

# "Asiatic" or "Feudal" – How to Define the Precapitalist Mode of Production in Korea?\*

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## I. Introduction

One problem in studying the precapitalist social formations of East Asia is the lack of a relevant concept to define exactly the precapitalist mode of production in this region. This is true not only of Korea but also of China and Japan, for which some accept the concept of the Asiatic mode of production and others, the feudal mode.<sup>1</sup>

Marxist debates have developed several concepts of precapitalist modes of production, including: "Asiatic," "feudal," "tribute-paying," "slave-holding," and "petty-commodity." Such concepts have been constructed on the basis of European experiences, and only insufficiently describe the traditional societies of East Asia. In East Asia, the centralized state has monopolized the means of physical violence and taxation since ancient times, and socioeconomic concepts that originated from Europe can be used in only a limited sense. There is no tangible conceptual apparatus that can assist in an analysis of the precapitalist mode of production, especially in the Yi dynasty (1392-1910). We should either construct new concepts or review and reinterpret the commonly used ones.

This paper examines the adaptability of several concepts of the precapitalist mode of production in the context of the Confucian society of Korea. It proposes that the concept of Asiatic feudalism be used for this society, which was characterized by a share-cropping system, centralized state power, and an estate system.

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1 For example, Ferenc Tökei believes an Asiatic mode of production existed in China and partially in Tokugawa Japan. See Tökei (1969), pp. 122 ff. Barrington Moore talks about "centralized feudalism" in Japan, whereas Samir Amin, Marc Bloch, and Karl Marx himself try to find similarities between the Japanese and European feudalism. Barrington Moore (1966), pp. 238 ff; Samir Amin (1974), pp. 140-1; Marx (1977), p. 878; Marc Bloch (1961), pp. 446 ff. See also John W. Hall (1962-3), p. 63; Perry Anderson (1979: Appendix).

## II. Diversity of Land-Ownership

One way to define a mode of production rests on combinations of such elements as "laborers - means of production - non-laborers = appropriators of surplus labor."<sup>2</sup> By investigating such combinations, a certain dominating mode of production in the Yi dynasty can be found. Here we will consider landownership first, since arable land was the most important means of production in this agrarian society. It has frequently been argued that the traditional societies of Asia had one typical form of landownership: the state ownership and village possession of land.<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, the forerunner of this argument, wrote:

Should the direct producers not be confronted by a private landowner, but rather, as in Asia, under direct subordination to a state which stands over them as their landlord and simultaneously as sovereign, then rent and taxes coincide, or rather there exists no tax which differs from this form of ground-rent. Under such circumstances, there need exist no stronger political or economic pressure than that common to all subjection to that state. The state is then the supreme lord. Sovereignty here consists in the ownership of land concentrated on a national scale. But, on the other hand, no private ownership of land exists, although there is both private and common possession and use of land.<sup>4</sup>

Marx's viewpoint has motivated the protagonists of the "Asiatic mode of production." However, this view is inadequate when applied for the landownership in the Yi era, because the landownership and the transfer of revenue in this society showed quite different features. To give a clear explanation, let us examine the diversity of ownership.

### 1. The amount of arable land

Of about one and one-half million *kyol* (unit of land-measurement) of arable land in the whole country,<sup>5</sup> the king owned 10,000 *kyol*, and the state apparatus,

2 Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar (1979), p. 212.

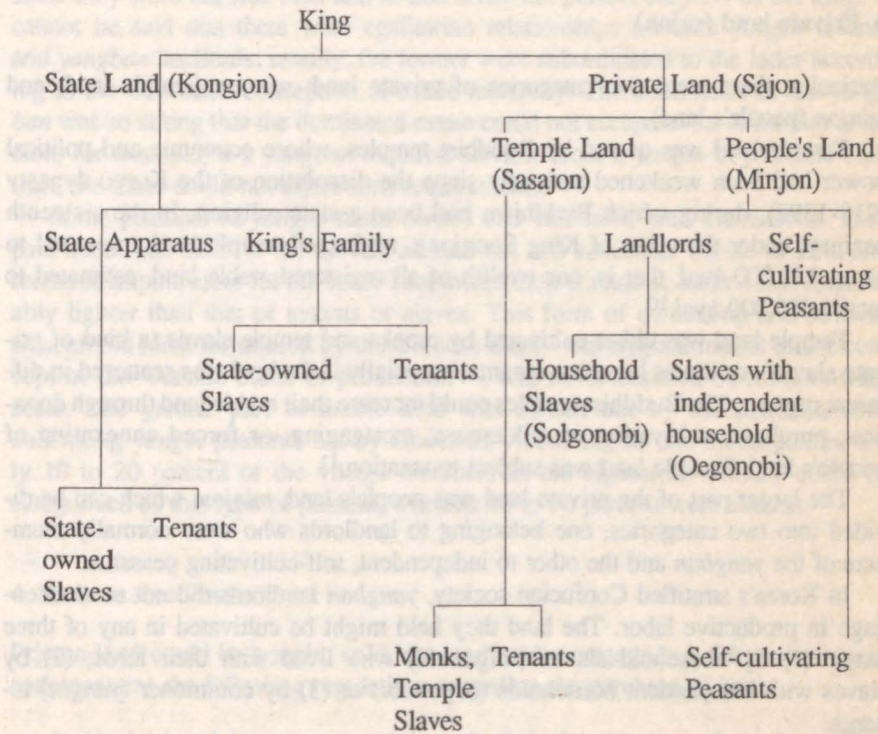
3 Leggewie repeats Marx's argument when he regards the state as the "higher owner" and believes the concept of the Asiatic mode of production useful in studying developing countries. Claus Leggewie (1975), p. 101.

