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## Community and Kinship in a Southern Korean Village

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## Community and Kinship in a Southern Korean Village

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The Korean family and kinship system have often been characterized as being organized on the basis of a few consistent principles: formality, filial piety, ancestor worship, and hierarchical patrilineality. In *A Korean Village: Between Farm and Sea* [1971], for example, Vincent Brandt distinguishes between two separate normative systems inherent in Korean culture, a kinship or lineage orientation and a community orientation, finding the former to be formal, hierarchical, and Confucian. The community-oriented ethic, on the other hand, is informal, egalitarian, and reciprocal.

Brandt is not alone in emphasizing the lineality and hierarchy of the Korean kinship system. Indeed, Martina Deuchler [1992:302] claims that lineage organization in Korea was 'by definition' an upper-class phenomenon that remained vital for centuries primarily because of its genealogical orientation and status consciousness. Ch'oe Chae-sök [1966:664-665] further contends that a Korean lineage is no more than an extension or enlargement of the domestic rules of seniority between father and son and between brothers. Because of their emphasis on a few basic principles, domestic groups and lineages—whatever their organizational level—are structurally undifferentiated and assigned to the same genus.

According to the above accounts, the Korean kinship system seems to be reducible to what Myron Cohen [1990:510] calls "the fixed genealogical mode," one of two modes of agnatic kinship that he finds coexisting in North China. In this mode, "patrilineal ties are figured on the basis of the relative seniority of the descent line so that the unity of the lineage as a whole is based upon a ritual focus on the senior line traced back to the founder ancestor" [Cohen 1990:510]. The other mode, which Cohen terms the "associational mode," involves an ideology of common descent from an apical ancestor and has been regarded by anthropologists as the basis of lineage organization in late traditional China. In the associational mode, all agnates and descent lines are equal, and "this equality provides the foundation for the subdivision of the lineage" [1990:510]. It is this latter mode that provides the basis on which individuals or lineage segments claim access to corporate resources held by the lineage.

This paper contends that the usual characterizations of Korean kinship have failed to recognize its egalitarian properties. Korean lineages, especially when compared with their southeastern Chinese counterparts, are very concerned with social prestige and hierarchy. However, scholars may be basing their

characterization of Korean lineages as the embodiment of a cultural value orientation toward hierarchical social order and prestige on an inadequate sample of research sites.

Korean kinship studies have largely been occupied with the analysis of elite lineages [e.g., Kim T'aek-kyu 1964; Ch'oe Chae-sök 1975]. The lineage villages that have been the major sites of this research are often the locus of nationally renowned *yangban* agnatic groups that are proud of the exceptionally high social prestige they enjoyed in the past and their maintenance of authentic cultural ideals and norms of kinship in the present day. These studies have focused mainly on the formal organization of lineages, the ritual process of ancestor worship, and the normative system associated with lineage ideology. As Shima Mutsuhiko [1979:2] warns, these studies may well be biased in favor of the normative ideals advocated by elite lineage groups. There is probably a wide gap between the ideals of elite literati and the living patterns of the masses. A better understanding of non-elite lineages is essential for a more balanced view of all levels of Korean society.

Given the assumed homogeneity of Korean culture, what I observed in the village of Nammang was somewhat striking. Nammang is a coastal village located on Yongju Island,<sup>1)</sup> which is close to Ch'ungmu City in South Kyöngsang Province. In the traditional social status system, islanders and fishermen were placed near the lowest level of *sangmin* (commoners). While some evidence of the usual Korean pattern of patrilineal structure is obvious in this village, there is much variation in the community's local cultural tradition. In Nammang we can find an "associative" dimension of agnatic kinship previously not seen as significant in Korean lineage organization. This paper seeks to ascertain what these variations in the Nammang local tradition mean in the general context of the Korean kinship system.

### Subsistence and Community

Nammang is a coastal community of 654 persons and 137 households.<sup>2)</sup> Most of its residents obtain their subsistence by combining agriculture with fishing, aquaculture, and marine-gathering. Landholdings in Nammang are small and relatively evenly distributed among its households.<sup>3)</sup> Given the small scale of landholding, it was almost inevitable that fishing and other marine activities have become an important supplemental means of livelihood.

