

The Development of Agriculture and Society in Late Chosôn Dynasty, 1700-1870

Hochol LEE

Dept. of Agricultural Economics, Kyungpook National University

朝鮮後期 農業와 社會發展의 歷史的 性格

李 鎬 澈

慶北大學校 農業經濟學科

Abstract

The Chosôn society witnessed internal unrest that culminated in popular uprisings during the years of 1700~1870, and this circumstances in Korean society offered a good opportunity to reorganize the relationship between production and society. However, it is not clear whether this pointed toward a modern capitalist society. Nevertheless, Korean society and agriculture developed under various difficult circumstances. In the view of the increase of land productivity and population during this period. Despite such tribulations, after WWII the country underwent rapid industrialization, but it is not clear how far the historical experience aided this development. The educational investment which builds upon the peasants' work morale and thriftiness certainly transforms the human capital and thus exerts important influence on the development of Korean modernization.

1. Preface

A correct comprehension of Korean society during the last century before the opening of the country to the outside world in 1876 must start with an analysis of some salient features of the contemporary economy, agriculture, and village

life. As is widely known, during the nineteenth century the countryside suffered large-scale popular uprisings, like the famous Hong Kyông-nae uprising in *P'yôn gan* in 1812, the popular unrest during the 1860s, and the *Tonghak* revolt in 1894.

These uprisings plunged the country into an unprecedented crisis.³⁾ However,

these events cannot simply be explained as a reaction to the peasants' plight. Rather, they can also be looked at from the point of view of agricultural developments during the latter part of Chosŏn that had continuously increased productivity, and consequently strengthened the peasants' economic and social position.

However, at that time Korea did not achieve modernization, and despite important developments Korean society underwent during the latter part of the Chosŏn period, the country was at last colonized by Japan. Although there is not yet sufficient research done to explain this course of events fully, an examination of some historical facts may contribute towards their understanding.¹¹⁾

2. The Background of Agricultural Development

During the last century of the Chosŏn period natural disasters deeply affected the life of the Korean population. Once every six years there was a major flood, while droughts posed problems once every three and a half years.⁴⁾ Through severe famines in 1763, 1792, 1809, and 1839 millions of people starved to death.

In famine years, moreover, epidemics spread quickly and also contributed to massive loss of life. In addition, cattle disease, which broke out on average once every five years, had an adverse impact on agricultural production.

Despite this situation, however, the population increased and reached towards

the end of the eighteenth century a peak of some fifteen to seventeen million people. According to new research, the population which grew rapidly already during the seventeenth century, showed an increase of 0.219 to 0.269% during the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁾

However, while professor Kwŏn T'ae-wan and others believe that during the period of 1800 to 1870 the population actually decreased, I see a slight increase of 0.08%. However one looks at this problem, it is clear that the peak had passed.

Under these circumstances, from the eighteenth century the tenants, who hitherto had been subjected to the landlords, gradually became independent small entrepreneurs. When we compare these owner-cultivators with the large estates of the early Chosŏn period, which depended on slave labor, we see that not only much of the earlier coercive system had disappeared, but that the surplus products of the owner-cultivators stimulated the commercialization of agricultural products.⁹⁾

From the eighteenth century on, some seventy percent of the Korean society consisted of small producers, and this rate even increased during the nineteenth century.

Consequently, the social system underwent great changes as some rich members of the lower classes climbed up the social ladder, and the social fabric began to loosen.⁵⁾ In 1801, the public slaves were manumitted, and in 1894, finally, the private slaves were liberated. This did not

mean, however, that the traditional social system collapsed, as the Confucian ideology remained strong.

3. The Change of Population and Agricultural Technology

On the other hand, the availability of farmland was reaching a ceiling. Although the gradual loss of government authority caused control over land to get laxer, the cultivated area remained roughly the same, from 1,430,000 *kyôl* in 1776 to 1,480,000 *kyôl* in 1883.