4 Karl Marx (1981), p. 791.

5 According to the Yi dynasty tax system, arable land was not taxed on the basis of size but on average harvest. Thus the measure of a certain parcel varied with its fruitfulness. If a certain parcel (e. g. 1 *kyol*) was more fruitful than average, its size was smaller, whereas the size of a land less fruitful was larger. If the investigation by Pak Si-hyong is followed, 1 *kyol* of land varied from ca. 1 to 4 *ha* in 1634. See Pak Si-hyong (1961), p. 401-2. Up to the end of the sixteenth century, the whole arable land of Korea was estimated to 1,500,000 - 1,700,000 *kyol*. After the Korea-Japan war at the end of the sixteenth century, it was drastically reduced to 300,000 *kyol*. Until the end of the dynasty, it did not recover over 1,400,000 *kyol*. See Ch'on Kwan-u (1965), p. 1506.

about 100,000 *kyol* or slightly more.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the state and the king owned at most one-tenth of the arable land. The other nine-tenths was owned by private landowners: the members of the ruling estate (*yangban*), self-cultivating *yangin* (commoners), Buddhist temples, *hyanggyo* (local schools), and clan communities. As a matter of course, the members of the *yangban* similar to the Chinese gentry, owned the largest part of the arable land, although they seldom cultivated it themselves.<sup>7</sup> The landownership of the Yi dynasty is presented in Figure 1.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1: Diversity of Landownership in the Yi Dynasty



6 Kim Sok-hyong (1957), p. 257; Kang Pyong-do (1957), p. 140.

7 The upper stratum of the *yangban* estate owned many slaves; some had more than 1,000. But the lowest stratum of the *yangban* had no slaves. They had either to till the land themselves or lease it. See Arri Tomonori (1967) p. 76-77.

8 Compare this scheme to that of Yi Chae-mu who takes over Marx's views on the Asiatic social formation in which rent and tribute coincide. Yi Chae-mu 1962, p. 60.

## 2. State land (kongjon)

Government administrative bureaus such as the central ministries, the king's chamber, local governors' offices, military camps, and ferry and horse stations had their own arable land as sources of the revenue necessary for their administrative functions. No tax was levied on this kind of land. Land-owning bureaus either cultivated this land with their own labor, that is, state-owned slaves, or they leased it to tenants who in turn were obliged to pay 30 to 50 percent of the harvest as ground-rent.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Private land (sajon)

Basically, there were two categories of private land: *sasajon* (temple land) and *minjon* (people's land).

Temple land was owned by Buddhist temples, whose economic and political power had been weakened seriously since the dissolution of the Koryo dynasty (918-1392), during which Buddhism had been a state religion. In the sixteenth century, under the reign of King Songjong, registered temple land amounted to about 130,000 *kyol*, that is, one-twelfth of all registered arable land, estimated to total 1,600,000 *kyol*.<sup>10</sup>

Temple land was either cultivated by monks and temple slaves (a kind of private slaves), or it was leased to tenants, especially if the land was scattered in different regions. The Buddhist temples could increase their arable land through donation, purchase, cultivation of wilderness, mortgaging, or forced annexation of people's land. Temple land was subject to taxation.<sup>11</sup>

The larger part of the private land was people's land, *minjon*, which can be divided into two categories, one belonging to landlords who were normally members of the *yangban* and the other to independent, self-cultivating peasants.

In Korea's stratified Confucian society, *yangban* landlords did not need to engage in productive labor. The land they held might be cultivated in any of three ways: (1) by household slaves (*solgonobi*) who lived with their lords; (2) by slaves with independent households (*oegonobi*) or (3) by commoner (*yangin*) tenants.

Household slaves usually possessed no means of production of their own,

9 Kim Yong-sop (1972b), p. 153.

10 At that time, approximately 20,000 Buddhist temples owned arable land. See Arii Tomonori (1979), p. 511.

11 Several favored temples did not pay land tax. In principle, Buddhist monks were exempt from *corvée*. See Arii (1979), p. 530 and *Man'gyoram* (1971; originally 1808), p. 169.

whereas slaves with independent households, though dependent on their lords, usually possessed their own working tools but were obliged, as were other tenants, to pay about 50 percent of their harvests as ground rent and to provide additional services. They could lease arable land not only from their own lords but also from other landlords under certain tenancy contracts. In a sense, they were similar to the serfs of European feudalism.<sup>12</sup>

Tenants of commoner status worked on a purely economic contract and paid half of the harvest as rent. As free men they were not personally dependent upon landlords, but they were, as subjects of the king, obliged to pay additional tributes to the state. Private slaves were exempt from paying tribute to the state, since they were not free men and in this sense not perfect subjects of the king. It cannot be said that there were egalitarian relationships between *yangin* tenants and *yangban* landlords; usually, the former were subordinated to the latter according to the Confucian conception of estate hierarchy. The dominance of the *yangban* was so strong that the dominated estate could not escape extra-economic coercion; for example, if a *yangban* required services from a *yangin* beyond the contract, the latter could not reject such requirements.

