

The Development of Modernizational Factors

Under the Latter Part of the Choson Dynasty

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I. THE LAND CONTROL AND OWNERSHIP UNDER THE LATTER PART OF THE CHOSON DYNASTY

The feudalistic society of the Choson Dynasty underwent several new developments in the field of land control following the Japanese invasion 1592-8. The emergence of new landowner groups was one, and the reduction of peasantry to tenantry another. A phenomena similar to the one which occurred in the last phase of the Koryo Dynasty could have been development but it was prevented by a sweeping land reform program by King *Taejo* of the new kingdom.

There were two groups of landowners: the bureaucratic and the rural. On the hand, many ruling feudalists including government bureaucrats, royal families and meritorious subjects, who had been granted the hereditary right to collect and taxes from the land allocated for them, began to claim title to it—the transition from tax collectors to private landowners. On the other hand, some fortunate peasants were able to enlarge their acreage for their own possession.

But the majority of the peasantry was transformed into mere tenant peasants of their new masters.

1. The Growth of Bureaucratic Landowners

The enactment of *Kwajon pop* (land reform program) was primarily aimed at preventing the development of the private ownership of land. Ironically enough, however, the program facilitated the expansion of land privately owned by feudal bureaucrats as well as rural peasants.

For example, the law provided for the hereditary right to collect tax from such lands as *Kwajon* and *Kongshinjon* and for collection of a private land tax from those who were granted the aforementioned land. It is apparent that two clauses prompted private land ownerships and drove the peasant to become tenants who had to pay a ground-rent to the newly emerged landowners instead of a landtax to the state.

The government's encouragement to reclaim wild land also expedited an increase in private land. Primarily adopted to remedy the shortage of land for distribution to newly appointed government officials and meritorious subjects, they abused this policy to enlarge the acreage of their private land. They either occupied deserted land or mobilized peasants to reclaim wild land which they would not turn over to the state. In most cases, such land was rented to peasants.

The seven-year war with Japan brought new problems and developments. Most of the land registers were burnt or destroyed and many peasants were conscripted and then declared dead or missing during the war. As a result a large of farmland was abandoned and went without cultivation for years. According to a survey conducted in 1611, or the 3rd year of Prince *Kwanghai*, the total acreage was reduced from the prewar level of 1,708,000 *kyol* to 541,000 *kyol*.¹⁾

It was not only the feudal bureaucrats but also some of the royal families who took advantage of of situation and annexed abandoned land and even took by force land that was being cultivated by peasants. The most popular method was merely to deceive the government with a false report that they had reclaimed or spotted abandoned land.

Finally, low-ranking government, bureaucrat, especially those who were appointed to local posts, joined the "private land increase movement." At first they

1) *Chungbo Munhon Bigo*, vol. 148, Chanbugo 8, Chose (Taxation) Choi Hochin: *An Outline of Korean Economic History*, 1962, p. 280, Cho Ki-Jun: *The Korean Economic History*, 1912, p. 193. Seoul.

mobilized peasants to reclaim wild land to enlarge the acreage of the *Kwantunjon* or office land. But most of the office land was soon made private by local officials.

2. The Growth of the Peasant-originated Landowners

Another group of landowners began to increase, and they arose from among the peasants themselves. Following the Japanese invasion the acreage of farmland had been reduced to one-third. For this reason the government promulgated a new law encouraging reclamation of wild land and cultivation of land abandoned during the war. The new policy, which was applied to ruling feudalists as well as peasants, promised such privileges as an exemption from taxes for three years and a guarantee of the cultivating right for whoever reclaimed or recultivated. The recultivator was supposed to pay one-third of the crops as rent to the original cultivator when and if the latter made his appearance.¹⁾

This was the first official recognition of ground-rent and the beginning of the development of private land ownership and tenancy. Thus some of the peasants could accumulate money to buy more land while others had to lose their land become tenant peasants. At the same time, some merchants and handicraftsmen who had enough money to buy land also became landowners.

