

The Endogenous Dynamics of Social Transformation in Traditional Korea

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I. Sociology of social process

Conventional theories of social change – Marxian, Weberian, and structural-functional – emphasize a tendency toward stagnation in traditional non-European societies. But a close examination of late Yi dynasty Korea in fact reveals a remarkably dynamic social process. Evidence of this dynamism is found in the existence of precapitalist commodity production, the dissolution of the estate system (*sinbun-je*), and a growing crisis in everyday etiquette. An investigation of these endogenous elements of social dynamics gives us a new understanding of the nature of Korean society and may contribute to our understanding of other traditional societies as well.

The works of two social historians – Eric J. Hobsbawm and Norbert Elias – have done much to shape the approach presented here. I regard the sociological analysis of social process as synonymous with Hobsbawm's "history of society" (Hobsbawm 1971).

Hobsbawm, an English social historian, maintains that one must consider a society as a whole, not in piecemeal fashion, for example, in terms of political, economic, or institutional history. Elias, a German sociologist, considers society in its totality to be a social process, that is to say, society is in ceaseless transition (Elias 1978). Economic organization, political structure, and ideological justification all interact to cause a long-term process of social change. Hence society should be conceived of not as a static substance but as a dynamic process that can be studied effectively only through long-term analysis.

Elias, with his comparative perspective on the civilizing process of European societies since the Middle Ages, is one of the best forerunners of the sociology of social process. His wide-ranging, long-term perspectives on the social process combine theoretical frameworks with abundant historical information regarding everyday etiquette, state power, and personality structures of the Europeans through several centuries (Elias 1982 a; 1982 b). More recently, scholarly works by Barrington Moore, Reinhard Bendix, Perry Anderson, and Immanuel Wallerstein have

been recognized as milestones for the sociology of social process at a global level (Moore 1966; Bendix 1978; Anderson 1979; Wallerstein 1976; Wallerstein 1980). Whereas these comparative sociologists are mainly concerned with the formal structures of the social process at a macro-level, such as the forms of government and economic organizations, Norbert Elias's works successfully combine the macro-level formalistic analysis with understanding of the everyday life and consciousness of people at a micro-level. In his work we find a persuasive picture of the process of European civilization that can serve as a model for an analysis of Korean society.

In order to understand modern Korean society, we must give more attention to combining an understanding of economic and political organization with an understanding of the everyday life of the people, which has been changing gradually since the seventeenth century. This change had nothing to do with exogenous factors but was caused by endogenous elements peculiar to this traditional Confucian society. This paper emphasizes those endogenous elements of social change that were characterized by the development of commodity production and the dissolution of the estate system. By studying these elements we can reach a deeper understanding of Korea's integration into the modern world system beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

II. Changes in Economic Organization

Since the Korea-Japan War at the turn of the sixteenth century, Korean society has shown remarkable changes in economic organization. In the rural area, rice transplantation technique and the production of cash crops such as vegetables, spice (cayenne, ginger, garlic), tobacco, and medicinal herbs including *insam* (ginseng), spread gradually over the country. As a result, a social differentiation took place among the peasants. The tax reforms initiated by the state during the seventeenth century facilitated domestic commercial activities by both state-licensed and private merchants, who in turn influenced petty commodity production in handicrafts. Handicrafts, conventionally the lowest vocation in this Confucian society, escaped the arbitrary control of the state apparatus. Manufacture as a new form of handicraft emerged no later than the early nineteenth century. Merchants, also a lower occupational group in this agrarian society, could accumulate capital to invest either in arable land or in handicraft. The hegemony of commercial activities moved from the licensed to the private merchants. The overall trend of these changes can be called a transition from subsistence to precapitalist commodity production.

1. Technical innovation and commodity production in agriculture

From the mid-seventeenth century, the technique of rice transplantation, which had already been known in the previous Koryŏ dynasty, spread rapidly.¹ Despite a prohibition by the government which was afraid of losing a major part of the nation's harvest in case of severe drought, this new technique was adapted on no less than 70 percent of all arable wet field in the country in the mid-eighteenth century (Kim Yong-sŏp 1978:38). The benefits – such as increasing productivity through more intensive use of the arable land, decreasing cost of labor and seeds, the possibility of rotating crops, early removal of bad seeds, and stronger resistance of rice to disease – were so great that the peasants put up with the danger of losing whole crops to severe drought. They could save up to 80 percent of labor costs thanks to this innovation.²

The increased rice production created a marketable surplus beyond needs. In addition to the marketing of rice, special cash crops such as vegetables, garlic, cayenne, cotton, linen, tobacco, ginseng and medicinal herbs contributed to the development of a monetary economy in the rural area. Although foreign trade was generally rejected and rigidly controlled by the government, the cultivation and export of ginseng increased, since it was welcomed in China and Japan as a valuable medicament. From 1797 to 1851 the export of ginseng to China increased from 120 *kun* (1 *kún* = 375 g) to 40,000 *kún* (Chŏn Sŏk-tam and Hŏ Chŏng-ho 1972, I:65; Kang Man-gil 1978:129).