From this we can conclude that although there were approximately 433,000 ha of farmland available, the government was able to collect taxes only from 53% of this land. Similarly, the government's control of the population decreased from 50% in 1810 to 41% in 1884. However, it is certainly wrong to try to understand the economic and social situation of that time merely on the basis of such statistics, as the Japanese scholars did in the past, and to conclude that there was a general decline.¹²⁾

During this period, various measures for converting dry fields into wet fields were taken. As a representative agriculturalist of the early nineteenth century, Sô Yu-gu(1764-1845), pointed out, rice cultivation was widely developed. In 1432 rice paddies comprised 19% of the cultivated area, while in 1913 this percentage was 35.7%. Moreover, various measures such as dyking for irrigation continued to be instituted, and thus the intensive and

extensive margins of cultivation expanded.⁹⁾ To a foreign observer who visited Korea in the 1890s, all land that could be irrigated seemed to have been irrigated. In contrast to the early part of the dynasty, land became a scarcer resource than labor for production.

While in 1550 there were 2.19 persons per one ha, by 1825 there had been a 67 % increase to 3.68 persons per ha. In the three southern provinces that percentage stood in the same year at even 4.54 persons per ha. This meant that on national average there were 65 persons per square kilometer, and even 100 persons in the three southern provinces. It is thus clear that land had become scarcer than people.

The population growth and the scarcity of land were important factors in bringing about intensive agriculture. Moreover, scarce land passed from the peasants into the hands of large landowners and rich peasants. In addition, landowners emerged who had become rich through commercialized agriculture which started at that time. These developments led to growing competition over scarce resources between rich owner-cultivators and tenant farmers.

Agricultural technology, which hitherto had concentrated on labor productivity, was changing into a means for increasing land productivity. If we look at the index of cultivated area per household, and take the year 1543 as 100, we find in the second half of the eighteenth area per household, and take the year 1543 as 100, we find in the second half of the eighteenth

and early nineteenth centuries a level of between 67.5 to 68.2.

Despite this reduction, the index of land productivity per ten acres, with 1444 taken as 100, actually rose to 125.9 in the second half of the eighteenth century, and to 142.5 in the first half of the nineteenth century. Finally, during the last century productivity rose to approximately 137 to 1801 of rice per 10 acres. In contrast, labor productivity remained at the level of 1444.

Changes in agricultural techniques are documented in the agricultural manuals.²⁾ During the second half of the eighteenth century, in such agricultural manuals as Yu Chung-im's *Chŭngbo sallim kyŏngche* and U Ha-yŏng's *Ch'ŏnillok* new agricultural technology for enhancing land productivity were appearing.

Especially the *Imwŏn kyŏngcheji*, a representative agricultural manual of the early nineteenth century, contained comprehensive information about intensive agricultural technology. Around this time, interest in agricultural implements and fertilization was rapidly growing, and cropping patterns and land utilization were maximized.

However, in contrast to the *Ch'ŏnillok* that emphasized techniques for small farms to change to commercial agriculture, Sŏ Yu-gu's *Haengp'oji* provided a management guide for large-scale agricultural entrepreneurs.¹⁵⁾ Moreover, efforts to find crop varieties best suited to Korea's climate and topography were intensified.

Thus, the development of commer-

cialized agriculture that was based on land productivity had an important influence on small-scale as well as large-scale agricultural entrepreneurs.

4. The Status of Agriculture and Society

There were also important developments in the market system. The markets that began to appear from the late fifteenth century expanded significantly at this time due to the appearance of money and commercialized agriculture.⁶⁾ Moreover, in urban centers new private wholesalers, who challenged already established merchants in Seoul, emerged in permanent markets,⁷⁾ and the so-called "five-day markets" also became a regular feature throughout the country.⁸⁾

According to various sources, the number of rural markets was between 1,064 and 1,052 in the period between 1770 and 1830, and 58% of them were situated in the rich three southern provinces. Various itinerant peddlers (*pobusang*) and brokers (*kaekchu*) frequented the five-day markets, and thus the rural markets contributed to the development of a monetary economy.¹⁶⁾ Consequently, the peasants started to participate in the newly emerging commercial agriculture, and agricultural production in the form of cash crops began to come under the influence of markets. Peasants who were successful in these new ventures grew rich.¹⁶⁾

However, some fifty percent of all peasants were tenants who from the late

seventeenth century onwards came under the exploitative control of landlord. Moreover, the land rent gradually changed from a fifty-fifty sharing of the harvest to a fixed rent.¹¹ As a result, the peasants became independent and self-confident entrepreneurs.