The exploitation of marine resources is not only an additional means of subsistence to the villagers. Their patterns of use also have a significant impact on the social organization and cultural values of the community. A critical difference between farming and fishing is their respective forms of resource ownership: whereas agricultural lands are individually owned, fishing and collecting grounds are customarily controlled collectively by the village. Thus, coastal villages are usually corporate entities that own and control resources. The corporateness of these villages is manifest not only in economic activities but also in religious faith

and rituals.

Rights to exploit marine resources are shared by all the households entitled to full membership in Nammang. Since marine resources are limited, native villagers impose various restrictions or qualifications for membership as a means of self-protection. Discrimination against new residents is strong in Nammang. For example, any household that has resided in the village for less than two years is not entitled to exploit any marine resources. A household that has been in the village somewhat longer than two years and pays membership fees may use certain limited resources, and a household that has been in the village for a long time but whose head was not born in the village can claim a whole share of all marine resources except aquacultural products. Only a household whose head was born in the village and that owns a house and land is qualified to claim full membership.

It is evident, therefore, that rights to marine resources controlled by the community are partly conditional upon ownership of a house and land in the village. Average holdings of land per household are very small in Nammang; but no matter how small the size of its parcel, some landholding is essential for a household to enjoy full membership in the community and full rights to exploit marine resources within the territorial limits of the village.

Under the village's system of communal ownership, fishing and collecting rights are granted equally to member households. This customary control of fishing and collecting grounds ensures an equal division of opportunities to the villagers, helping them to maintain economic viability in a relatively narrow ecological niche. Socially, the custom helps to maintain egalitarian interpersonal relations in an economic setting where opportunities for resource use are potentially unequal. It also reinforces homogeneity and egalitarianism in the village by proclaiming that every household has an equal opportunity to obtain its share of marine resources. Since the basic units of production are households, and only households that participate in production are entitled to claim a share of its results, the village's customs encourage the nuclearization of families, and that nuclearization in turn affects the configuration of the family and kinship system.

### **Family, Inheritance, and Ancestor Worship**

Principles of patrilineal descent and a system of primogeniture have long been adopted as cultural ideals in Korean society. In the ideal pattern of Korean family division, a family was perpetuated from one generation to the next by its first son, who lived together with his parents after his marriage and eventually assumed headship of the family. His headship was symbolized by his occupancy of his parents' house. Younger sons were supposed to leave their natal family before or after their marriage and establish branch families.

Division of property was characterized by unequal inheritance among these sons. The eldest son was the primary heir who inherited the house, responsibility for the care of the ancestors, and the largest share of family property. The rule of

primogeniture was so strongly fixed that a father could not choose another son as his successor, even if the eldest son was incompetent [Lee 1975].

In this ideal system of inheritance, transmission of the rights and responsibilities of ancestor worship was deemed to be of primary importance. Upon the death of his father, the eldest son assumed primary responsibility for performing ancestor worship for all the direct patrilineal ancestors of his line up to the fourth generation (parents, paternal grandparents, etc.). The assumption of this role in ancestor rituals emphasized a man's genealogical position within a lineage, for transmission of responsibility for ancestor worship was supposed to follow the division of family property and succession to family headship according to a fixed genealogical mode.

In Nammang, however, the inheritance practices of the villagers did not follow this ideal principle of ritual and economic primogeniture. If an eldest son lived outside his parental home, for example, one of his younger brothers stayed and took care of their parents, assumed headship of the main family, and inherited the house. Moreover, the superiority of the descendants in the senior line was not respected in the transmission of roles in ancestor rites. Instead, these roles were generally divided among male—and sometimes even female—descendants. Often an eldest son took responsibility for the rituals offered to the father, a second son took responsibility for those offered to the mother, and a third son took responsibility for those offered to grandparents.

Nammang is not an isolated instance of practices that contradict the seemingly fundamental organizational principles of the Korean family and kinship system. Accounts of surviving sons who either rotate or divide responsibility for ancestor worship are reported from Cheju Island [Satō 1973], Chin Island (Chindo) of South Chōlla Province [Chōn 1977], and the villages of Inje and Silli in Kangwōn Province [Lee 1977, 1987; Yō 1979].

