Coordination and Brokerage: Leadership in Community Development in Rural Korea

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This paper examines how South Korean village leaders, under the influence of government policies, promoted or intervened in community development processes, and contrasts different styles of village leadership in different political situations. The discussion is based upon a case study of a village in Chindo County, South Cholla Province. However, the aim is not to provide a unique case from a particular community. Rather, the paper depicts a dynamic model for analyzing the collective choices villagers make, and shows how these choices have elasticity and adaptability with respect to coping with the changing politico-economic surroundings caused by the penetration of national government policies.

As is usual in any peasant society, South Korean rural villages are not as isolated as we may imagine. Instead, they stand in close multi-stranded relationships with the outside world. One of these connections is comprised of intervillage personal networks based on kinship and non-kin friendship. Another channel to the world outside the village is the government. Represented by the township and county offices, it exerts a great influence over village life. This influence may be most clearly seen in the development movements that have always been initiated by the central government. It is quite natural to assume that the basic characteristics of the village leadership reflect the modes of interaction between villagers and township or county officials supervised by the central government.

The village of Yongsanni, which I have studied since 1972, is located about fifteen miles from the town of Chindo, the county seat. In 1972, it took forty minutes by bus and twenty more minutes of walking to get to Yongsanni from the town. The village's economy was based on rice cultivation in well-irrigated paddy fields. Vegetables were planted in dry fields primarily for domestic consumption, but some of the dry-field crops were sold in the market in order to obtain the limited kinds of goods necessary for ordinary village life. In 1972, the village consisted of 94 households, which constituted the basic units of agricultural activities and daily domestic life. Labor—beyond what each household could provide for itself—was mostly furnished through exchange between households. There was little occupational differentiation.

In the following pages, community development movements promoted by the government in two quite different periods and with different backgrounds are analyzed. One is the Village Promotion Movement (Nōson shinkō undō), which
took place in the 1930s under the Japanese colonial government. The other is the New Community Movement (Saemaül undong), which I observed during the 1970s and 1980s.

Many villagers, especially of older generations, often emphasized how they had successfully improved village life through their active participation in the Village Promotion Movement. They noted that they had used the traditional organizations of a village community as an autonomous entity to mobilize village efforts. Strangely, although the villagers recalled that the movement was a success, it seems to have left no lasting, concrete aftermath on village life. All the public buildings and equipment used for communal purposes during the movement, such as the newly introduced threshing machines with engines, the village-managed barber shop, the cooperative store, and the common bath, had long been abandoned by 1972. The only exception was a tile-roofed building used for village meetings and women's communal indoor work during the winter. Even this building was abandoned in 1973. Thus, all the enthusiasm of the villagers that was evident in the colonial period seemed to have quickly faded away with the end of Japanese rule.

In 1972, more than half of those who had been active members of the Village Promotion Movement were already deceased, but those who survived retained vivid memories of the movement. Their memories were fortified as they compared the past movement with the ongoing New Community Movement. The accounts of elders, some of whom had been the core members of the Village Promotion Movement, provide the primary material on which this study is based. A large volume of documents concerning village organizations and activities has also been utilized. As for the New Community Movement, first-hand material was obtained through observation during the 1970s and 1980s.

The Village Promotion Movement

In the 1920s, the Government-General of Korea started what was called the Project for Increasing Rice Production, which was intended to increase rice exports to Japan. Although the project placed a great burden on the Korean farmers, it was remarkably successful in increasing the amount of rice production in Korea. However, its success triggered a nationwide campaign by the farmers in Japan against importing cheap rice from Korea. Because this campaign effectively blocked Korean rice exports, the price of rice in Korea slumped, causing serious privation for Korean farmers.

