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THE PENINSULA

Remembering David I. Steinberg

Published December 10, 2024

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Category: [Uncategorized](#)



Asia specialist [David I. Steinberg](#) passed away on December 5, 2024, at the age of 96. David had deep roots in the DC-based community of Asianists with the Mansfield Center for Pacific Affairs and at Georgetown University. David's wide-ranging responsibilities included over 25 years of service on the board of the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI) from 1993 to 2018.

Trained in Chinese studies at Dartmouth College, Harvard University, and SOAS University of London in the 1950s, David lived and worked on the ground with The Asia Foundation in both Myanmar (1958-1962) and South Korea (1963-1968 and 1994-1998), where he met and married his wife, Ann Myungsook Lee, during his first tour in Korea.

Following his return to Washington, DC, David consulted for almost two decades during the 1970s and 1980s with the U.S. Agency for International Development, taught at Georgetown University for almost two decades in the 1990s and 2000s, and maintained a vast network of contacts through regular visits to both Myanmar and South Korea throughout his professional career. David was the author of 15 books and monographs and over 150 articles or chapters on politics and development in Asia, drawing on his extensive research and lived experience, in addition to providing his own insights on Korea's culture and development in a regular *Korea Times* column published in the 1990s called [Stone Mirror](#).

I first met David when I moved to Washington in the mid-1990s. Always avuncular, innately curious, and a consummate networker, David quickly became a mentor to me and anyone else in the Korea-watching community in DC. Only later did I realize that in befriending young and aspiring Korea watchers in DC, David was simply applying the same skills in Washington that had enabled him to be successful in identifying and developing talent and promoting social development and good governance in Myanmar and South Korea.

I saw the depth and breadth of David's Korea network when I followed him to South Korea in the early 2000s as The Asia Foundation's Korea representative. David would stop by the Asia Foundation's Korea office periodically as part of his frequent tours to Asia, provide ideas and historical context, and explain to us what was really going on in the country beyond the newspaper headlines following a few meals and drinks with old friends he had made over decades. Those friends were elites from across South Korea's political and social spectrum.

I recall a particularly generous introduction that David made on my behalf when I led preparations to commemorate The Asia Foundation's 50th anniversary of the establishment of its office in Seoul in 2004. David introduced me to the internationally recognized artist Lee Dae-won, who had received grants early in his career from The Asia Foundation as part of its post-Korean War support for social development in the 1950s and whose art adorns many Korean government buildings today, including work displayed at the Korean Ambassador's residence in Washington, DC.

David suggested to me that Lee might be willing to provide a limited-edition print of one of his paintings in commemoration of The Asia Foundation's 50th anniversary in South Korea. I was nervous about making such a request to someone upon my first meeting and was thrilled that he expressed his willingness to make such a contribution during our meeting at his studio. What I did not know until later was that David and Lee were old drinking buddies who had been meeting at the Josun Hotel bar for decades. This was classic David Steinberg: present in the moment, constructive and effective, and giving the spotlight to others. After all, in both Myanmar and South Korea, he was not only a witness to history but also tried to be a constructive influence on it.

With the passing of David Steinberg, South Koreans have lost a great friend, supporter, and cheerleader for South Korea's rapid development and democratization. He exemplified the qualities that he identified during The Asia Foundation Korea office's anniversary commemoration as its distinctive approach to supporting South Korea's political and economic development based on "mutual respect, empathy, consideration, and commitment." I believe David exemplified that approach, and it is rightfully part of his legacy.

Scott Snyder is President & CEO at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI). The views expressed are the author's alone.

Photo from [the Asia Foundation](#).

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