How can these interesting deviations be explained? Analysis of Korean historical documents reveals that at least until the fifteenth century there were no distinctions between daughters and sons as genealogical links to ancestors, nor was there any differentiation between first and junior sons. In all likelihood, siblings rotated responsibility for ancestor worship. *The Veritable Records of the Yi Dynasty (Yijo sillok)* report that in the fifteenth century descendants rotated death anniversary worship (*kije*) in violation of written precepts; and the government prohibited rotating death-anniversary rites during the reign of King Chungjong in the sixteenth century. Thus, Lee Kwang-Kyu [1987:59] speculates that increasing insistence by the central government caused the custom of rotating ritual services for ancestors gradually to disappear until it remained only in remote areas like Cheju Island.

Is the "remoteness" of these regions a sufficient explanation for the continued existence of the custom of dividing responsibilities for ancestors? Since Korea is a small country, geographic distance from the capital in Seoul seems to have little explanatory power of its own. Although systematic explanations for this

interesting custom have rarely been attempted, Takeda Akira [1990:84–85] offers a valuable hypothesis. He suggests that the division of responsibility for ancestor rituals has something to do with a specific type of family division that prevents parents from developing close emotional ties with any particular son. By way of example, he cites the retirement system practiced in the southwestern part of the Japanese archipelago. In this system, according to Takeda, the elderly couple live separately after completing the division of their family upon the marriage of their youngest son. In other words, the father lives with the first son but the mother lives with another son. When each parent dies, his or her ancestor tablet is placed in the house where he or she died, and their ancestor rites are conducted separately.

Takeda notes that the case of Cheju Island in Korea bears a resemblance to the practice which he terms “divided-tablet ancestor worship.” Although parents on Cheju do not live in separate houses, when their first son marries they move into their own building in the back yard of their former house together with their unmarried children. There the parents have their own kitchen and storage space, symbolizing a separate residence. As a result, relatively shallow emotional relationships between parents and their eldest son may develop on Cheju Island as well. Takeda, however, does not make it clear whether socioeconomic factors are also involved in a family division system that produces weak emotional relationships.

In Nammang, two factors seem to be primarily responsible for maintaining the system of ancestral division: the resource-management pattern of the village and the conception of the *chip* (domestic household unit). As noted above, marine resources within the territorial limits of the village are communally owned, and marine products are shared equally between households. Thus, a family obtains no benefit from maintaining a household that contains two married couples. A son is encouraged to move out as soon as he marries, even if he is the eldest son. When the last remaining son marries, however, complicated problems arise concerning who will live with the elderly parents.

Ideally, the eldest son should live with and care for them until they die, but this union of the eldest son’s family with his aged parents is not easily achieved. Since a considerable amount of time may have elapsed since his departure, there may well be emotional as well as practical problems to overcome. In fact, the parents often choose to live with the last son remaining in their home, who is usually the youngest, and he inherits his parents’ house after their deaths.

This arrangement confounds sibling hierarchy and the relationship between the main house (*k’ün chip*) and branch houses (*chagün chip*) after the parents die. The house occupied by the youngest son, as the place of origin and the place where the parents lived and died, has the symbolic implications of being the main house. The “proper” place for ancestor worship thereby becomes ambiguous. The eldest son may insist that ancestor rites should be performed at his house, arguing that performance of ancestor worship is the prerogative of an eldest son. The younger son, on the other hand, may argue that he should perform the ancestor rites because

his house is the main house. Accordingly, the final division of ancestor worship requires a negotiated agreement, often forthcoming only after years of dispute between siblings. Such disagreements are usually settled by compromise, the first son taking ritual responsibility for the father, the second son for the mother, the third son for the paternal grandfather, etc.

The division of ancestor worship is also encouraged by the native conception of a *chip* (house). From the villagers' point of view, a *chip* is not simply a physical entity. It symbolizes a person's roots in the village. One can claim a share of communal resources only after his or her own *chip* has been established. Moreover, a *chip* also signifies an eternal entity, a connection with one's ancestors. Thus, residents of Nammang believe that a *chip* ought to serve at least one ancestor in order for it to qualify as a *chip* in the full sense of the word.