They enjoyed education through private schools (*sôdang*). Literature in *han'gûl*, *p'ansori* (a kind of musical drama), and popular painting flourished. A representative example is the "Story of *Ch'unhyang*" (*Ch'unhyangjôn*) -- a story that recounts the love between a young man of the elite and a *kisaeng*, a low-class entertainer. This story was often performed as *p'ansori*. Moreover, literature in the Korean script (*han'gûl*) was printed, and books that suited public taste came out in great numbers.

In the second half of the eighteenth century painters like the famous Kim Hong-do painted genre scenes that became even more popular in the nineteenth century and were hung in every house.¹² However, commercial agriculture was not the exclusive domain of the peasants. The production of commodities through which the government officials and landlords hoped to gain monetary profit came under pressure by high taxation and high rents (the abuses of the so-called "three administrations").¹³ The crisis of the government finances daily grew worse.

The tax income depended on the land tax, but as the actual acreage on which taxes were levied rapidly decreased, the land from which for one or the other

reason no taxes were collected continued to increase. Ultimately, as its tax authority was crumbling, the government was faced with a major crisis.

In order to overcome this crisis the government was forced to levy all kinds of additional taxes.¹² By 1800, according to a report by Chông Yag-yong, on top of the legal tax of 25 *tu* per *kyôl* 40 to 50 extra *tu* were collected, and what was worse, such taxes were levied even on people who did not have any land.¹⁰ This led to friction with the peasantry which refused to pay the taxes. Under these circumstances, the land owners who concentrated on commercial agriculture began to strengthen their management and extra-economic control, and this led, of course, to strong reactions of the tenants who refused to pay taxes.

Tenants who tilled one *kyôl* of land may have harvested around six hundred *tu*, but half of this they had to pay to the land owner, from the rest they had to pay the taxes so that only some 200 *tu* were left for their living. Nevertheless, the number of peasants who grew rich through commercial agriculture also increased.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the politics of the powerful families, which emerged as a small group favored with special privileges, could no longer control the contradictions between agriculture, society, and production. Consequently, in the middle of the nineteenth century the Chosôn society witnessed internal unrest that culminated in popular uprisings.¹⁴

5. Conclusions

Such changes in Korean society offered a good opportunity to reorganize the relationship between production and society.⁷⁾ However, it is not clear whether this pointed toward a modern capitalist society. Nevertheless, Korean society and agriculture developed under various difficult circumstances, and such development can be easily ascertained through the fact that land productivity and population continued to increase during this period.

Despite such tribulations, after WWII the country underwent rapid industrialization, but it is not clear how far the historical experience aided this development. Some scholars mention the landowner system as the most important basis for capitalism, others insist that small-scale intensive agriculture was in fact the precursor of modern industrialized society.¹⁾

In Korea, during the past one hundred years the social and economic success resulted from an expansion of intensive agriculture. The work-spirit of the Korean peasantry clearly was an important asset for the country's modernization.¹⁷⁾

Moreover, the educational investment which builds upon the peasants' work morale and thriftiness, based on Confucian thinking, certainly transforms the human capital and thus exerts important influence on the development of modernization that is capable of absorbing new techniques and new thought.

摘 要

1700~1870年間の朝鮮封建社會는 그 内部的인 矛盾에 따른 農民蜂起 勃發 등의 深刻한 社會經濟的 葛藤을 겪고 있었다. 다른 側面에서 볼 때, 이 時期에는 農業 및 社會發展에 새로운 變化의 契機가 주어지고 있었다. 그렇지만 그러한 變化가 반드시 近代資本主義 社會를 指向하는 것으로 斷定할 수는 없다. 그럼에도 不拘하고 當時 朝鮮의 社會와 農業은 매우 劣惡한 與件에도 不拘하고 發展하고 있었으며, 특히 이는 土地生産性과 人口가 持續적으로 發展하고 있었음에서 端的으로 드러나고 있다. 이와 같은 歷史的 背景을 檢討해 볼 때, 第2次大戰以後 韓國의 急速한 工業化는 이러한 朝鮮社會의 發展이 가져다 준 歷史的 經驗과 결코 無關할 수가 없다. 農民들의 正直한 道德性과 儒敎思想에 바탕을 둔 教育投資는 確實히 人間資源의 蓄積에 크게 寄與했으며, 이는 結局 韓國 近代化에 가장 重要한 影響을 미쳤기 때문이다.

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