2. The development of a monetary economy and the role of the state

As the everyday consumption of the state apparatus was supported not by the market but by tribute in kind gathered from all over the country, there had been no remarkable commercial activities in the first half of the Yi dynasty (fourteenth to the sixteenth century). Industrial products were produced in state-owned workshops either by state-owned slaves or by private craftsmen who were obliged to offer tribute in kind. The majority of the population lived in a subsistence economy so that

1 Although this technique promising higher productivity of rice cultivation had been known since the Koryŏ dynasty, it was adopted on a wide scale only from the seventeenth century (Kim Yong-sŏp 1979:11). In China it was known as early as the first century B.C. (Anderson 1979:521)

2 Kim Yong-sŏp (1978:38). Thanks to this important advantage of rice transplantation, the peasants could cultivate five times more wet field than without it. See Song Ch'an-sik (1970:105).

the commodity production had only marginal meaning. But after the tax reforms called *taedongpŏp* during the seventeenth century, which converted taxes in kind into tax in money or in functional substitutes such as rice or cotton, marketing developed to catch up with increasing demands. The introduction of coins, *sangp'yŏng t'ongbo*, in 1678 was another important step in the development of a monetary economy in Korea. The monetary economy permeated the everyday life of the population to such an extent that the Annals of King Sukjong written in 1708, that is, thirty years after the introduction of coins, stated:

Since the coins were introduced, the way of doing things in everyday life has changed. Prices have been continuously moving upward. Even old ladies selling vegetables do not respect the grains any more but want to be paid with coins. The peasants cannot exchange their grains for needed goods, so they cannot help but sell their grains cheaply to acquire coins... Rich men are accumulating coins and giving credit to poor people. Peasants borrow one *yang* (unit of money) in spring to buy one *mal* (= 8 kg) of rice. But in autumn they must sell several *mal* of rice to repay the borrowed one *yang*. That means one has to repay six to seven *mal* of rice for the borrowed one *mal*, if we compute the cumulative interest (cited from Chang Kuk-chong 1963:52).

As this statement implies, the peasants had to adjust their traditional way of thinking, oriented as it was to subsistence production, to the newly emerging money-commodity relations that became an indispensable part of their everyday lives. Commodity production became an important part of their productive activities.

The exchange rates between several important goods were regulated officially, but the mechanism of the market economy was such an imperative that the government could not control it arbitrarily. In 1779 and 1794 the price of rice in the capital city, Seoul, rose surprisingly because of the willfull retention by the rice merchants. Another price explosion in 1833 caused a mass riot in the capital city that escalated into the burning of several rice storage facilities. The outcome of this incident was the execution of nine men, including two wholesalers, and corporal punishment for 38 men (Kang Man-gil 1978:85-92). In this incident we apparently see a functioning market mechanism that was under the control not of the state but of the big wholesalers.

The monetary economy initiated by the state developed so far that a certain portion of the state's revenue was collected in coins. In Table 1 we can see that about 40 percent of the revenue of major central administrative bureaus was collected in coins during the period from the second half of the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. Though not shown separately in this table, up to 52.8 percent of this revenue was collected in coins in 1820 (An Pyŏng-t'ae 1975:111). In addition,

we find a gradual decrease of revenue; in the years 1778-86 the total revenue was 4,650,021 ryang on an average, whereas in the years between 1857 and 1866 it was only 1,873,470 *yang* per year. This rapid decrease, if not mainly due to statistical errors, means the state lost of control of its main revenue sources. Since 1811 there had been social unrest, symptomized in repeated peasants' rebellions, that together with the usual corruption of government officials at all levels, surely had a major part in decreasing revenue.

Table 1: Income of major central administrative bureaus in coins and in kind (Total amount expressed in *yang*, that is, value of coins)

Year	Coins	Cotton and Textiles	Grains	Total revenue per year
1776 and 1778-86	46.5 %	15.8 %	37.7 %	4,650,021
1787-96	47.0	14.0	39.0	3,824,488
1797-1806	41.9	17.7	40.4	4,672,107
1807-16	44.6	23.3	32.1	4,516,170
1817-26	45.1	23.0	31.9	3,734,650
1827-36	48.7	16.3	35.0	2,849,165
1837-46	44.4	15.4	40.2	2,580,352
1847-56	34.2	16.8	49.0	2,730,033
1857-66	44.4	17.1	38.5	1,873,470
1868-76	36.4	22.4	41.2	1,943,430

Source: An Pyöng-t'ae (1975:113). An's study is based on the Annals of related years.

Other statistical data showing the monetarization of the state's revenue can be seen in Table 2. In 1807, 36.5 percent of the income and 35.7 percent of the expenditure of major central administrative bureaus were collected in gold, silver, and coins.