Some peasants of *yangin* status owned and cultivated land themselves. They paid about one-tenth of the harvest as land tax and additional tribute in kind and rendered unpaid labor for the state. That meant their economic burden was remarkably lighter than that of tenants or slaves. This form of ownership and cultivation, an old ideal influenced by the Chinese ideal – the original model of the concept of the "Asiatic mode of production" – was never realized on a nationwide scale. The greater part of arable land was owned not by independent, self-cultivating *yangin* peasants but by landlords. According to one investigation, only 10 to 20 percent of the village members in the eighteenth century could be categorized as this type of peasant, whereas 80 to 90 percent were tenants.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. State vs. landowner

Private land could be bought, sold, donated, and mortgaged. A fifteenth-century code contains the following regulations regarding the purchase of land:

Arable land and houses may not be refunded after 15 days of purchase. They must be registered in 100 days at the state offices. The same rule applies to selling slaves. Cows and horses may not be refunded after five days of purchase.<sup>14</sup>

12 Ch'on Kwan-u 1965, p. 1436

13 Kim Yong-sop 1972a, p. 11.

14 *Kyongguk Taejon: Hojon* (1972), p. 200. See also Ch'on Kwan-u 1965, p. 1433.

The king's chamber or other state apparatus could not at will remove land from private landowners. Arable land about to become waste land and whose landowner was absent for more than three years could be cultivated without permission of the landowner.<sup>15</sup> But if the authorized owner returned to insist upon his ownership, the land had to be given back to him. Only if a person cultivated virgin land could he own the land.<sup>16</sup> Thus the rich and powerful of the dynasty could increase their private land through cultivating virgin land by engaging a labor force under their control.

Sometimes the king tried to annex the private land of self-cultivating peasants under the pretense that the whole territory was his own personal property, but peasants resisted such endeavors. The Annals of King Hyonjong in the year 1662 report an exemplary incident. In that year, high-ranking state functionaries, including the minister of finance, accused the king of endeavoring to annex cultivated land owned by private persons. The king wanted to distribute this land among his family members. The high-ranking officials were unanimously against such a maneuver:

The poor, landless peasants have cultivated the wilderness with their own labour and tilled it since many years. They inherited it from father to son, or they sold it to other persons. Now, the King's family tries suddenly to usurp the cultivators of their own arable land. What a lamentable endeavour it is!<sup>17</sup>

The king could not repeat his attempt. If he needed the arable land, he had to pay for it.<sup>18</sup>

### III. The System of Political Domination

The state as a centralized power had the following sources of revenue:

- a. ground-rent: the whole harvest or ca. 30 to 50 percent of the harvest from the state land that made up one-tenth of all arable land in the country.
- b. land tax: about one-tenth of the harvest on private land.
- c. tribute in kind: differing materials for everyday administration gathered from all provinces and countries.
- d. *corvée* or forced labor: a sort of labor tribute. Physical services by state slaves, private craftsmen, and all adults of *yangin* status for construction

15 *Kyongguk Taejon* p. 189.

16 *Yi Kyong-sik* (1973), pp. 90 ff.

17 Cited in An Pyong-t'ae (1965), p. 61.

18 *Ibid.* Since 1668 a certain amount of money had been given to the members of king's family and to administrative bureaus for purchasing needed arable land. See *Yi Kyong-sik* (1973), p. 99.

works managed by the state. This physical service, defined by law, was up to 6 days per year for every person.<sup>19</sup>

e. Military service and defense tax from all *yangin* adults.<sup>20</sup>

It is worthwhile to remark on the fact that the tribute in kind, *corvée*, and defense tax had been gathered in rice, cotton, or coins since the seventeenth century, when tax reforms were introduced. Thanks to the long period of peace, the state did not need a strong army, so that the military support was converted easily to cash or kind, such as rice or cotton.

Little is known about the amount of land tax and tribute in kind. If the estimate of Pak Si-hyong is followed, the land tax equalled 10 percent and other various tributes, including labor tributes, about 7 percent of the harvest. According to Chon Sok-tam, 25 to 30 percent of the harvest was destined for the state budget.<sup>21</sup> But only self-cultivating peasants enjoyed this relatively light burden. The majority of peasants were tenants and paid an additional 30 to 50 percent of the harvest as rent to their landowners.

With these incomes, the central government could financially support its administrative and military apparatus, and, moreover, could control the provinces. The governors of the eight provinces, who ruled in the name of the king with full responsibility of taxation, jurisprudence, and partial military activities, were ousted again and again, since the central government adopted the principle of rotation. Six governors hold the office up to one year; the governors of the two northern provinces, up to two years.<sup>22</sup>

Governors were not recruited from the provinces they administered but were sent by the central government. The principle of mutual avoidance (*sangp'i*), forbidding service by governors and chiefs of counties in the areas of their own tribal and geographical origins, was a way of uprooting the local base of political power. If the governor of a province and the chief of a county had the same family background, the latter had to move to another province. The same principle applied even to the village origin; no one might be nominated as governor of a province where he had parents.<sup>23</sup> As a matter of course, the principles of rotation and mutual avoidance were preventive measures against the possibility of any concentration of power at the local level. A citizen of the Yi dynasty could build up neither his own military bases nor autonomous administrative units against

19 Yi Ki-baek (1971), p. 217.

20 Members of the *yangban* also were obliged to serve in the army, but legally or illegally, they could be exempt from military service. In reality, the *yangban* fulfilled no military service. See Yi Song-mu (1980), pp. 174 ff.

21 Kang Pyong-do (1957), pp. 153-4.

22 Chang Pyong-in (1978), p. 146.

23 Ibid.

those of the king.