The development of an exchange economy and the wide circulation of coins prompted sales of farmland.²⁾ The richer farmers as well as the merchants or handicraftsmen would each attempt to enlarge their acreage by lending money to poorer peasants at usurious rates called *Kapni*.³⁾ Those who failed to pay back their debts had no choice but to sell their land and become tenant peasants.⁴⁾

One interesting and significant phenomenon was the gradual deterioration of the traditional order of social status which forced some impoverished men of the *Yangban* classes to become tenant peasants, a situation which their ancestors would have never tolerated.⁵⁾

1) *Taejon Haetong*, Vol. 2, Hojon, Suse (Revised Basic Code, Home Affairs, Collection of tax).

2) Kim Yong-Sup, *Yangan Yongu* (The Study of Land Survey under the Choson Dynasty), Hanguk Shakhoe (The Korean Historical Association), *Sahak Yongu* (The Study of History), nos. 16-17.

3) *Taejon Haetong*, Vol. 2, Hojon, Chingchae (Basic code, for State Government, Home Affairs, Collection of debt). The last and largest Compilation of laws and regulations enacted and enforced during the Choson Dynasty. Compiled by Cho Du-Sun and other scholars by the order of king Kojong in 1865. The *Kyongguk Taejon* and *Taejon Tongpyon* were included in this work.

4) Kim Yong-Sup, *Yangan ui Yongu*, nos. 16-17,

5) *Ibid.*

Two ways were adopted to determine tenant-rent. One was the fixed rent system called *Tojipop* in which the rate was fixed in advance and the tenant was supposed to pay the rent regardless of the crop. Another method was the proportion system called *Tajopop* in which the tenant was required to pay a certain proportion of the crop as rent. The development of productivity made the latter more prevalent after the latter part of the 17th century.¹⁾

The cancellation or renewal of tenancy was subject to the arbitrary decision of landowners.²⁾ Seed, tools and oxen were often lent to tenant peasants from whom the landowners would collect fees at the harvest time. In addition to the rents and fees, landowners also demanded extra labor contributions from tenants.

The development of private land ownership and tenancy among the peasants was one of the most significant development in the farm economy during the latter part of period under discussion and it may be regarded as the origin of the modern economic structure of the rural communities.

II. THE HANDICRAFT INDUSTRY DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE CHOSON DYNASTY

1. The Collapse of the Government Handicraft and the Growth of the Private Handicraft Industry

After the turn of 17th century following the Japanese invasion the private handicraft industry began to surpass the level of the government industry in both its output and technical skill. This in turn gave rise to new developments in the division of labor and management in the handicraft industry.

The progress of the private industry was most eloquently dramatized by the practical abolishment of the registration system for government craftsmen and by the government's initiative in hiring private craftsmen on a wage basis. All government craftsmen had earlier been required to register with various government offices in order to insure effective government control of them.

According to the *Taejon Tongpyon* (legal codes) promulgated in 1785 or the 9th year of King *Chonjo*, 30 metropolitan craftsmen were dismissed for

1) *Pibyonsa Dungenok*, vol.1, 106 King *Yongjo*, June 26th 16th year: The Records of the Military Office. It contains the daily accounts of the discussions and activities at the Military Office during the Choson Dynasty. However, the existing version includes only the diaries of the period 1617 (the 9th year of Prince *Kwanghae*) to 1892 (the 29th year of King *Kojong*).

2) *Chosen Minsei Siryo*, Moku Min Hen,

unspecified reasons while 242 others deserted their work-shops altogether,¹⁾ Soon the provincial craftsmen followed suit.

The practical nullification of the regulations increased the number of skilled private craftsmen and in turn forced the government to hire them in order to fulfill government orders.²⁾ The government could no longer depend on public work or labor obligations imposed on government craftsmen. The government's hiring of private craftsmen on wage basis was the origin of a modern wage labor system.

What, then, caused the gradual decline of the government handicraft industry?

(1) The government could not give sufficient payment to its craftsmen because of the financial difficulties which had been aggravated by the war against invading troops from Japan.³⁾ The *Chungjong Sillok* or the court annals of the king, recorded that all commoner craftsmen walked out in protest to low payment.