Table 2: Income and expenditure of major central administrative bureaus in 1807

	Gold, silver, and coins	Cotton and Textiles	Grains	Total amount (<i>yang</i>)
Income	36.5 %	12.9 %	50.6 %	3,222,225
Expenditure	35.7	13.8	50.5	3,120,877

Source: An Pyöng-tae (1975:113). These statistics are based on *Man'giyoram* (1808).

In the same year, up to 75 percent of defense taxes that had previously been collected in textiles (*kunp'o*, that is, textiles for defense) was collected in coins. In the case of land taxes, this rate was as low as 20 percent (Kim Kwang-jin et. al. 1973:300, 303-4).

The role of the state in monetarizing economic life can be seen in Table 3, which computes the relationship between income and expenditure of the Central Bureau of Tribute (*Sonhyech'öng*). According to this data, 73 percent of rice, 81.6 percent of cotton and textiles, and 90.6 percent of coins collected as taxes were given out to order commodities.

Table 3: Income and Expenditure of the Central Bureau of Tribute (1769)

	Rice	Cotton and Textiles	Coins
Income (A)	178,927 <i>sök</i>	128,121 <i>p'il</i>	276,219 <i>yang</i>
Expenditure for ordering goods (B)	130,656	104,562	250,307
B/A×100	73.0 %	81.6 %	90.6 %

Source: An Pyöng-t'ae (1977:40).

Additionally, we have to take into consideration the expenditure for ordering commodities by the Ministry of Finance and other administrative bureaus. In principle, each bureau of the dynasty could order commodities for itself.

But the state did not always favor the development of a monetary economy. Based on the Confucian concept of order and hierarchy, the ruling group of the state occasionally tried to break the rapid monetarization, because the latter meant a disturbance and dissolution of the status quo. As we learn from the Annals of King Sukjong in 1701, the ruling group tried to counteract the monetarization of everyday life by restricting its means of payment, that is, coins. King Sukjong noted:

I will not allow the minting of any more coins. In the last analysis, I will abolish it. If we abolish coins, the public can regain goodwill, and the disorder can be ended... If certain things are used for many years, it is inevitable that their negative effects become apparent. How can there be no negative function of coins after we have used them for such a long time? If we are conscious of such negative functions, we must abolish them... If we abolish them, we can get out of the inconvenient troubles with foreign countries. From now on, the tribute from the southern provinces may not be collected in coins (Man'gi-yoram 1971:859-60).

Since the state did not issue enough coins, occasional shortages handicapped the development of the monetary economy together with the state's unwillingness to allow exploitation of mineral resources. This coin shortage symbolized the antimercantilistic attitude of the ruling group. Although the state partly initiated the monetarization through tax reforms, it continued to hinder the transformation of the society into a commercial and industrial nation.

3. Emerging private merchants

The tax reforms of the seventeenth century meant that there were merchants who got orders from the state and arranged the supply of various commodities. For this purpose, the government issued licenses to certain merchants (*kongin*). These licensed merchants were permitted to monopolize the major commercial networks of the country; but as the commercial sector grew, they could control only a part of them. A major part of commercial activities was taken over by unlicensed private merchants. As the influence and efficiency of the private merchants proved to be of great importance, the government could not but admit their status; in 1791 the government issued a decree (*Sinhae t'onggong*) and in 1794 another one (*Kabin t'onggong*) that removed discrimination against private merchants.³ Without recognizing commercial activities of the private merchants, the government could not guarantee a smooth supply of commodities either for the general population or for its administrative bureaus.

The private merchants were engaged in various commercial activities:

- a. They took over from the state's transportation agencies the transportation of rice collected as taxes. In addition, they could connect the producers of rice and its consumers. Such activities proved to be very profitable. They then reinvested the profits in industry, for example, in ship-building.
- b. They controlled the local markets through their branches. Because of the local-specialization of agricultural and industrial products and because of insufficient transportation, prices were not unified at the national level, from which the private merchants could profit.
- c. They were engaged in limited foreign trade with China and Japan. Silver valued at three million *ryang* per year flowed to China in the eighteenth century in exchange for silk and other luxurious consumer goods (Kim Kwang-jin et. al.

3 Despite these edicts the monopoly right of the state-licensed merchants, *yugüjŏn*, in the capital continued to exist. See Cho Ki-zun (1974:226).

1973:13). But after the mid-eighteenth century this liaison trade decreased, as the Tokugawa Shogunate established a direct trading route to China.