Consequently, the Village Promotion Movement was introduced as the major program of the colonial government to revitalize the rural sector. It was started in 1932 under Governor General Ugaki Kazushige [Kobayakawa 1959:670–673; Matsumoto 1991:89–90]. The movement aimed at the economic recovery of the rural population through increasing production while curtailing household expenditures. A promotion association (chinhŭnghoe in Korean, shinkō-kai in
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Japanese), or an association for the increase of agricultural production (sikszankye in Korean, shokusan-kei in Japanese), was set up in each village. These bodies assumed the role of autonomous units in directing village activities. Villagers were also encouraged to organize women's associations and youth associations, based on Japanese models, to actively support the promotion associations by providing workers with a wide range of activities. Cooperatives in various fields of agriculture and fishing were also encouraged [Chindo-gun 1976:209].

The Promotion Association in Yongsanni

The formation of the Promotion Association in Yongsanni was proposed by several villagers who were active in local affairs. With the support of the village elders, the association was set up in 1928. Its proposed aims included promoting mutual friendship, diligence, education, and industry among villagers, as well as reducing consumption, reforming corrupt customs, and improving the health of the villagers. These aims were quite similar to those expressed in the popular slogans of traditional Confucian associations (hyangyak) among the local gentry.

The association began as a voluntary organization: whether or not to join it was left to the decision of each villager. Fifty-three individuals, each representing a different household, participated at the beginning. That is, membership covered less than two-thirds of the village households. However, several others joined during the next three years, and eventually most of the village's 87 households acquired membership in the Promotion Association. As a result, villagers came to consider it as an organization of the village as a corporate body. Keeping close contacts with the long-existing organization of the village (tonggye), which represented the village as a corporate body, the Promotion Association began to play the central role in affecting public issues that aimed to improve village life. The officials of the Association, including the president, were elected every three years. People from widely different age brackets were elected because there were roles suitable for persons of different ages.

Each member contributed a fixed amount of rice per month to form the assets of the Promotion Association. The funds were then loaned out at interest to make them grow, as was usual in Korea's traditional, rotating credit associations (kye). After 1937, part of the fund was invested in paddy fields that were leased to some association members for rent. The Promotion Association gradually expanded into many activities, ranging from agriculture to education and domestic life. Activities related to agriculture included increasing the production of compost, reserving seeds as a precaution against famine, and preventing illegal brewing. In the education field, the association provided financial support to the village school (södang) where children learned Chinese classics.

Association activities even penetrated the villagers' private lives. For instance, it tried to promote hard work by urging villagers to get up early in the morning. It aimed to improve the financial situation of villagers by lending barley at low interest to families in difficulty and by discouraging gambling. For the same reason, it
encouraged the wearing of black clothes instead of the white traditionally worn by Koreans. The aim was to reduce the time and work expended in washing. It also encouraged reduced food and wine consumption at rites of passage, because such consumption was considered wasteful. In addition, it commended good deeds (zenkō hyōshō in Japanese, sŏnhaeng p’yoč’ang in Korean). During the Chosön Dynasty, one of the basic policies of the government was to encourage commoners to behave according to Confucian norms. The government commended people for their good deeds in daily life. Similarly, the Promotion Association of Yongsanni took it upon itself to give annual commendations to those individuals recommended by the members of the Confucian association (yudohoe) of the county. The profiles of those thus commended are inscribed on stone monuments erected near the entrance of the village.

**The Irrigation Association**

The most outstanding accomplishment among the corporate enterprises in Yongsanni was the construction of a dam. This project was first proposed and planned by the leaders of the Promotion Association, who went on to establish an Irrigation Association (surigye) in 1933. The dam was to supply water to the paddy fields in Yongsanni and parts of the fields in two adjacent villages. Those leaders of the Irrigation Association who owned paddy fields in the valley where the dam was constructed voluntarily offered their land. All the landowners who would benefit from the dam, whether living in Yongsanni or in other villages, were persuaded to join the Association. The funds needed for the construction were obtained from the Financial Cooperative (kŭmyung chohap), a government-sponsored organization for financing this kind of village initiative. The loan was to be paid back from irrigation fees assigned to landowners according to the size and quality of their fields.

A Japanese engineer living in Chindo was invited to draft the plan of the dam and to supervise the construction work. The members of the Youth Association and the Women’s Association of Yongsanni, discussed below, provided most of the necessary labor, and additional labor was hired from the village during the slack farming season. The dam was completed in 1936. Encouraged by this success, the Irrigation Association planned another dam project, which was completed in 1943 without the help of any outside specialist.