In the ideal model of the Korean kinship system, ancestor worship is deemed a primary instrument by which the ritual as well as the socioeconomic superiority of the eldest son is established. In Nammang, however, any realization of the eldest son's superiority is hindered by socioeconomic factors that encourage the division of ancestor worship.

### *Tangnae and Munjung*

Thirty-two different surnames are found in Nammang. Among them, the Hyŏngju O and the Wŏlsŏng O form the two major agnatic groups, each of them constituting a lineage. Of the 137 households in the village, 45 belong to the Hyŏngju O and 28 to the Wŏlsŏng O. Both these lineages hold some land in ancestral trusts, though neither possesses an ancestral hall.

There are no reliable data to indicate when people first settled in the village of Nammang. The earliest residents traceable through genealogical records are a Hyŏngju O family that moved to the village about 1650. A Wŏlsŏng O family settled there about 70 years later. Today, their agnatic descendants form a core to which most of the other households in the village trace some kind of maternal or affinal relation.

Each of the lineages is subdivided into genealogical branches. These branches are called *tangnae* in the conventional terminology of Korean anthropology, but Nammang villagers do not use that term. Instead, they use the term *chiban* ("within the house") to refer to the branches. These *chiban* are the basic descent groups, and their respective members gather together for periodic worship of common ancestors. Amity and cooperation are emphasized in the *chiban*: the term itself evokes a sense of solidarity analogous to that of a single household. Kinsmen of the same *chiban* also tend to help each other when one of the them has a life-crisis ritual, such as a wedding, sixtieth-birthday celebration, or funeral.

Anthropologists conventionally define a *tangnae* as an agnatic group consisting of those who jointly worship four ascending generations of paternal ancestors under the leadership of the primogeniture descendant (i.e., the eldest son's eldest son, etc.) of the group's apical ancestor. A *tangnae* is composed of its own

branches, each of which constitutes a *sojong* ("small lineage") descended from a more recent ancestor. The primogeniture descendant within each of these *sojong* assumes its ritual heirship. A *sojong* tracing its origin to the eldest son of the *tangnae*'s apical ancestor is regarded as ritually superior to the remaining branches derived from the founding ancestor's younger sons. Moreover, members of different branches are related to each other according to a permanent hierarchical relationship based on the relative seniority of their descent lines. In a *tangnae*, therefore, the fixed genealogical principle finds ritual expression in the transmission of ancestor worship prerogatives through the succeeding line of senior sons.

This classic pattern of *tangnae* cannot be realized in Nammang, where the ritual superiority of succeeding sons is attenuated by the system of dividing ancestor worship and by the ambiguous definition of the *k'un chip* (main house). Senior lines have neither authority nor obligations to assist junior lines. Other principles of seniority, such as generation, and age within generation, operate in interactions between kin. Descent lines are not used to determine ritual seniority in Nammang.

In Nammang, kinship activities within the kin group that elsewhere might constitute a *tangnae* are generally not accomplished according to status distinctions between senior and junior descent lines. Rather, these activities are centered on *sojonggye* ("small-lineage associations"). The constituent units of *sojonggye* are families, each of which contributes equally a small amount of money annually to help defray its expenses. The original purpose of a *sojonggye* is to raise funds for acquiring land that can generate income to finance the ancestor rituals for the *sojonggye*'s own apical ancestor (*wit'o*). In fact, a majority of the funds raised are spent on activities that cultivate mutual friendship among kin, such as group tours or contributions to wedding expenses of a member's family. Chairmanship of a *sojonggye* is generally assumed by one of its senior members, seniority being defined in terms of age and generation. The post of secretary (*yusa*) is rotated among members.

Lineage (*munjung*) organization and lineage functions do not seem to be as pronounced in Nammang as in elite *yangban* villages. As noted above, Nammang lineages have only small amounts of corporate property and no ancestral halls. Nevertheless, a *munjung* is a major reference group in village life. It provides individuals with a framework for interacting with other members of the local community. The two *munjung*, that of the Hyŏngju O and the Wŏlsŏng O, take turns having one of their members assume village leadership, for example. Lineage-level ancestor worship (*sije*) is performed annually, at ancestors' graves early in the tenth lunar month. These rites provide occasions to emphasize the *munjung* as a cohesive agnatic community. Participation in *sije* emphasizes the associational domain of kinship, for it is based on the descent of all lineage members from a common ancestor.