Especially remarkable was the development of local markets (*chang*) where state control was relatively weak and private merchants were very active. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were more than a thousand local markets. According to a report from 1726, there were 1,064 markets; according to another report from 1807, there were 1,061 markets; a third report from the mid-nineteenth century counted 1,051 markets (Chǒng Sok-chong 1972b:153-4). Most local markets, built at the same time as the local centers, were 2 to 10 km from the neighbouring ones and were open every five days.⁴ According to the third report cited above, 905 markets were open every five days, 125 every 10 days, 18 every 15 days, and 4 markets twelve times a year.⁵ This same report counted 175 items sold in the local markets ranging from food and medicaments to iron products (Zenshō Eiske 1929:81-2). In several cases, local markets specialized in certain kinds of commodities such as medicinal herbs or even cows.

From the existence of more than one thousand local markets at the turn of the nineteenth century, we may infer that the majority of the population of Korea at that time did not live in a natural economy but in a monetarized world, although as marginal participants. If the number of local markets (1,061) is divided by that of the population (7,561,402) in 1807, there was one market for every 7,127 persons; if we divide the number of local markets by the number of households (1,764,504), we find there was one market for every 1,663 households.⁶ In view of this, it is not an exaggeration to say that the population was involved in the network of local markets.

Commercial capital tended to be invested in the manufacturing industries, as will be seen in the following section.

4. Development of handicraft

There were principally three kinds of handicraft in the Yi dynasty: state handicraft, private handicraft, and peasants' subsistence handicraft. In the first half of the dyn-

4 On the tight network of local markets, see the map of them around the city of P'yŏng-yang in Zenshō Eiske (1929).

5 Chǒn Sŏk-tam et. al. (1972, II:73). Instead of 1,052, Chon counts 1,051 local markets.

6 On the size of population and number of households in 1807, see Zenshō Eiske (1929:6-97); see also Sŏk Nam-guk (1972:43-4).

asty, state handicraft, based on slave labor, dominated the other kinds. The division of labor between agriculture and industry was at a minimal level. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, private handicraft developed to the point of becoming dominant. State control and oppression continued but not as effectively as in the previous period. On the contrary, the state sought to adjust to the newly developing private handicraft by approving the privatization of state handicraft.

This privatization began at first in the mines. The state, which had forbidden the exploitation of mineral resources such as iron, copper, silver, and gold, approved it in the seventeenth century. The local administrative bureaus that could not provide enough capital for investment in the mines provided incentives to merchants to manage the mines and in turn collected mine taxes. In the second half of the seventeenth century, many of the half-state mines were converted into private ones. Work in the mines changed from forced to wage labor (Chŏn Sŏk-tam 1966:7). The labor force could not be mobilized arbitrarily by the state apparatus as in the early period of the dynasty but had to be paid for. This form of labor allocation was the origin of wage labor in Korea. While agricultural laborers were engaged mainly in subsistence production for landlords, wage laborers in the mines produced only for the market.

The manufacturing industry was also privatized. Consumer goods such as paper items, iron products, brassware utilities, ceramics, textiles, and processed food like alcoholic beverages and dried fish were produced mainly in private factories with which the state-owned factories could hardly compete. The principles of organization in the state-owned handicraft, that is, the exploitation of slave and half-slave labor, could not catch up with the ascending private handicraft. Many state-owned slaves ran away in the eighteenth century, most of them being emancipated in 1801, when the state burned a major part of the slave registers.

The privatization of state handicraft and the development of mines and handicraft in the private sector presupposed the investment of merchants' capital. Historians of both South and North Korea, without direct scholarly communication with each other, have been trying to study the role of merchants' capital in developing precapitalist commodity production and later in giving birth to the capitalist mode of production, especially in the iron and brassware industries. To a certain degree, they have agreed on the existence of elements of the capitalist mode of production in the nineteenth century; concrete materials on the previous centuries are lacking.

- a. According to North Korean historian Hong Hŭi-yu, about 30 laborers were engaged in seven operational units of an iron moulding factory in P'yŏngan province in the mid-nineteenth century. He estimates that 23.4 tons of pig-iron were

- transformed into 1,000 huge black cooking pots that symbolized the Korean iron industry at that time (Hong Hŭi-yu 1963:40).
- b. According to South Korean economic historian Kwŏn Pyŏng-t'ak, 63 laborers worked in 23 operational units of an iron moulding factory in Ch'ongdo county in Kyŏngsang province in 1904. Kwŏn estimates that 18,000 huge pots per year were moulded from 180,000 *kwan* (1 *kwan* = 3,75 kg) of pig iron (Kwŏn Pyŏng-t'ak 1972:103-135). Relying basically upon the oral history of old villagers, he supposes that this form of management can be traced back to no later than the mid-nineteenth century.
 - c. South Korean historian Kim Yong-ho reports a brassware factory in Ansŏng county in central Kyong'gi province, where crude brassware plates were processed to brassware utilities by eleven skilled workers in ten operational units (Kim Yong-ho 1965:1-6). North Korean historian Chŏn Sŏk-tam estimates that there were at least 50 such factories producing 300,000 pairs of 600,000 individual items of brassware utilities in the nineteenth century (Chon Sok-tam 1972, IV:65).
 - d. North Korean historian Pak Si-hyŏng reports a brassware factory in Chong-ju county of northwestern P'yŏngan province where eleven skilled workers were engaged in ten operational units. A certain merchant-landlord named Pak Myŏng-jo in the nineteenth century invested 20,000 to 30,000 *yang* to found a factory that produced brassware items weighing 1,200 kg per month from 1,800 kg of copper and lead. The laborers in this factory were free wage laborers separated from the means of production (Pak Si-hyŏng 1963:69-72).