High-ranking government officials were selected through literary examinations organized by the state. Passing this examination was the main goal of every member of the *yangban*. Lower-ranking civilian and military officials also were recruited through state exams of various categories for which usually the people from the *chungin* (intermediate estate) were candidates. Landownership was not a sufficient, but a necessary, condition in preparing for the state exams. It could not itself guarantee entrance into the state bureaucracy; but without the revenue based on landownership, it was almost impossible to spend the time necessary to prepare for the exams.

State power was highly centralized. It was more centripetal than centrifugal. The dynasty was an "absolute" monarchy, although this word should not be understood as unlimited power of the king and his family members over all kinds of political decision making. In reality, there were powerful clans that could participate in or sometimes monopolize the decision making at the king's court. The power of the king was never so "absolute" as the term "absolute monarchy" implies. The monarchy was a power configuration in and around the king's court, where several powerful *yangban* clans were conflicting, competing, and cooperating with one another, in order to strengthen their own political influences, as well as their economic and ideological power. As Kwang-Ching Liu remarked, "Because the institution of kingship was weak in Korea's aristocratic society, the king was often manipulated to suit the ideas and interests of the powerful *yangban* families."<sup>24</sup>

The influence of several *yangban* clans was so strong that the central government had no alternative but to give up parts of its important revenue sources, that is, the land tax. Table 1 shows that over 40 percent of the arable land was exempted from state taxation, and that this tendency was increasing.

Table 1: *Tax-obliged vs. tax-free land (1804-83) (unit: kyol)*

Year	total surface	tax-obliged surface (A)	tax-free surface (B)	A:B
1804	1,454,356	816,502	637,854	56:44
1824	1,455,167	787,933	667,234	54:46
1844	1,458,942	786,976	671,966	54:46
1864	1,445,491	776,708	668,783	54:46
1883	1,483,633	757,018	726,615	51:49

Source: Curtailed table according to Pak Si-hyong (1961), 303.

24 Kwang-Ching Liu, Forward to Kim Key-hiuk (1980), p. x.



Nevertheless, attention should be paid to the fact that the tax-free land included the private land free from taxation by law. Table 2, based on a government source from 1808, shows that about 14 percent of the arable land belonged either to the state or to private owners who were obliged to fulfill certain functions on behalf of the state; this kind of private land was free from taxation.

Astonishingly, the same table shows that 28.2 percent of the land was exempted from the tax "because of unreasonable disorder." As such, only 55.7 percent of the arable land was subject to taxation. It may be assumed that the powerful *yangban* clans, who were collaborating with local government officials, manipulated their tillable land into this category to exempt it from tax obligations.<sup>25</sup>

Table 2: *Tax-obliged vs. tax-free land (1808) (unit: kyol)*

Total surface in land register:	dry field	927,602	(63.7%)
	wet field	528,990	(36.3%)
	total	1,456,592	(100.0%)
Tax-obliged surface		810,819	(55.7%)
Tax-free at the time because of natural disaster		29,985	(2.1%)
Tax-free because of unreasonable disorder		411,250	(28.8%)
Tax-free for state land (A)		204,628	(14.0%)
Total		1,456,592	(100.0%)
Explanation of (A):			
Arable land attached to the graves of king's family		2,016	(0.1%)
Arable land belonging to the king's family		37,926	(2.6%)
State land		46,102	(3.2%)
Other tax-free lands (a)		118,584	(8.1%)
Total		204,628	(14.0%)

(a) including tax-free private land reserved for certain state projects.

Sources: *Man'gi Yoram* (1971 (originally 1908)), p. 142-3.

Ch'on Kwan-u (1965), pp. 1506-10.

25 See the interpretation by Pak Si-hyong (1961), pp. 303 ff and Ch'on Kwan-u (1965), pp. 1507 ff.

The central government, the configuration of powerful *yangban* clans, seems not to have been in a position to levy taxes upon a greater part of the private land against the interests of those clans.<sup>26</sup> The result was a financial crisis in the nineteenth century that in turn contributed to a weakening of the state's power.

On the other side, the majority of the population was totally excluded from the opportunity to participate in the state's affairs. They had only the obligation to pay tribute in various forms with no rights of participation.

#### IV. Conceptual Sketch

This section examines several concepts that have been used or could be used to define the precapitalist modes of production in Korea.

##### 1. Asiatic mode of production

On the basis of reading Marx's works and various interpretations of them, the Marxian image of traditional Asian societies may be summarized as follows:<sup>27</sup>

1. The arable land in Asiatic societies belonged to the state-king who appeared "as the higher owner or as the only owner".<sup>28</sup> The village communities in turn could be conceived of as the real possessor of land.
2. Individuals tilled the arable land as members of the village community that possessed and inherited it from generation to generation.
3. In the Asiatic societies, the tax coincided with the ground-rent, because the state as the sole landowner had the right to exploit the surplus products from immediate cultivators in the form of tribute. Such tribute was gathered by the village community through communal control.
4. The state was the owner of arable land because it initiated the cultivation of wilderness through wide-ranging irrigation project.
5. Since there was no private landownership, state power tended to become despotic, and the society in general tended to stagnate.

<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the king was dependent upon the powerful aristocrats. Several kings of this dynasty were enthroned after victorious party struggles, whereas several others resigned from the crown for lack of support from the powerful *yangban* clans.