Elsewhere in Korea, there are two centers in each *munjung*. One is headed by its *chongson* (primogeniture descendant), who is also the senior heir of the lineage's most senior branch, and the other is headed by a *munjang*, an elder of the lineage.



In contrast, the status of *chongson* is of little significance in Nammang. During the *sije* I observed, no special role was assigned to him. Perhaps this was due to the ambiguous definition of *chongson* in Nammang. The central figure of the lineage is the *munjang*, who is elected from the lineage's elders by the *munjung*'s members. The *munjang* also assumes chairmanship of the *taejonggye* ("big-lineage association"), which is the most important organization of the lineage.

As is the case with *tangnae*, all of a lineage's activities are organized in the associational mode. Except for the position of *munjang*, lineage leadership rotates from branch to branch. Similarly, the rotation of leadership responsibilities of the component sub-lineage branch associations shows that each branch and its component families are equal members of the corporate *munjung*.

### Concluding Remarks

We have seen that the fixed genealogical mode of kinship cannot be realized in its entirety in the local context of Nammang. Instead, the associational mode prevails in the domain of agnatic kinship. Thus, the Nammang case seems quite deviant from the "traditional" family and kinship structure of Korea.

But what does "traditional" mean? As a matter of principle, we should be very cautious about making assumptions regarding original and homogeneous traditions. As Hobsbawm and Ranger [1983] suggest, the traditions of Western and non-Western societies often turn out to be recent inventions, connected with the politics of nationalism and a search for national identity, which are themselves recent sociopolitical phenomena [cf. Yoon 1989:17].

In fact, historical studies of Korean society have revealed that the development of patrilineages was a product of the Confucian transformation of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) [Deuchler 1992:283–284]. Through that transformation, the more inclusive descent principles of the preceding Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), in which descent was traced through females as well as males, gave way to exclusively patrilineal reckoning. Matrilineal kin lost their place in the kinship system; uxori-local marriages yielded to viri-local residence; fraternal and equal inheritance were succeeded by primogeniture in the ritual and economic domains; and the continuation of the main line was emphasized while collateral lines were marginalized.

Nammang villagers seem to maintain some of the principal elements of the pre-Confucian kinship system in Korea. Although far more evidence will have to be brought forward to confirm any explanations for this maintenance, our evidence suggests that the patterns of resource management and family division are among the most important reasons.

### Notes

- 1) The island is about 45 square kilometers and had a population of 14,114 persons in 1983.

- 2) These figures represent data obtained in 1984.  
 3) The average holding of farmland per household in Nammang is 0.3 hectare. The comparable figure for all rural areas of Korea is 1.1 hectares [Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 1986:31].

### Romanizations

chagŭn chip(K)	작은 집
Cheju(K)	제주 (濟州)
chiban(K)	집안
chip(K)	집
Chindo(K)	진도 (珍島)
chongson(K)	종손 (宗孫)
Chŏlla(K)	전라 (全羅)
Chosŏn(K)	조선 (朝鮮)
Ch'ungmu(K)	충무 (忠武)
Hyŏngju O(K)	형주 오 (刑洲 吳)
Kangwŏn(K)	강원 (江原)
kije(K)	기제 (忌祭)
Koryŏ(K)	고려 (高麗)
k'ŭn chip	큰집
Kyŏngsang(K)	경상 (慶尙)
munjang(K)	문장 (門長)
munjung(K)	문중 (門中)
Nammang(K)	남망 (南望)
sangmin(K)	상민 (常民)
sije(K)	시제 (時祭)
sojong(K)	소종 (小宗)
sojonggye(K)	소종계 (小宗契)
taejonggye(K)	대종계 (大宗契)
tangnae(K)	당내 (堂內)
wit'o(K)	위토 (位土)
Wŏlsŏng O(K)	월성 오 (月城 吳)
yangban(K)	양반 (兩班)
Yijo sillok(K)	이조실록 (李朝實錄)
Yongju(K)	용주 (龍洲)
yusa(K)	유사 (有司)

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