The production of iron and brassware was regionally specialized. Social discrimination among laborers according to the status of their origins in those regions was becoming loose. In Ansŏng county, the center of South Korean brassware industries in the past, there were proverbs such as: "There are in Ansŏng neither *yangban* (literati) nor *sangnom* (commoners)"; "One works for wage, that's all." We can find in those industrial regions a weakening of principles of social gradation in terms of the estate that was apparently related to the spreading of monetary relations.

Statistics from the 1830s based on *Imwŏnsimnyukchi*, published around 1840, provide information about the marketing of iron and brassware items, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Marketing of iron and brassware products in the local markets

Province	(a)	(b)	(c)	(c)/(b) in %	(d)	(d)/(b) in %
Kyönggi	93	33	15	45.4 %	4	12 %
Ch'ungch'öng	158	59	5	0.8	2	3
Chölla	188	62	17	27.3	4	6
Kyöngsang	268	72	22	30.5	25	34
Kangwön	51	26	2	0.7	-	-
Hwanghae	109	23	5	21.7	6	26
P'yöngan	143	48	41	85.4	35	82
Hamgyöng	42	14	6	42.8	4	28
Total	1,052	337	113	31.5 %	80	23 %

a) Total number of reported local markets.

b) Local markets whose repeatedly sold items were counted in this record.

c) Local markets where iron products were sold.

d) Local markets where brassware products were sold.

Source: Chön Sök-tam and HÖ Chöng-ho (1972, IV:61, 67).

According to this table, iron products appeared in 113 of the 337 local markets for which commodities were reported. Brassware products were reported in 80 markets. This means iron products were sold in 31.5 percent of the market, and brassware in 23 percent. In P'yöngan province alone, 85.4 percent of local markets reported iron products and 82 percent brassware products as one of the major commodities. Until the sixteenth century only rich *yangban* families could afford brassware products for their households, but since the seventeenth century the market for such products had been widened so that they could also be used by commoners as typical household items by the beginning of the nineteenth century (Yasuda Yoshi-mi 1973:72).

As we learn from the various reports considered above, a new form of management, that is, manufacture, was introduced in the iron and brassware industries in the nineteenth century. The labor force was bought by the capitalist and brought under direct control by the latter at one and the same workplace. To a certain degree, the division of labor in manufacturing industries was proceeding, as shown above. The industrial resources and working tools were separated from the workers and belonged to the capitalists. The wage laborers consisted mainly of landless peasants

who left the rural sector in search of opportunities in mining and manufacturing industries. They were free from feudal fetters imposed by the estate system. Capital came usually from the commercial sector, though fluctuating among the commercial, industrial, and agricultural sectors.

III. Dissolution of the Estate System and Changes in the Patterns of Social Interaction

Hand in hand with the monetarization of economic life, we see the weakening of the estate system and the changing of patterns of everyday social interaction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The traditional estate system based on the Confucian sense of social gradation between the four estates – *yangban* (literati), *chungin* (intermediate estate), *yangin* (commoners), and *nobi* (slaves) – became perverse. In order to preserve the status quo for the advantage of the ruling group, the borderlines of these four estates must be kept rigid, and they had been so in the former period of the dynasty. The ruling estate, the *yangban*, could and did preserve its privileged status by punishing those who tried to disturb the existing order.

But from the eighteenth century, and especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, we see a radical dissolution of the estate system which, together with the weakening of state control, caused a crisis in the society as a whole. Several statistical studies show the degree of the dissolution of the estate system.

1. Statistical tendency

- a. Japanese historian Shigata Hiroshi in 1938 analyzed the official household registers of the city of Taegu for the period from 1690 to 1858 and found a substantial change in the composition of the population. Whereas only 9.2 percent of the population of Taegu could be counted as *yangban* in 1690, the percentage in 1858 was 70.3 percent. The proportion of *nobi* households in turn showed a radical drop from 37.1 percent to only 1.5 percent, while that of *yangin* households dropped from 53.7 percent to 28.2 percent in the same period. In Table 5, based on Shigata's study, we see the following changes of estate composition during the given period: a drastic increase of *yangban* households, a decrease of *yangin* households, and a drastic decrease of *nobi* households that certifies the real disappearance of *nobi* households in the mid-nineteenth century.