<sup>27</sup> Among numerous works on the Asiatic mode of production, see: Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie; Capital*, Vol. 3; "The British Rule in India"; "Revolution in China and in Europe"; "The Future Results of British Rule in India" in Marx and Engels (1968); Wittfogel (1959); Sofri (1972); Tökei (1969); Sawyer (1977); Skalinik et. al. (1966); Hobsbawm (1978); Dunn (1982).

<sup>28</sup> Godelier (1978), p. 223.

6. Although there was a class differentiation between the state class and the peasants, the village communities usually had no experience in class differentiation on a large scale, since their members produced, harvested, and distributed communally.

Among the participants in the debates on the Asiatic mode of production since the 1930s, there has been no consensus on what Marx really meant by this concept of the traditional Asiatic societies. Maurice Godelier believes the most important characteristic of the Asiatic mode of production is the state ownership of land.<sup>29</sup> According to his explanatory scheme, the state controlled the individual neither directly nor individually but through the village community, so individuals should not be considered separately from the village community.

The Asiatic social formation was quite different from other precapitalist social formations. According to the illustration given by the Hungarian Sinologist Ferenc Tökei, there were principal differences of social organization between the Asiatic, Ancient, and Germanic formations, as were given by Marx in his famous section on "Forms which precede capitalist production" in *Grundrisse*.<sup>30</sup> In the Ancient formation, a citizen (free man) not only owned his own land and slaves but also got access to the communal land (*ager publicus*) because he was a member of the city-state consisting of free citizens. In the Germanic formation, the individual owned his own means of production not as a member of the village community but as an individual. In comparison with these two formations, the individual in the Asiatic formation owned and possessed the land only as a member of the spontaneous community (*Naturwüchsige Gemeinschaft*).

But what Marx really meant remains somewhat vague. Perry Anderson seems to be right in pointing at the oscillation of Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production. According to Anderson, Marx's own conception oscillated between the landownership of the village community and the state monopoly of landownership. Thus, Marx did not provide a "consistent and systematic explanation of the Asiatic mode of production."<sup>31</sup>

Ferenc Tökei, a remarkable advocate of this concept, also suggests that the Asiatic mode of production as conceived by Marx and Engels had a double meaning: "On the one side, they were designating with this concept the pre-Ancient mode of production which had been stagnating in a transitory phase. At the same time, they called the stagnation of oriental people up to the penetration of capitalism 'asiatic.'"<sup>32</sup>

29 Godelier (1978), p. 223.

30 Tökei (1977), p. 131.

31 Anderson (1979), p. 482-3.

32 Tökei (1969), p. 89.

For Marx, the Asiatic societies were nothing more than a not-yet civilized world that should be civilized in time by the capitalistic Western world. Such an opinion was imminent not only in his abstract concept of the Asiatic mode of production but also in his description of concrete historical phenomena in Asia. As one of his newspaper articles stated: "England has to fulfill a double mission in India; one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia."<sup>33</sup>

Although Marx appreciated the role of the Russian village community as "the base for rebirth of Russia" and as such the developmental potential of a non-European society, his view on the stagnation of Asiatic societies remains uncontroversial.<sup>34</sup>

Marx's conception of Asiatic societies could not avoid the "errors of European eyes" of the nineteenth century, which regarded non-European societies fundamentally as stagnating, despotic, and barbarian. This prejudice had its roots in insufficient knowledge regarding the society and culture of Asia. As Eric J. Hobsbawm elucidates:

It [i. e., Marx and Engel's historical knowledge] was (at all events in the period when the *Formen* was drafted) thin on pre-history, on primitive communal societies and on pre-Columbian America, and virtually non-existent on Africa. It was impressive on the Ancient or medieval Middle East, but markedly better on certain parts of Asia, notably India, but not on Japan. It was good on classical antiquity and the European middle ages, though Marx's (and to a lesser extent Engels') interest in this period was uneven.<sup>35</sup>

Our intention is not to introduce in detail the debates concerning the concept of the Asiatic mode of production, but rather to examine its applicability to the pre-capitalist society of Korea.<sup>36</sup>

The private ownership of land was approved by law no later than the fifteenth century. The purchase, sale, giving away, heritability, and right to mortgage land were untouched rights of private owners. Thus, the rich and powerful tried to increase their land through such means. Although the founders of the Yi dynasty

33 Marx: "The Future Results of the British Rule in India"; in Marx und Engels (1968), p. 82.

34 See Marx's letters to Vera I. Sassulitsch in *Marx-Engels-Werke* Vol. 19, (1969), pp. 242-3, 284-95, 306-406. Also the positive evaluation of Marx's intention by Leggewie in Leggewie (1975), pp. 96-97. See also Gerhard Hauck (1979), p. 9.

35 Eric J. Hobsbawm (1978), p. 26.

36 Detailed discussions of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production can especially be found in Andersen (1979), Godelier (1978), Sofri (1972), Tökei (1969), Sawyer (1977), and Dunn (1982).

adopted a new land distributing system called *kwajonpop* prohibiting the sale and purchase of arable land, they abandoned their effort after 33 years. In 1424, they could not but admit the right to dispose of private land.<sup>37</sup>

Individuals cultivated their own or leased land not as members of a village community but as independent individuals.<sup>38</sup> Although there was solidarity on the basis of common family and clan membership, it had more of a spiritual and ethical meaning than economic advantages. The individual calculations of every household dominated economic life. Every household was an economic unit that tilled and harvested for itself, although certain communal tillage was done on the principle of mutual help. The main features of the Asiatic mode of production, that is, communal ownership, tillage, and harvest, were exceptional, found only on land that belonged to clans whose center was the line of first sons or to voluntarily organized mutual financing groups called *kye*.<sup>39</sup> On this kind of communal land, tenancy was dominant; in other words, the clans leased the land to finance communal clan activities, mainly ancestor worship. The surplus products, that is, the ground-rent gathered from this communal land, were not distributed among the clan members but rather assigned to clan activities such as ancestor worship and clan feasts.