(2) The high-ranking government bureaucrats often imposed extra works on government craftsmen for their personal benefit. Sometimes they even forcibly made them become their personal servants. These irregularities developed to such an extent as to drive all craftsmen to leave their post.⁴⁾

(3) The retrogression of the technical skill of the government craftsmen prevented the government industry from making any further progress. The keen competition among the craftsmen for survival and the monopoly of certain specialties was attributable to the retrogression of skill. It must be pointed out there was no similar system of apprenticeship as there was in the Western societies in which warm human relationships and technical and business cooperation could develop between masters and apprentices. For this reason certain types of specialized skills were completely discontinued.⁵⁾

(4) The progress of the money or the exchange economy contributed to collapse of the government industry. After the middle of the 17th century minted coins, called *Sangpyong Tongbo*, began to be circulated among the general public, especially merchants. The development of domestic and international commerce must have convinced the government that it would

1) *Taejon Tongpyon*, Kongjon, vol. 6, (metropolitan craftsmen): An enlarged book of the *Kyonguk Taejon*. All of the royal decrees and current regulations were added to the original codes. Compiled by Kim Chi-In by the order of King *Chungjo* in 1784.

2) *Ibid.*, vol. 6, Kongjon (provincial craftsmen)

3) *Chungjong Sillok*, vol. 84, April, 32nd Year.

4) *Ibid.*, vol. 88, August, 32nd Year.

5) *Ibid.*, vol. 84, April, 32nd Year.

be easier and cheaper to procure its industrial supplies in the markets rather than to reconstruct its own industry which was suffering from low productivity. Thus common craftsmen began to leave the government *en masse* to join the more profitable private industry.

2. The Development of Labor Organization and Industrial Management

The division of labor or specialization is generally regarded as an indicator of progress in solid economic development. The division of labor developed further in the latter part of the Choson Dynasty than in any previous period. For example, the production of arrowheads was specialized into four groups of specialists: three blacksmiths, six assistants, six soakers and six refiners.¹⁾ Dyers were also divided into various groups according to the colors in which they were specialized as, for example, the red dyer, the yellow dyer or the purple dyer. In short, the specialization of labor was a general phenomenon in the period under discussion when the production of commodities was greatly enhanced by the development of money and an exchange economy. The division of labor in turn indicated the origin of the manufacturing (Manufaktur) system which preceded the factory system in the process of the development of modern industry.

The Craftsmen's Guild: The decline of the government industry encouraged the craftsmen to organize guilds in order to insure a monopoly in the production and sale of handicraft commodities. It is presumed that the formation of guilds was initiated by former government craftsmen who no longer enjoyed the aegis of the government and had to unite to protect their interest by themselves.

It is probable that the guilds were developed in the mutual interests of both the government and the craftsmen who were granted exclusive privileges in the *Yugui-chon*, or the six official markets which were developed during the period under discussion. So far no definite material concerning the formation of craftsmen's guilds have been discovered, except for the Japanese version of the *Kankoku Shi* (originally "the Description of Korea" in Russian) published in 1905.²⁾

This book alleges that the guilds were organized primarily to insure a united defense against oppression by the state and to promote their common interests as well as to exercise an industrial police authority. If this is true, it is evidence

1) *Yukchon Chorye*, vol. 3, Hojon, Pangryo (Legal Provisions for the Six Ministries, Home Affairs): Regulations for the 6 ministries enacted and enforced during the last phase of the Choson Dynasty. The work contains what was not included in the Taejon Hoetong compiled and published by Cho Tu-Su by the order of King *Kojong* in 1865.

2) Noshomusho (trans.) *Kankoku Shi* (The Description of Korea), 1905, Tokyo, p.64.

that the social consciousness and the ability of self-government among the handicraftsmen had developed to an extent which enhanced the development of the private handicraft industry in the latter part of the Choson Dynasty.

The Putting-out System: The putting-out system was developed between the metropolitan merchants and local craftsmen in the latter part of the 18th century. The local craftsmen, mostly blacksmiths, had earlier attempted to sell their ironworks in the metropolitan markets where only authorized merchants were allowed. Naturally the latter blocked the intrusion of local products into their exclusive domain. Left with no other choice, the local craftsmen proposed a compromise which split the profit from the sale of their commodities with the metropolitan merchants.¹⁾ This was the beginning of the system and later the *Seoul* merchants began to provide capital to the local craftsmen.