Table 5: Household Composition of Taegu according to the Estate (1690-1858)

Year	<i>yangban</i> (a)	<i>yangin</i>	<i>nobi</i>	Total households
1690	9.2 %	53.7 %	37.1 %	3,156
1729/32 (b)	18.7	54.6	26.6	3,092
1783/86/89 (c)	37.5	57.5	5.0	2,810
1858	70.3	28.2	1.5	2,985

(a) includes *chungin* households; (b) average for both years; (c) average for the years 1783, 1786 and 1789.

Source: Shigata Hiroshi (1938:367-388).

b. South Korean historian Kim Yong-söp studied the household registers and land registers of Sangju county in Kyöngsang province for the periode from 1720 to 1738. Though for a short period of 18 years, he found a gradual increase of landowning *yangban* households from 19.4 percent in 1720 to 30.1 percent in 1738, as shown in Table 6. If we follow his argument, not suggested in this table, 30.6 percent of *yangban* households were related to *yangin* status, and 68.7 percent of *yangin* households were related to *yangban* status. Moreover, 43.7 percent of *nobi* households could hardly be distinguished from those of *yangin* origin (Kim Yong-söp 1978:426).

Table 6: Household composition of Sangju by estate (1720-1738)

Year	<i>yangban</i>	<i>yangin</i>	<i>nobi</i>	Total households
1720 (a)	19.4 %	59.8 %	20.8 %	1,146
1738 (b)	30.1	49.3	20.6	509

(a) based on land registers

(b) based on household registers

Source: Kim Yong-söp (1978:427)

Kim also analyzed the land registers of the Chinju county in the same province and found the class differentiation in the rural area, given in Table 7.

Table 7: Class differentiation of landowners in Chinju (1848)

Year	Proportion of households	Proportion of owned land	Total Number of households
a) Regarding total 382 landowning households of the village studied			
Landlords and rich peasants	6 %	44 %	
Middle class peasants	10 %	15-20 %	
poor peasants	20 %	15-20 %	
impoverished peasants	63 %	18 %	
Total households			382
b) Regarding 211 <i>yangban</i> landowners:			
Landlords and rich peasants	8.1 %		
Middle class peasants	11.3 %		
poor peasants	25.6 %		
impoverished peasants	55.0 %		
Total households			211
c) Regarding 171 landowners of <i>yangin</i> and <i>nobi</i> origin:			
Landlords and rich peasants	2.9 %		
Middle class peasants	7.6 %		
poor peasants	17.0 %		
impoverished peasants	72.5 %		
Total households:			171

Source: Kim Yong-sŏp (1978:202-4). This study is based on a land register of 1846.

This study based on a land-register of 1846 shows that 55 percent of the *yangban* landowners in the investigated village should be classified as impoverished peasants, whereas more than 10 percent of landowners with *yangin* and *nobi* status were classified as landlords and rich and middle-class peasants. These statistics re-

veal a tendency of impoverishment of a part of the *yangban*, causing the selling of this status to people of lower origins, as will be shown below.

- c. South Korean historian Chŏng Sok-chong analyzed the household registers of Ulsan in the same province for the period 1729 to 1867 and found a tendency similar to that found by Shigata in Taegu. Table 8 shows the drastic increase of *yangban* households from 26.29 percent to 65.48 percent of all registered households during the given period. Meanwhile, the percentage of *yangin* households decreased from 59.78 percent to 33.96 percent and of *nobi* from 13.93 percent to 0.56 percent.

Table 8: Change of estate composition in Ulsan (1729-1867; households)

Year	<i>yangban</i>	<i>yangin</i>	<i>nobi</i>	Total households
1729	26.29 %	59.78 %	13.96 %	633
1765	40.98	57.01	2.00	549
1804	53.47	45.61	0.92	649
1867	65.48	33.96	0.56	533

Source: Chŏng Sok-chong (1972a:283).

Chŏng's further analysis of the population, as shown in Table 9, showed the same trend of an increasing proportion of *yangban* from 19.39 percent to 67.07 percent. As for *solgŏnobi* (houshold slaves residing in the same household as their lord's), we see their existence until 1867 (14.36 percent of the population), whereas *oegŏnobi* (slaves with their own independent households outside their lord's house) were almost nonexistent by the mid-nineteenth century.

Table 9: Change of estate composition in Ulsan (1729-1867; real population)

Year	<i>yangban</i> (a)	<i>yangin</i>	<i>solgŏnobi</i>	<i>oegonobi</i>	Total population
1729	19.39 %	49.57 %	21.83 %	9.20 %	2,542
1765	32.11	50.83	15.20	1.87	1,875
1804	43.67	33.88	22.67	0.32	2,205
1867	67.07	18.27	14.36	0.30	1,998

Source: Chong Sok-chong (1972a:285)

Chǒng's study provides the following findings: a drastic increase of *yangban* households; a radical decrease of *yangin* households; the disappearance of slave households represented by the proportion of *oegǒnobi* and a decrease but continuing existence of *solgǒnobi* (household slaves).