The tax did not unconditionally coincide with the ground-rent. Two forms of revenue were distinguished from each other. The cultivators of private land paid about 50 percent of the harvest as ground-rent to the landlord and an additional 10 percent as land tax to the state. They could appropriate only the remainder. If an immediate cultivator was at the same time the owner of the land, he needed to pay no ground-rent but rather land tax, which was the case for only a small minority of peasants, the majority of whom were tenants.

Thanks to the advantageous climate of the Korean peninsula with sufficient rain during the cultivating season, the state did not need nationwide irrigation projects.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the country was so mountainous and the arable land so scat-

37 Ch'on Kwan-u (1965), pp. 1432-3.

38 On the dissolution of village communities as units of ownership in the process of parceling, see Kang Chin-ch'ol (1965), p. 1328.

39 On the organization and function of *kye*, see Kim Sam-su (1965), pp. 661 ff.

40 It is worthwhile to cite Wittfogel's remarks on the geographical situation in Japan: "The peculiarities of the country's water supply neither necessitated, nor favored substantial government-directed works. Innumerable mountain ranges compartmentalized the great Far Eastern islands; and their broken relief encouraged a fragmented (hydroagricultural) rather than a coordinated (hydraulic) pattern of irrigation farming and flood control." See Wittfogel (1959), p. 197. It seems to be problematic to distinguish the Chinese (hydraulic) pattern from the Japanese (hydroagricultural) pattern. Anderson criticizes the Wittfogel theorem, while he points out the coexistence of private ownership and irrigation projects in China. See Anderson (1979), pp. 527-8. At any rate, the geographical relief structure of Korea would be more similar to that of Japan than to that of China.

tered that large-scale irrigation systems were neither possible nor meaningful. Nationwide irrigation projects in Korea were initiated by the state during and after the colonial era.<sup>41</sup>

The social formation of the Yi dynasty was characterized by a relatively rigid system of inequality called here the estate system (*sinbunje*) that consisted of the four main estates: *yangban* (literati), *chungin* (intermediate estate), *yangin* (commoners), and *nobi* (slaves). Normally, the borderlines between these four estates were not to be transversed. According to the estate system social gradation by birth was the backbone of society.

Centralized state power, which could integrate and control internal conflicts, was a hindrance for the transformation of the society as a whole. The absolute monarchy, which did not know how to benefit from mercantilist policies, fettered the emerging trade and manufacture in the private sector. But it may not be inferred from this fact that the society of the Yi dynasty was fundamentally stagnating. On the contrary, certain dynamics of social process can be found in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that were related to the development of commodity production and the dissolution of the estate system. The long-term process of transformation evolved from the efforts of the dominated estates, commoners and slaves, to overthrow the old estate order.<sup>41a</sup>

## 2. Feudal mode of production

From the various definitions of the concept of the feudal mode of production, the following common features can be enumerated:<sup>42</sup>

1. Society was divided into two main classes: feudal lord and serf.
2. The most important means of production, that is, arable land, belonged to the feudal lords, who could additionally profit from the labor power of the serfs.
3. Agricultural producers "possessed" the means of production.
4. Surplus products were expropriated from the agricultural producers by the feudal lords through extra-economic forces, the immediate cultivators being conceived of as serfs of the landlords. The surplus products were exploited in forms of socage, natural tributes, or money in the later feudal age.
5. Political power was decentralized, and the system of domination was centrifugal.

41 Yi Kwang-nin (1961), p. 146 ff; Saijo Akira (1971)

41a See the following paper by the same author. "The Endogenous Dynamics of Social Transformation in Traditional Korea". Working Paper No. 57. Sociology of Development Research Center, University of Bielefeld, 1985.

42 Marc Bloch (1961), especially Part VIII; Claude Cahen (1977); Samir Amin (1976); John W. Hall (1962-63); Anderson (1978).

- gal. In principle, the feudal lords enjoyed administrative and juridical autonomy.
6. This autonomy originated from the vassalage developed after the dissolution of the Roman Empire. In this process of feudalization, the vassalage came into being that usually has been regarded as the most important criterion for distinguishing between the European and Asiatic types of feudalism.<sup>43</sup>
  7. The cities were free from feudal bondage and were relatively conducive to commercial and industrial activities.

The adaptability of this concept developed on the basis of European experience to the analysis of the mode of production in the Yi era is now examined.

In the Yi era, there was a rigid estate system. The first two estates, *yangban* and *chungin*, were exploiters; the other two estates, *yangin* and *nobi* were immediate producers exploited by the former. In this sense, the society of the Yi dynasty was dichotomized into two main classes.

The most important means of production, arable land, usually belonged to *yangban* landlords who owned and inherited it as private property. In addition, they owned private slaves whose duty was to perform productive work and everyday services for their lord.

The direct cultivators were *yangin* and *nobi*. While the *nobi* belonged either to the state apparatus or to a private lord, the *yangin* had the status of free men. They were never serfs of a particular landlord, although they were discriminated against severely by the ruling estate. Some *yangin* had their own arable land and were independent in this sense, but most of them were tenants. The *nobi* were either household slaves or slaves with independent household (*oegonobi*). The former were patriarchal slaves, whereas the latter were similar to the serfs of European feudalism.

