CENTRE FOR KOREAN RESEARCH

Friday 9 October

3:30 – 5:00pm

C.K. Choi Building Conference Room #120
1855 West Mall

Evaluating the Silk Letter of Hwang Sayŏng;
A defense of human rights or a betrayal of the nation?

By Professor Don Baker (University of British Columbia)

In 1801, in the middle of a bloody persecution of Korea’s fledgling Roman Catholic community, one member of that community, a young yangban named Hwang Sayŏng, picked up a brush and wrote a letter on a piece of silk to the French Catholic bishop in Beijing. In that letter, Hwang asked for the bishop to either arrange for the French fleet to sail to Korea and force the Korean government to stop persecuting Catholics or convince the Manchu rulers of China to assume direct rule over the Korean peninsula (he assumed that the religious freedom he believed Catholics enjoyed in China would then be extended to Korea). In my talk I will provide an overview of Hwang’s letter, why he wrote it, what happened when that letter was intercepted, and how Hwang and his letter are viewed by Koreans, both Catholic and non-Catholic, today.

Don Baker is a professor in UBC’s Asian Studies department. He teaches courses on Korean history and religion, as well as Asia in general. His research has focused on pre-modern cultural history, particularly the writings of Tasan Chŏng Yagyŏng (1762-1836). He has also published articles on the history of Chinese medicine in Korea, the role of the Healing Buddha in Korean Buddhism, the various ways the Kwangju Uprising of 1980 has been interpreted, and the history of the Vancouver Korean community. His most recent book is Korean Spirituality (University of Hawaii Press, 2008).