Most of the irrigation associations in Korea were organized under the supervision of the government for the purpose of collecting irrigation fees from farmers who benefited from dams constructed by the government. These associations were often criticized as means of exploiting poor villagers. The irrigation association of Yongsanni seems to have been exceptional in that it was organized and managed in an autonomous way.

**The Youth Association**

The government encouraged each village to organize a youth association
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As mentioned above, the Youth Association was involved in the building of the dam. Another project that it promoted in connection with the Village Promotion Movement was communal farm work. Communal work, called ture, had long played a key role in accomplishing such labor-intensive work as transplanting and harvesting. Coordination of productive activities was a crucial strategy for the villagers. Their remote island lacked modern irrigation systems to cope with endemic famine situations, causing competition for the scarce water supply during the short transplanting period. Accordingly, the villagers had to cooperate and coordinate their efforts. During harvest, on the other hand, they tried to keep paddies standing as long as possible in order to obtain the largest yield. This strategy limited the time available for tilling their fields for the second crop. Coordination among the villagers was again the key to maximizing production. The Youth Association successfully adapted this traditional form of labor to their new project.

The Youth Association that the government encouraged had its model in Japan, where village-level youth associations supported a nationwide campaign for community development under the supervision of the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, there were critical differences between the youth associations in Japan and those in Korea, differences that derived from the traditional modes of organization in each society.

In Japan, youth associations (seinenkai) had been highly institutionalized. All boys were recruited at a fixed age and were assigned various roles of public nature in the village. Usually, they retired from the youth associations upon marriage, whereupon they joined another village-wide association of household heads.

In Korea, on the other hand, youth associations were typically based on the principle of voluntary associations (kye), where a young man or a group of friends took the initiative and recruited other members from the village youth within a limited age bracket, using their personal friendship networks. The membership of such associations, once organized, were rather fixed: there were no systematic ways of recruiting younger people. In consequence, these associations found it difficult to sustain their enthusiasm as time passed and the members grew older. Though youth associations actively initiated and promoted development projects in the early stages of their organization, it was structurally difficult to secure the sustained participation of later generations in the development movement unless people in the following age brackets organized their own organizations and joined in the movement in their turn.

The Women's Association

Yongsanni villagers also responded positively to the government encouragement and organized their Women's Association (puinhoe). This association was particularly active in supporting the dam project. It contracted out the construction work and added the money it received from the Irrigation
Association to its fund. The Women's Association then invested these funds, and later was able to embark on its own separate enterprises: a cooperative farm for breading pigs and goats. Together with the Promotion Association and the Youth Association, they also installed a communal bath which the villagers welcomed with particular enthusiasm.

The primary leader of the Women's Association was a unique individual. She was well known as a very devout Buddhist. She had prayed for many years to the Mirük (Maitreya in Sanskrit, a Buddhist Messiah-to-come) at the village temple and was finally blessed with a son. Filled with gratitude, she devoted her whole life to the improvement of the welfare of the villagers. She was commended by the colonial government for her initiatives and dedicated self-sacrifice on behalf of the Women's Association.

**Government and Community Leadership**

The county office, under the supervision of the central colonial government, supported and encouraged all these development activities. Nevertheless, it was the Promotion Association, the Irrigation Association, the Youth Association, and the Women's Association that were in charge of carrying out the necessary tasks.

All of these associations were autonomous organizations set up and managed by the villagers on the traditional principle of voluntary associations for cooperation (kye). Their leaders were natives of Yongsanni. These leaders, with long and rich experience in village life, took on the role of coordinators among the villagers, rather than presenting their personal ideas and trying to persuade others. The only exception was the Women's Association: due to the (de facto) principles of village exogamy and patrilocal residence, the membership of this association consisted of in-marrying women.