The division of labor system, the formation of craftsmen's guilds and the putting-out system developed in the latter part of the Choson Dynasty and these are some of the factors necessary to modernize the industrial structure. It may be supposed that the origin of the manufacturing (Manufaktur) system was found in the fields of pottery, brassware and paper for which popular demand was very great.²⁾ This suggests that the industries in Korea could have been modernized without the foreign intrusion or, to be more accurate, the domination of Japanese colonialism.

III. THE EXCHANGE ECONOMY UNDER THE CHOSON DYNASTY

A significant development was made in the field of international and domestic trade. The *Yugui-Chon* or the six big stores prospered in the capital, and the number of local markets increased to as many as 1,000.³⁾ A nationwide organization of peddlers and big market stores developed in the major cities and towns of the rural provinces.⁴⁾ Although official trade with foreign countries was a monopoly of the state, private trade was also enhanced through the trade centers along the northern frontiers. The development in the exchange economy and the handicraft industry led to the emergence of the manufacturing system, the beginning of the modern industry.

1) *Pibyonsa Tungnok*, vol. 173, January 25, 12th year, King *Chongjo*

2) Kim Yong-Ho; *Ansong-Yugie kwanhan Yongu* (The Studies on the Brassware Industry at Ansong), *The Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. VIII, No. 4, 1966. Seoul.

3) So Yu-Ku, *Yimwon 16 Ji*, Yekyuji, vol. 4. Palyok Changsi (The Local Markets in Eight Provinces).

4) Choi Hochin, *Kindai Chosen Keizai Shi* (The Recent Economic History of Korea) 1942, p. 19, Tokyo.

1. The Domestic Commerce

The Kyong-Shi-Chon: The first metropolitan marketstores or the *Kyong-Shi-Chon* were built in 1399, the first year of King *ChungJong*, in *Han Yang* (presently Seoul), the capital of the new kingdom. The area of the new marketplace was 800 *kan* or roughly the 28,800 square feet. The government rented spaces to merchants for market taxes called *KongNang-Se*. As in the *Koryo* period a special market office called the *Kyong-Shi-So* was established to handle market affairs.

Some Merchant were designated by the government to fulfill *Kuk-Yok* or national duty which meant their becoming government suppliers. They were authorized to purchase government supplies and dispose government surpluses or imports. The share of the national duty varied from ten to one per cent according to the type and quantity of commodities handled by the merchants.

Most prosperous and famous were the *Yugui-Chon* or the six big dealers who were granted the largest share of the national duty:¹⁾ 10% for the *Sunjon* to deal silk fabrics; 9% for the *Myonpojon* or cotton cloth dealer; 8% for the *Myonjujon* or the silk cloth dealer and the *Umuljon* or the fish dealer; 7% for the *Jijon* or the paper dealer and 6% for the *Jupojon* or the ramie cloth dealer. In addition to the big six, a total of 31 other stores existed in metropolitan market with a share 6% each. Other petty dealers were also entrusted with part of the national duty by the big six.²⁾

The big six were granted various types of privileges including the so-called *Nanjon Kwon* or the exclusive police power to detect the *Nanjon* who were the unauthorized dealers or out laws. The big six were empowered with the authority to confiscate the commodities in the hands of unauthorized dealers and, if deemed necessary, to impose corporal punishment on them.

The *Nanjon-Kwon* may be compared with the merchant guild developed during the medieval period of the European history. However, a significant difference is found in the fact that European merchants could develop their guilds in an attempt to eliminate the power of the manor while the Korean merchants in the period relied heavily on the aegis of the government. Nevertheless, both had the common objective of insuring a monopoly in the sale of

1) Yu Kyo-Song, *Seoul Yugui-Chon Yongu* (A Study on the *Yugui-Chon* in Seoul), *Yoksa Hakbo* (The Journal of History), vol. 1, *Yoksa Hakhoe* (The Historical Association).

2) *Mangi Yoram*, Jaeyong Pyon 5, *Kak-Chon*. *Magi Yoram: Policy Recommendations for Kings on financial and military affairs*. Compiled by Shim Sang-Kyu and So Yong-Bo in 1809, the 9th year of King *Sunjo*.

merchandise.

