Confucianism and Social Structure in a Traditional Korean Village

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This paper considers how Confucianism became established as the controlling ideology in Korean society in the Choson period and how it transformed kinship systems and village organization.

As a political ideology, Confucianism already had a certain degree of influence from the Sangoku (Three kingdoms) period and the United Shilla period through the Koryo Dynasty. However, it was in the Choson Dynasty period that Confucianism began to exhibit absolute influence. The Choson period was a time when the elite class was evolving into a ruling class, and Confucianism, embraced as a universal ideology by the elites, was held in high esteem and began to have an influence on society. Since the end of the Koryo Dynasty, village organization had been controlled by powerful village officials whose authority was based on Buddhist thought. The elite class used Confucianism as the perfect justification to repress official power in the villages, which was grounded in Buddhism.

Confucianism took a long time to become established in society and gradually transformed kinship systems. The kinship system in the first half of the Choson period was a bilateral kinship system, i.e., a non-patrilineal system in which both the paternal kinship and the matrilateral kinship were treated equally. However, in the second half of the Choson period, with the turning point in mid-17th century, the spread of Seongri-hak (Chu Hsi studies) shifted the kinship system toward a patrilineal system centered around the eldest legitimate (male) heir. Family records contained detailed information about the patrilineal line and simplified information about the matrilineal line. The distribution of assets also changed to give priority to the eldest (male) heir. Ritual succession was also established in the beginning of the 18th century to be dedicated to the eldest (male) heir.

Moreover, Confucianism significantly transformed village society. Up until that point, 40 to 50 households formed a natural village community unit, and through a system of mutual aid, engaged in cooperative labor and other miscellaneous activities in the village, held festivals and events that maintained shamanistic traditions, and conducted coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages, funerals, and ancestral worship. However, as the elite class took control based on Confucian and Seongri-hak philosophies, the way these natural village
communities operated, i.e., as mutual aid-based communities, began to be seen as negative. Thus village communities were gradually incorporated into the lower class in a hierarchical system controlled by the elite.