**The New Community Movement**

The South Korean New Community Movement (Saemaül undong) has often been cited as a successful case of a community development campaign in a developing country. At the same time, some critics have reservations as to the actual accomplishments of the movement.4)

The movement was first suggested by President Park Chung-hee in a speech in 1970 [Munhwa kongbobu 1973; Seoul sinmunsa 1973; Naemubu 1975]. By transforming the attitudes of rural villagers and mobilizing the idle labor force during slack seasons, the movement attempted to modernize village life, increase agricultural production, and raise farm-household income.

In spite of President Park's assertion that the movement ought to be driven by the initiatives of the villagers and based on their autonomous institutions, the movement has been promoted by directives of the central government with preponderant and penetrating authority over local residents. Especially since 1972, the movement has been given political priority as one of the most urgent issues in
domestic administration. The importance of the movement was strongly expressed in the President’s speeches and directives at the Meeting for the Promotion of Income Growth (Sodik chungdae chokjin taehoe) on 18 May 1972. This sentiment was repeated on many later occasions, even including the graduation ceremony at Seoul National University on 26 February 1973 [Seoul sinmunsa 1973]. The moral aspect of the New Community Movement has been emphasized from its inception. The speeches of President Park were reprinted in the opening pages of guidebooks that outlined the movement and expounded on how it should be carried out [Seoul sinmunsa 1973].

The distinctive feature of the movement was its top-down style of implementation. An underlying assumption was that rural villages were “empty vessels” that needed social and technological intervention from the government in order to promote change. This assumption was symbolically implied in the lines of the movement’s theme song, which proclaimed the unfolding of “a new history” with “a dawn bell” in “a new dawn breaking.” Under the supervision of the New Community Movement Promotion Headquarters in Seoul, New Community sections were established at each level of local government, i.e., province, county, and township. In each village, in addition to the existing village headman (ijang), a new post of New Community leader was established. The leader was to be approved by the county office upon the recommendation of the villagers.

Two years had already passed since President Park’s first order to launch the movement when I visited Yongsanni for the first time. Yet there was no noticeable activity concerning the movement, except that its theme song was repeatedly played through the village office’s loudspeaker. According to one line of this song, the traditional farmhouse thatched with rice straw was looked down upon as a symbol of shabby, degrading rural life. Replacing thatch with slate was regarded as a most urgent task, and it symbolized development. In many other villages, this campaign had already had a remarkable effect, spurring people to join the nationwide movement. In Yongsanni, however, substantial work for the New Community Movement was yet to be planned.

In many villages on Chindo and elsewhere, where Confucian education continued to be influential, there existed a post for a village leader, called tongjang, who served as a guardian of Confucian morals. He led an informal committee of elders when moral issues arose, particularly concerning sanctions against deviance from filial piety. This village leader was chosen by recommendation of the elders. The tongjang of Yongsanni was in his seventies and had served as the president of the Promotion Association for more than ten years during the Village Promotion Movement discussed above. The village headman (ijang) was elected by the members of the Village Association (tonggye) from among comparatively younger people. Since 1971 the headmen have all been in their early thirties, and most have a high-school education.

The first New Community leader of Yongsanni was in his late forties when he was elected in the early 1970s. This placed him midway in age between the
tongjiang and the elders on the one hand and the village headman on the other.\footnote{5} He had once been an officer in the township office. All of his children had graduated from high school and moved to Seoul, where they were well-off with stable jobs. He had turned away from farming himself, putting all his fields in tenancy. He had many acquaintances in the town of Chindo and in the county office through his former career as township officer. His personal network, based on this wide range of acquaintances, was quite helpful to him in gaining access to official information and in inducing the township and county government to give special benefits to Yongsanni villagers. He had always been attentive to trends outside the village and eager to seize the chance for new experiences related to development. He also enjoyed and took advantage of the many opportunities to attend seminars for the New Community leaders, which were sponsored by the national government and held in the town of Chindo or in Kwangju City, the provincial capital.

Cooperative projects under the auspices of the New Community Movement in Yongsanni were launched on a full scale in 1974. They were usually carried out during late autumn, when villagers were free from agricultural work. The village headman directly commanded the work teams and assigned individual villagers to specific tasks according to their special skills. The New Community leader played the role of general manager and transmitted the intentions of the government to the villagers.