The dominant form of exploitation of surplus was the share-cropping system. The landlords usually could get one-half of the harvest as ground-rent, as long as their arable land was leased. The state apparatus could receive about the same amount of ground-rent from its tenants. It was normally paid in kind; rent in forms of forced labor or money had only marginal meaning.

Power had been centralized in the state since the unification of the country in the seventh century. Until then, there had been ceaseless wars among the Three Kingdoms which had been formed originally by the alliance of several tribes. The Yi dynasty was able to control all the provinces with the exception of a massive peasants' rebellion in the late nineteenth century. There was no decentralized sys-

43 Max Weber, in his ideal-type approach, distinguished *Pfründenfeudalismus* from *Lebensfeudalismus*; the former would have been found in the Islamic Near East, India of the Mogul regime, and partly in Japan. According to this typology, one may speak of a feudalism without vassalage (*Lebensverhältnis*). See Weber (1976), pp. 151 ff.

tem of domination as occurred in the European middle ages: the provinces were ruled by officials sent by the king as his own personal delegation. The *yangban* clans, having no chance to establish their own power at the local level, tried to widen their influence upon the king's court so that they could share in decision making for their own purposes.

There was no vassalage in the Western European form. Because of the long period of peace, the powerful clans could not build up their own armies, which could have been the reason for vassalage.

The cities were usually the center of administration and offered no free room for industrial and commercial activities. Quite contrary to the cities of European feudalism, the cities in the Yi era had no rights of autonomous administration.

### 3. Tribute-paying mode of production

The concept of the tribute-paying mode of production, proposed mainly by Samir Amin, encompasses the following characteristics of Afro-Asiatic social formations.<sup>44</sup>

1. The society was divided into two major classes: peasants, who were organized by the village community, and the ruling state class, which was obliged to organize the society politically. In return for their "pains" of governing, the latter was thought to be authorized to receive appropriate tributes (normally in noncommodity forms) from the rural communities.
2. The ruling state class was not a landowner. The land was owned by the village communities.
3. In more developed types of the tribute-paying mode of production, a merchant class emerged and organized industrial production for the market.
4. This mode of production was found not only in Asia (China, India, Indonesia, Mesopotamia, and the Classical Orient), but also in Africa (Egypt, Black Africa), Europe (pre-ancient societies of Crete and Etruria), and Indian America (Incas and Aztecs).
5. This mode of production can be further divided into two subcategories: the earlier forms and the more developed form, for example, the feudal mode of production. In the later form, the village community lost its proprietary right to the feudal lords. In most cases, the tribute-paying mode of production tended to develop into feudalism.<sup>45</sup>

44 Amin (1976), pp. 15-6.

45 One of the difficulties in using the concept of the tribute-paying mode of production is that the protagonists of this concept sometimes try to include also European feudalism. For example, Immanuel Wallerstein substitutes this concept for feudalism without explain-



At first sight, this wide-ranging concept seems to be able to cover almost every type of precapitalist society, including the Korean one. But it is doubtful that this concept would be applicable to the society of the Yi dynasty since individuals rather than village communities were the rightful owners of the arable land. In the process of state formation in ancient times, the village communities lost their ownership to the landowners, that is, either government officials, members of the ruling estate, or the state apparatus. It is not quite clear how Amin can distinguish the tribute-paying mode of production as a prototype from the feudal one as its developed form. If it is said, one can find the feudal mode of production in those societies where the "community loses the dominium eminens of the land,"<sup>46</sup> then the mode of production in the Yi era should be called feudal rather than asiatic. The ruling class here, emerging from the process of state formation, took over the arable land from the village communities. This process of state formation occurred in the Three Kingdoms era. In this context, it is important to determine whether the ownership of communal arable land was given to private landowners before or after the foundation of centralized political power. I believe the privatization of landownership had already begun in the ancient Three Kingdoms, that is, before the first unification of Korea in the seventh century.

#### 4. Slave-owning mode of production

The characteristics of the slave-owning mode of production of the Greco-Roman type can be summarized as follows:<sup>47</sup>

1. Private landownership by citizen-free men existed in addition to communal landownership.
2. The free citizens appropriated the surplus products produced mainly by prisoners of war.
3. The products were produced in commodity form and destined for long-distance markets.
4. This mode of production presupposed the ceaseless recruitment of slaves through wars of conquest.

In the Yi dynasty, there were many slaves, but their role was different from that of the Greco-Roman slaves. No land was owned communally by the free citizens of the state, as was the case in the Greco-Roman society. Not slaves, but peas-

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ning the reason for doing so. See Wallerstein (1980), p. 8. An uncritical application of this concept to the traditional society of Korea is found in Wontroba and Menzel (1978), pp. 2-9 ff.

46 Amin (1976), p. 16.

47 Hindess & Hirst (1975: Part Three); Tökei (1977).

ants of yangin estate were the majority of immediate producers.

The materials and services produced by the slaves were not for long-distance markets but for the everyday use of slave-holders. In this sense, the slavery of the Yi dynasty was patriarchial. When commodity production increased beginning in the seventeenth century, slavery was being dissolved; the slaves were on the verge of emancipation. Production by slaves had nothing to do with commodity production.