It must be pointed out that the privilege was not necessarily granted in reward for the services rendered by the merchants as government suppliers. The government gave them these special favors because it had to rely on them for the disposal of its surpluses of taxes and tributes as well as imported commodities.

In short, the police power granted to the big six was in the mutual interest of the two. For this reason, the relationship between the two was one of very close cooperation. Furthermore, the government took numerous measures to encourage the development and protect the interests of the *Yugui-Chon*. In fact King *Honjong* loaned 2,000 *nyang* of coint to the silk fabric dealers after their stores were destroyed by the fire in 1844. King *Choljong* took similar action when he lent 10,000 *nyang* to cotton cloth and other dealers in 1854.¹⁾

The Hyang-Shi (Local Market): At first the government adopted rather negative and quite often suppressive policies toward the local markets, mainly because it did not see any profitable advantage to be gained from promoting local markets. However, after the turn of the 18th century the suppressive measures lifted and more than 1,000 local markets were recorded.

The local markets were opened every other five days so that the *Pobusang* or the roaming merchants could travel from one market to another. Foodstuffs, clothings, clothings, ceramics, domestic animals, and even farming tools were traded. The roaming merchants (peddlers) organized a nationwide guild in order to promote mutual cooperation and prosperity.

More significant was the emergence of the *Kaekchu* or settled merchants in major local cities and towns. They usually ran inns and restaurants and at the same time engaged in consignment, storage, transport and financing. They also maintained largestores and warehouses and evolved into wholesale dealers as well as money lenders.²⁾ They could accumulate large sum of commercial capital. They even acted as middlemen between domestic and foreign merchants after Korea opened ports as *Pusan* and *Inchon* to foreigners. They also organized the *Kaekchu-hoi* or the merchant association and the *Pakmul-kye*, a mutual financing association, in order to promote their mutual interests cooperation. In such

1) Chungbo (enlarged and revised) Munhon Pigo, vol. 163, Sijok Ko, 1: The historical records of the institutions, politics, economy, social life and arts of Korea throughout its history from the ancient times to the end of the Choson Dynasty. It was first compiled in 1770, the 46th year of King Yongjo and later revised and enlarged and published in 1908 by the order of King *Kojong* under the title of *Chungbo Munhon Pigo*.

2) Choi Hochin, Kindai chosen Keizai Shi (The Recent Economic History of Korea), 1942, p. 56, Tokyo.

big cities as *Taegu*, *Chungju*, and *Kongju* annual markets of specialties were opened and permanent stores developed.

2. International Trade

Choson's trade with *Ming* was also a government monopoly and was carried out in the form of tribute. The Korean government sent *Ming* handicraft products, gold and silver works and specialties collected through the official market stores in the capital. In turn Korea received from China silk fabrics of high quality, dye, medicine, copper, sulphur and books.

After the turn of the 16th century trade other than tribute developed through international market centers established along the Korea Manchurian border. In 1628 an international market was opened at *Horyong*, *Hamkyung-Do*, where merchants from various parts of Manchuria came to trade with Korean merchants. They brought written certificates of authorization from the Chinese government with them and were permitted to trade only once in a year. Later the international trade was increased to twice per year. *Kyungwun* was also opened to the Chinese merchants at the request of the government of *Ch'ing*.¹⁾ Animal skins were the prime specialties that the foreign traders brought with them while they took oxen, ploughs, pots and salt from their Korean counterparts.

In 1646 *Chungkang* was added to the international trade centers. At first the transactions were made on the *Nanji* Island in the *Yalu* River and only government agents were permitted to participate. However, civilian merchants also were allowed to take part in later years.

One of the favorite products in the trade with *Ch'ing* was ginseng. At first no merchants were allowed to accompany the official envoy. But after the middle of the 17th century they were allowed and *Chamen*, an inland town in Manchuria, became the trade center for both Korean and Manchu merchants. Korea's ginseng, silk materials, gold and silver works and ramie cloths were exchanged for Manchu's colored silk fabrics, medicine, jewels and Chinese books.

The trade with Japan was rather active from the beginning of the *Choson* Dynasty except for a brief discontinuation due to the Japanese invasion. The feudal lords of *Tsushima* Island played the role of the middleman between Korea and the *Tokukawa Shogunate* in Japan. The Japanese government would send annual tribute ships to the court of *Choson*, which constituted the main

1) *Sok Taejon*, vol. 6, Hyongjon, Kumje.