The fundamental policies and directives of the New Community Movement were formulated in the headquarters in Seoul, handed down through the administrative hierarchy in provincial, county, and township offices, and finally conveyed to villagers by the local New Community leaders. These leaders reported the results of activities in their villages to the township office, and their reports were transmitted up to government in Seoul through the same administrative channel.

Villages that achieved significant accomplishments were officially recognized as model villages and received special material rewards from the government. Therefore, villages within the same township competed with each other, and New Community leaders tried to exaggerate the attainments of their villages in their reports. Photographs were appended to their reports to make them more credible.

Good results were attributed to the distinguished service of the New Community leaders and the officers in the New Community sections of township and county offices. It is no exaggeration to say that whether a village was successful or not depended on the performance of its New Community leader. In order to provide the successful villages with further encouragement, they received large quantities of building materials such as cement or cement blocks as visible rewards.\footnote{6}

In addition to obtaining material benefits for their villages, New Community leaders found another incentive for working hard. The official commendations recognizing their special services could be used to enhance their own careers and their efforts to find more advantageous employment and move to cities.
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Leadership in the Village

A comparison of the two community development movements reveals notably different strategies used by villagers in coping with government policies. The features of leadership successful in implementing these strategies are also dissimilar.

In the Village Promotion Movement, villagers used the traditional principles of kye associations to elicit cooperation in setting up various organizations for their activities. Corporate capital for the communal enterprises was raised through equal contributions from members and through wages earned by communal work teams. Equal rights and obligations for achieving common goals were distinct features of the activities of these associations. The leaders shared a spirit of devotion to the welfare of the village as a whole, and they carried out their tasks by coordinating and encouraging the communal activities of women and young people.

We find no evidence that these leaders sought personal benefits. This is especially true of the elders (őrön) who were respected by the villagers and who acted as effective advisers to the associations of younger people. For individuals who gave distinguished service to community development, villagers organized memorial associations that raised funds to erect stone monuments and conduct annual rites of commemoration.

Forty years later, the outstanding characteristic of the New Community leader of Yongsanni was that he acted as a broker between the government and the village for the benefit of the villagers. He was a native of the village and an active member in many kinds of mutual-aid associations (kye) that he organized along with other villagers. At the same time, he also had a career as an officer in the township office and had kept a social network that extended beyond his natal village. His uniqueness lay in this marginal career as both insider and outsider.

Judging from observations in Chindo during the 1970s, the national government had adopted a policy of identifying such marginal but ambitious persons and authorizing them as agents for development administration to serve as leaders of village-based movements. The New Community leader of Yongsanni, for his part, was eager to assume the role of social broker by making the best use of his personal networks. The villagers also acknowledged his potential capacity as a middleman, and they shrewdly responded to the government policy by recommending him as the New Community leader of their village. Yongsanni's New Community Movement was promoted by the shared interests of the villagers for some tangible rewards to be obtained from outside the community.

The movement appeared to have started under favorable circumstances. Yet the village elders harbored fundamental criticism of the development policy because it urged the villagers to compete with other villages by luring them with material benefits, and because it stimulated the selfish interest of individual villagers by offering opportunities for personal gain. Another criticism, implicit but firmly held by many villagers, was the suspicion that the New Community leader might seek...
personal success, making the most of his advantageous position at the expense of villagers who lacked any special skill or knowledge.

In Yongsanni, there were many kinds of rotating credit associations for mutual aid that operated in a range of activities indispensable for village life. Everyone joined such associations in preparation for the time when he or she would need assistance from other villagers. The kind of associations one chose to join depended on one's stage of life and domestic conditions. Such considerations were particularly crucial in preparing for wedding and funeral expenditures [Itō 1977b].