- d. John N. Sommerville studied the household registers of Ulsan in his doctoral dissertation of 1974 and came to about the same conclusions as Chǒng Sok-chong. In Table 10 we see an obvious increase of *hyangban* (name for local *yangban*) households from 14.48 percent in 1729 to 35.80 percent in 1804/10. In the meantime, *nobi* households decreased from 26.50 percent to 0.54 percent of all registered households of the city, whereas the *yangin* households remained at about 50 percent. Special attention was given to determining the proportion of *chungin* (intermediate estate), which increased from 11.82 percent to 15.75 percent in the same period. *Chungin* status is interpreted in this study as a channel of upward social mobility for *yangin* and *nobi*.

Table 10: Change in estate composition of Ulsan (1729-1804/10; household)

Year	<i>yuhak</i> (a)	<i>hyangban</i> (b)	intermediate class	commoner	slave
1729	211 (10.44 %)	294 (14.48 %)	240 (11.82 %)	958 (47.19 %)	538 (26.50 %)
1753	260 (14.96 %)	344 (19.79 %)	160 (9.21 %)	942 (54.20 %)	292 (16.80 %)
1765	318 (18.64 %)	400 (23.45 %)	252 (14.78 %)	922 (54.04 %)	132 (7.73 %)
1804/10	569 (33.95 %)	600 (35.80 %)	264 (15.75 %)	803 (47.91 %)	9 (0.54 %)

(b) includes (a); *yuhak* is understood as the lower stratum of local *yangban* called *hyangban*

Source: J.N. Sommerville (1974:88).

Through intensive case studies of several families, Sommerville found a tendency toward upward mobility. He introduced an example: "Chang Ch'ul-lip, a member of the Indong Chang Clan, was a private slave householder in 1729, married to a private slave. In 1765 his son, a non-commissioned officer, reported the four ancestors as purchased title holders. Two of Ch'ul-lip's grandsons appeared in the 1804 census as *yuhak*" (Somerville 1974:126). At that time, *yuhak* was thought to be the lower

stratum of *yangban*. Table 11 shows the non-*yangban* origins of several *yuhak* registered in 1729 and 1765.

Table 11: Origins of registered *yuhak*.

Case	year of registration	Father	Grandfather	Great-grandfather	Mother's Father
1	1729	Post officer	Purchased title holder	Purchased title holder	Purchased title holder
2	1729	Commoner	Soldier	Soldier	Commoner
3	1765	Commoner	Commoner	Commoner	Commoner
4	1729	Soldier	Soldier	Soldier	Soldier

Source: Sommerville (1974:126).

These case studies suggest that upward mobility in terms of registration in the official records was not unusual in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many commoners and slaves succeeded in registering themselves and their ancestors as members of a *yangban* clan, which would have been impossible without the socio-economic power needed to persuade responsible government officials and clan chiefs.

2. Changing patterns of social interaction

The drastic changes in the estate composition reviewed thus far caused a change of human thinking regarding the principles of social gradation. The Confucian principles of social gradation originally presupposed the ability of ruling *yangban* to be engaged solely in studying Confucian classics without worrying about the economic basis of their lives. They were to be given sufficient means of subsistence. If they were well qualified and lucky, they could get into the government bureaucracy at a higher level; the lower positions were to be filled by the people of a lower estate, the *chungin*. From a caricature of the late eighteenth century by Pak Chi-wŏn, a scholar of the reformatory, praxis-oriented *sirhak* school, we can get an overview of the everyday benefits of the *yangban* at the local level:

Heaven created the people in four estates of whom *sŏnbi* (a special name of *yangban*) is the most honorable one. Nothing is more advantageous than to be called *yangban* who do not need to be engaged in agriculture nor in commerce. Only after studying the Confucian classics and history one can either pass the great literary examination or at least become a *chinsa* (local *yangban* without government position). The red wooden certification of successful literary examination is only two feet long but brings everything so that we can call it a purse. Also a *chinsa* who at the age of 30 begins his career as a government official can enjoy various profits and advantages, if he performs well. Also through personal recommendations he can become chief of a provincial administrative bureau. He works all day under a parasol. He feels his stomach full, while the answers for his orders jingle like pearls. In his room he can ornament *kisaeng* (prostitutes) with earrings. He brings up lovely birds in the garden. Even an impoverished scholar in a village has a certain power. He can take oxen of neighbors to cultivate his field at a right time. He can assemble the villagers and let them cultivate his field. Who can resist his orders? Even if he pours ash in your nose, takes your hair and pulls out your beard, you may not complain against him. (Pak Chi-wŏn 1973:204-5).