There was no massive sale and purchase of slaves on the slave market. Only in the ancient Three Kingdom when ceaseless wars of conquest took place, were captured warriors converted into slaves. But in the Yi dynasty without such wars, slaves were recruited through juridical sanctions and inheritance; the slaves had to inherit their status from generation to generation.

Because of these peculiarities, one cannot say that a slave-owning mode of production existed in the Yi dynasty. The productive labor provided by slaves did not constitute a slave-owning mode of production as such; rather they formed a part of a feudal mode of production that, in the Korean case, cannot be considered separate from slaves.

### 5. Petty-commodity mode of production

The petty-commodity mode of production shows the following characteristics:<sup>48</sup>

1. This mode was based on the separation of handicraft and agriculture.
2. Money-commodity relations dominated the everyday life of the population.
3. This mode of production emerged in the transitory phase between feudalism and capitalism.
4. It seldom dominated other contemporaneous modes of production. "No society has ever been based on the predominance of this mode of production."<sup>49</sup>

Based on these characteristics, the petty-commodity mode of production seems to be ascending in modern Korea. When the government introduced coins as a means of payment in the seventeenth century, money-commodity relations developed rapidly, which in turn accelerated the dissolution of the traditional estate system. The separation of handicraft and agriculture proceeded gradually, so that the emerging manufacture in the nineteenth century became a new form of management. All these can be called "endogeneous dynamics" of social transformation.

48 Amin (1976), p. 15. Sweezy replaces this concept with "precapitalist commodity mode of production" in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. See Sweezy et. al. (1963), p. 15.

49 Amin, *ibid.* p. 15.

## V. Conceptual Alternative

No one concept of mode of production hitherto discussed describes exactly the relations of production in the Yi dynasty. In summary, elements of the following modes of production can be found in the social formation of the Yi era:

- (+) ascending tendency,
- (-) descending tendency, and
- (o) partial phenomena

### *Asiatic mode of production*

- a. Disadvantageous natural conditions and wide-range irrigation projects initiated by the state (-)
- b. State ownership of arable land (o)
- c. Coincidence of ground-rent and tax (o)
- d. Centralized political domination and despotism (+)
- e. Payment of tribute by the producers to the state (+)
- f. Ownership or possession of land by the village communities (-)
- g. No differentiated system of inequality (-)

### *Feudal mode of production*

- a. Private ownership of land (+)
- b. Share-cropping according to tenancy (+)
- c. Differentiated system of inequality/estate system (+)
- d. Decentralized system of domination (-)
- e. Vassalage (-)
- f. Extra-economic force by the ruling estate (+)

### *Slave-owning mode of production*

- a. Slaves as direct producers (+)
- b. Slaves for everyday services (+)
- c. Slaves for commodity production (-)
- d. Slave markets (-)
- e. Recruitment of slaves through war of conquest (-)

As this schematic overview shows, it is hard to define the mode of production in the Yi era by means of one conventional concept. All three concepts based on European experience can apply only partly for the Yi dynasty. The fourth possible concept, tribute-paying mode, which is used either to replace the Asiatic mode (as

by Amin) or to reformulate the feudal mode (as by Wallerstein), provides no more precise a definition, because this concept lacks the analytical sharpness to make possible the distinction between European feudalism and the society of the Yi dynasty.

Tribute in state-centralized societies is nothing more than the tax that the centralized state apparatus claims. The tribute-paying mode of production can be a valid concept, as long as the surplus products in a state-organized society are gathered mainly by the tax authority, that is, the state. But this was not the case in the Yi dynasty. The major part of the surplus was gathered not by the state as tax but by private landlords as rent; thus the concept is not valid in this society.

If the concept of the feudal mode is accepted, another serious problem surfaces. Although the production and exploitation of surplus in the Yi era on the basis of share-cropping were similar to those of European feudalism, no similar centrifugal tendency existed. The society of the Yi dynasty showed a strong centripetal tendency. The major characteristic of European feudalism, vassalage, cannot be found here. Nonetheless, other important characteristics of European feudalism can be found in the Yi dynasty: the estate system, private ownership of land, and share-cropping based on extra-economic coercion.

The Asiatic mode thought by so many Marxists to be a useful alternative, cannot be applied to the society of the Yi dynasty. The most important criterion of the Asiatic mode, state ownership and village control of the arable land, does not apply for this society.

My proposal to define the mode of production in the Yi dynasty as feudal and the social formation as a whole as Asiatic feudalism is based upon three characteristics: share-cropping, the estate system, and the centralized state. It is not my intention to give concepts generally applicable to every type of traditional society, as Marx tried to do; but suggestions can be made for further investigations in terms of comparative sociology.

To a certain extent, the three characteristics mentioned here are found in other traditional societies of Asia, for example, China, Java, and Ottoman Turkey, so that some scholars who are not ready to give up the concept of the Asiatic mode of production are mentioning the "feudalization" of this mode.<sup>50</sup> But in the Korean case, such feudalization cannot be insisted upon, because the Asiatic mode of production seems not to have been dominant in any period. If there was no dominant Asiatic mode, there may not have been a feudalization derived from it.

50 Keyder draws our attention to the feudalization of the Asiatic mode of production in Ottoman Turkey. See Keyder (1976). Godelier cannot escape the fallacy of the Asiatic mode of production, as he writes: "Aside from this well known path, we think that another one exists, one which would lead slowly, with the development of individual ownership, from certain forms of the Asiatic mode of production to certain forms of feudalism, without going through a slave stage. See Godelier (1978), p. 245.

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