that someday he would become a great person.

**FACING THE TIGERS — SOME CONCLUSIONS**

In a search to understand times long gone, possibilities abound and definitive answers are rarely availaoie. The more pieces of the puzzle one has, the more clear the picture. Yet turning over pieces of the puzzle can often produce questions rather than answers. In the beginning, while translating our ancestors’ stories, we were brought up short by a pair of tigers lurking in the family tree. Shock. Dismay. A definite quandary. Looking for reality, we bumped face to face with legend, To face the tigers meant facing ancient superstition, modern embarrassment.

We could not honestly hide the tigers nor comfortably ignore them, and we certainly coula not explain them. So we set them aside and searched for the meaning of the chokpo一the reasons, the process, the history—and found ourselves back again, looking at the tigers.

To the ancients, the tiger messengers said, “Sit up, take notice. This person is important.”

Ana in hindsight, the tigers, appearance did the same for us. It shocked us into reflection and sent us on the search for what was known and not known of the book in which they lived. Unwittingly the tigers projected their message to us, “Stop. Take notice. This book, this piece of history, has worth.”

The work done by so many family members across hundreds of years of time should not be relegated to the dusty library shelves simply because it is no longer a ritual necessity. The chokpo remains an asset to culture, a window into history, and a source of both personal and family identity. It is intriguing to read of government officials, noblemen, and queens, but in every chokpo, ninety percent of the entries are simple nobodies. Far from devaluing the lists, it links them even more closely with the nobodies of today.

“The humbling realization...that each of us is merely a link in a chain. We may someday be forgotten, but the contribution we made to the chain, however slight, will always be there, and as long as the chain exists, a piece of us will exist, too.” (unknown)

[page 21]

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7. Shin, Kyu-Ho, editor. Interview.

8. Lee, Ki-baik. p. 80.

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10. Wagner, Edward, p. 143.

11. Ibid. p. 142.

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14. Lee, Peter, p. 180.

15. Ibid. p. 43.

16. Haboush, JaHyun. “The Confucianization of Korean Society, “ in Confucian Heritage and its Modern Adaptation. Edited by Gilbert Rozman, Princeton University Press, 1991. p. 104.

17. Wagner, Edward, p. 143.

18. Shin, Kyu-Ho, editor. Interview.

19. Wagner, Edward, p. 143,

20. Ibid. p. 144.

21. Ibid. p. 145.

22. Note: Two significant works, incorporating much of the more ancient writings, were written during this period. In 1145, Kim Pu Sik included passages from older works in his “History of the Three Kingdoms”(Samguk Sagi) and in approximately 1285 more of their contents went into Iryon’s “Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms” (Samguk Yusa).

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26. Ibid. p. 5.

27. Ibid. p. 11.

28. Ibid. p. 11.

29. Ibid p. 51.

30. Ibid. v. 14. [page 23]