True *yangban* should be able to avoid any kind of productive work. What they really should do was to indulge only in the studies of the classics, writing poems, and in philosophy. Dirt, dust, and sweat from manual labor were not distinctive marks of true *yangban*. Their only concern was passing the literary examination and taking a government position. Such a way of life presupposed having the means of survival reserved for them.

But as the monetary economy was penetrating the everyday life, many *yangban* could not catch up with it. Unconcerning about productive and practical activities, they did not know how to make money. Even if they knew how to do it, their sense of privilege as Confucian scholars did not permit them to engage in making profits. The Annals of King Chŏngjo in 1779 put this circumstance as follows: "More than half of the population of Ch'ungch'ŏng province carry the title of *yangban*. But they are very poor. However, they will not be engaged in agriculture, handicraft, nor in commerce." (Chŏng Sok-chong 1972a:290)

Yu Su-won, a scholar of the *sirhak* school of the eighteenth century, wrote:

Now, the living condition of *yangban* has become very poor. If they work hard for agricultural production, they cannot insist upon their honor, because their bodies get dirty from the soil, and then they cannot be distinguished from commoners. (Han Yŏng-u 1972:31)

If certain *yangban* are engaged in dishonorable activities, the state forbids their access to the government bureaucracy... . Should there be no real hindrance to friendship, marriage, and to careers as government officials if they are engaged in agriculture, handicraft,

and commerce? Surely there would be disadvantages. Other people would surely regard them as dishonorable and would have no more communication with them, while saying: "This guy has fallen to *yangin* status." (Yu Su-wŏn 1973:168)

But in the process of monetarization, many poor *yangban* were forced into productive work; otherwise, they could not survive. Frequently they became tenants of rich *yangin*.

On the other side, rich *yangin* could imitate the mode of life peculiar to *yangban*. Rich peasants and merchants of *yangin* origin might call each other *yangban*, as recorded in the Annals of 1786:

The lower people of downtown call each other *yangban*. The *kat* (mandarin hat from horse hair) is a hat reserved only for *yangban*, but lower government officials and even slaves wear *kat*. The *top'o* (long mandarin anorak) is thought to be only for the literati. However, merchants wear this cloth with pleasure! (Chŏng Sok-chong 1972 a:290)

We see in these records the crisis of everyday etiquette. Etiquette in this court society was an important symbol of hierarchy at the level of everyday life. A *yangban* should behave as a *yangban*, a *yangin* as a *yangin*, and *nobi* as a *nobi*. When *yangin* and *nobi* were allowed to imitate the life-style of *yangban*, the monopoly of these on their peculiar networks of etiquette was broken. It became meaningless. Then the crisis of orientation in everyday life became apparent for everyone. What the ruling group feared as it complained about loosening ties of etiquette based on Confucian hierarchy was nothing else than the loss of their monopoly status.

Their monopoly of candidacy for the state examinations was also threatened by the candidates of lower origins, as we read in the Annals of 1797:

Since the order and rules have become loose, rich peasants and even emancipated slaves call themselves *yuhak* (candidate for the state examination) and rush to the state examinations. Some rich persons buy three or four candidates and send them to several examination places to submit papers with the buyer's name. (Chŏng Sok-chong 1972a:292).

Because the ties of the estate hierarchy had become so loose that mere candidacy for the state examinations meant belonging to the *yangban* estate. Many people with sufficient financial ability were fond of becoming candidates with no real hope of success. No wonder that in 1800, 110,000 candidates for the literary examination and an additional 35,000 for the less-privileged military examination rushed into the capital, a city of 200,000 inhabitants (Chŏng Sok-chong 1972a:292-3; 1972b:157).

IV. Conclusion

The *yangban* estate at the turn of the nineteenth century could no longer control its own membership, its life-style, or candidacy for the state examinations. The borderlines between it and lower estates became ambiguous. Members of the lowest estate, *nobi*, could emancipate themselves either by buying free status or by simply running away from their lords, while many *yangin* succeeded in acquiring *yangban* title. The impoverishment of the ruling *yangban*, on the one hand, and the economic prosperity of several members of the lower estates, on the other hand, were the essential causes of the weakening of the estate system. The state apparatus, suffering from financial deficits, accelerated this process by selling titles. At the same time, private family registers of prominent *yangban* clans were falsified massively, and membership in such clans was dealt out in exchange for money, so that in the mid-nineteenth century more than half of the population of the southern provinces could register themselves as *yangban*. This inflation of the *yangban* estate was a general tendency in the nineteenth century.

The development of a monetary economy from the seventeenth century was facilitated by tax reforms and had a strong impact on loosening the ties of the estate system. The commerce and handicrafts developed mainly in the private sector were transforming the economic organization, state policies, and the network of the everyday etiquette of the population. This long-term social process covering the economic, political, and interactional levels was the result of the endogenous dynamics of social transformation in traditional Korea.

(I am indebted much to Ms. Barbara Yount and Mr. Michael Macmillan for their help in preparing this article.)

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