A kye association was organized by two or three individuals who were close friends. These core members recruited other members using personal friendship ties. However, the association was managed in such a way as to guarantee strict equality among members. For instance, rules were strictly adhered to and no special circumstances of any particular member were allowed to interfere in the management of the association. A man with memberships in many associations might be connected with a great number of people through ties of comembership, but these ties did not allow him to exert any personal influence on his partners in each association. The fact that many rotating credit associations overlapped with each other within a village promoted egalitarian cooperation and effectively prevented individuals from acquiring too much political power. Yet, if one had memberships in many kye associations, it was a sure sign of his popularity and creditworthiness among his peers. Those villagers who were recognized as "elders" had won public confidence through their participation in many kye associations, which allowed them to play coordinating roles in the village.

New Community leaders, in contrast, did not emerge from the ranks of coordinators who had established themselves within the village. Instead, they arose from a small group of marginal people who responded to government policies and who understood the expectations of the villagers at the same time. It was the policy of the government to encourage villagers by offering access to outside resources through personal channels. Those marginal persons who took advantage of such opportunities transformed themselves into brokers between the villagers and the government. They exploited their personal networks and sought to gain personal prestige by monopolizing the channels of interaction between ordinary villagers and the government. Though these brokers made positive contributions in promoting development for the benefit of the villagers, one might expect that they would try to hinder autonomous efforts of the villagers if the latter sought direct access to government-provided resources. Such direct access would threaten the leaders' positions as brokers.

Conclusion

By comparing two development programs and how they were implemented in one village, I have depicted two different types of leadership, each reflecting the strategies adopted by villagers to cope with national government policies. We have
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seen sharp contrasts in the roles that leaders were expected to assume in adapting to the respective development policies. In the Village Promotion Movement, the coordinating role of the leaders was preeminent. It was legitimized by the ethic of community autonomy and based on close-knit personal networks among villagers, mutual-aid associations, and labor-exchange systems. The colonial government encouraged such leadership. In the New Community Movement, in contrast, the villagers expected the leaders to act as social brokers. The government authorized, legitimized and encouraged such leadership with its interventionist development policy.

This paper has combined a historical analysis of a development movement with an analysis of another, ongoing development movement, based on participant-observation over more than two decades. This comparison has identified contrasts in leadership operant in a local community undergoing transition under strong external influence. It has also been helpful for defining relationships between the villagers’ and the government’s approaches to rural development.

Notes

1) Voluntary rotating credit associations have been very commonly used by Chindo villagers in preparing for the expected ritual expenditure of weddings and funerals or for saving, buying fields, and replacing straw-thatched roofs with slate or zinc. They are also organized for the purpose of promoting friendship without any material gain [Itô 1977a].

2) The Promotion Association at one point corporately owned paddy fields of more than 100 majigi. (One majigi equals 660 square meters or 200 p’yong of paddy fields.) In South Korea, village associations and rotating credit associations often own a considerable amount of farm land. Local lineages also own land as corporate estates, but the purpose of such land ownership is usually confined to financing rituals. The amount of land owned by Korean lineages is much smaller than that owned by some of the local lineages in southeastern China [Freedman 1958:11–14, 1966:33, 162; Baker 1968:91–93, 170–171].

3) More than one Youth Association could often be found in villages of considerable size, and especially in villages composed of two or more competing lineages.

4) There have been many disputes and considerable skepticism concerning whether or not sustained development has been primarily the result of villagers’ autonomous initiatives. Consumption standards of villagers have risen dramatically during the last twenty years. The question is whether this improvement is due to the self-help efforts of the villagers in the movement, or to the pervasive influence of investment by the national government. There is little evidence that the New Community Movement has succeeded in establishing a local industrial base to sustain such increased levels of consumption. The rural population continues to migrate to urban centers, and those who stay are increasingly dependent on their relatives who have migrated to cities and are wealthier.

5) The second New Community leader, who was elected in 1994, was also in his early forties.

6) Some villagers found excellent opportunities for personal benefits and tried to exploit their connections with the New Community leader of their village to use such materials for repairing their own houses.

7) A social broker is defined as a middleman who has no social resources of his own but who stands in a special position that enables him to effectively intermediate the flow of
resources [Mayer 1966:114]. See also Mayer [1967] and Boissevain [1974].

Romanizations

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