Sok Taejon: The revised and enlarged version of the *Kyongguk Taejon* completed in 1746, the 22nd year of King *Yongjo*.

trade between the two countries. Although the number of the tribute vessels was considerably restricted after 1635, the 13th year of King *Injo*, the volume of trade was rather enormous because of an impressive degree of smuggling. Korea imported copper, sulphur and spices from Japan and exported cotton cloths, rice and ginseng to her. A Japanese trade mission was all owed to stay at *Choryang* near *Pusan*. The rice and cotton cloth used to be collected from the peasants.

3. The Money Economy

For the first two centuries of the Choson period the circulation of minted coins was rare. Rice and cloth remained the primary means of exchange.¹⁾ Several attempts by the government to increase use of metal coins met with negative response from the people.

During the reign of King *Taejo* the *Choson Tongbo*, coins of Choson, were minted and they spread as far as Japan. In 1401 King *Taejong* ordered the *Sadam-Sa* to print the *Chuhwa*, Korea's first paper money made of the skin of paper mulberry, which was paid as salaries for government officials. The paper money was comprised of two kinds: *Choji* and *Sangji*. The *Choji* was 1.6 *chok* in width and the *Sangji* 1.1 *chok* in length and 1 *chok* in width. One piece of the paper money was worth 1 *sung* or/10 of 1 *mal*.²⁾ But the paper money was never popular. In 1464 King *Sejo* minted coins named *Palbang Tongbo* with an exchange value of three pieces of paper money. This coin was not successful either.

The failure was attributable to several reasons. The lack of understanding the value or convenience of money on the part of the general public was one thing and the discrepancy between the real and nominal values of the money another. The shortage of money in circulation was also responsible.

However, the war against the invading troops from Japan helped greatly to stimulate the circulation of money among the Koreans. The silver coins introduced by the Chinese soldiers during the war became quite popular among the general masses mainly because there was no difference between the real and

1) *Kyongguk Taejon*, vol. 2, Hojon, Kukpai.

Kyongguk Taejon: The Basic Codes for the Godes for the Government of the State of the Choson Dynasty. It included all laws and regulations concerning the central and local governments. The compilation was first initiated in 1469, the first year of King *Yejong*. It was later revised and enlarged four times during the reign of King *Songjong* for final refinement.

2) *Ibid*.

nominal values.

Encouraged by the example of the Chinese money the Korean government expedited the exploration of silver mines. The first attempt was made in 1633, the 11th year of King *Injo*, when the king ordered the *Sangpyong-Chong* to mint the *Sangpyong Tongbo*, a new metal coin. Shaped round with a square hole in the center, the iron coins were distributed among the merchants in *Hansong* because of the shortage of money supply there.

The general use of money had to wait until 1651, the 2nd year of King *Hyojong*, when the government imported 15,000 *kwan* from *Ming*. The Chinese money was distributed among provincial towns such as *Anju* and *Pyongyang*. Besides the government minted more *Sangpyong Tongbo* to encourage the spread of money among the people. The exchange rate was fixed at 1 silver *nyang* for 600 *mun* of minted coins and 1 *sung* of rice at 4 *mun*.

The spread of money was later followed by privately minted or counterfeit money which, in turn, caused an inflationary trend. Therefore, King *Hyojong* adopted a law to prevent the circulation of money in 1656. Ironically enough, however, the general public would not stop using money they had become accustomed to it.

After the middle of the 17th century competition to obtain the enormously profitable right to mint coins developed among various government agencies, especially in the provincial governments. The government gave permits to such central and local government agencies as the provincial governments of *Cholla-Do* and *Pyungan-Do* in 1678; the town government of *Kaisong* in 1661, the *Sangpyong-Chong* and *Hunruyn Togam* in 1693; the provincial governments of *Pyongan-Do*, and *Kyongsang-Do*, in 1695; the *Hojo* and *Sonhye-Chong* in 1750 respectively. But the permits were granted to the *Hojo* and *Sonhye-Chong* exclusively after 1786, the 10th year of King *Chongjo*.

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