

On The Yangban's Local Ruling and the Village Code(鄉約) in the Choson Dynasty

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The Yangban(兩班), the ruling class of villages in the Choson dynasty, operated organizations such as the Kyongjaeso(京在所, Capital Liaison Office, an office built in the capital "Seoul" for the rural Yangban posted at high government offices) and the Yuhyangso(留鄉所, a council or office in local villages for the local Yangban to gather) and enforced the village code.

The Kyongjaeso was established for the bureaucracy based in Seoul to consult on matters such as personnel affairs, offerings to the state, tax and public order in rural areas. This organization originated from the Sasimguan(事審官, Inspector general) system of the Koryo dynasty. The Sasimguan system was nullified in 1318, King Chungshuk's fifth year at throne, because the system was misused to exploit the local people. But those among the Gwonho(權豪, the local power) professed themselves to be a Sasimguan and continued the exploitation. This has become the basis of the Kyongjaeso in the Choson dynasty. Meanwhile, the Kyongjaeso of the Choson dynasty was closer to bureaucracy whereas the Sasimguan of the Koryo dynasty was more like a rich and exploitative resident of the rural area. The Kyongjaeso, an organization that provided consultation to the bureaucracy posted in Seoul on governing the rural areas, was formed in a dual structure composed of the Kwanch'alsa(觀察使, governor) and Suryong(守令, the prefect) system, which officially governed the rural villages and the Kyongjaeso and Yuhyangso system.

The Kyogjaeso had command over the Yuhyangso of each region, which were organized with the local elites. For such aspects, the Yuhyangso was also called the branch Kyongjaeso. The Hyangim(鄉任, officials of the Yuhyangso) were designated with the sanction from the Kyongjaeso officials. From this fact one can assume the relationship of the Kyongjaeso and the subordinate Yuhyangso. The Hyangim played a part in governing their local area and also cooperated with the Kyongjaeso in restricting the power of the local functionaries. While the Koryo Sasimguan cooperated with the local natives to govern the rural areas, the Choson Kyongjaeso and Yuhyangso left the Gunhyun(郡縣, county and prefecture) affairs

to the local natives but at the same time maintained the Hyanggwon(鄉權). Such characteristics were due to the policies for suppressing the power of the local natives during the early Choson dynasty.

Starting from the Koryo dynasty, the rural villages were ruled by the P'umguan group(品官群), who received Guanpt 'um(官品, an official ranks) from the government, and the Hyangni group(鄉吏群), the local functionaries who did not receive any official lanks. The P'umguan group later emerged as the new literati power in the late Koryo and early Choson period to become the ruling class of the Choson dynasty. At this point the ruling literati of the Choson dynasty enforced laws that prohibited local functionaries and the people from accusing the local prefects punished the local functionaries who mocked the local prefects and practiced sweeping shifts upon the local functionaries personnel. They also supported the P'umguan group to finally take hold of the Hyanggwon(鄉權). So the unofficial Kyongjaeso operated as if it were a government organization and took command over the Yuhyangso, which was unprecedented in the former Koryo dynasty.

However, in the late Choson dynasty when the nation was strongly centralized the government no longer needed support from the Ky ngjaeso or Yuhyangso for governing the rural areas. Then as coercion in fields other than economics weakened and economic concerns became the main focus of the society the absentee landlords became residential landlords and the slave laborers became employed laborers. Under such conditions, the Yangban's tenacity for governing their home villages slackened and they gradually left the villages. Furthermore, after the Japanese invasion of 1592 the local prefect's authority was intensified while the local elite divided into Guhyang(舊鄉, the former existing local power) and the Shinhyang(新鄉, the newly emerging power) in the Hyangjon(鄉戰, conflict for local power) and the power of designating the Hyangim was given to the local prefects. As a result the Kyongjaeso lost its role and became nominal. The Kyongjaeso system was nullified in 1603, King Seonjo's 36th year at throne.

Whereas the Kyongjaeso officials were composed of government officials (居京品官, "officials living in Seoul") who had participated in the founding of the new dynasty Choson, the Yuhyangso were composed of Yuhyangp'umguan(留鄉品官), the rural Confucian literati who did not get the opportunity to take part in building Choson. Though the officials of the two organizations differed in this aspect, they aligned in suppressing the local functionary native power and taking over the Hyanggwon(鄉權). But since the locality of the rural elite with the Hanryangp'umguan(閑良品官) in the center was much higher than that of the

government officials, the efforts for centralizing the nation received much resistance. The Gunhyon reformation is one of those cases. Later on, when the ruling Yangban class became the Hungu(勳舊, the bureaucratic scholars who have helped Sejo usurp the throne) and the Yuhyangp'umguan became the Sarim(士林), the neo-Confucian literati that practiced Sarim politics during the latter half of the Choson dynasty.

As mentioned, the government was composed of the ruling Yangban aligned with the Yuhyangp'umguan in suppressing the local functionaries but also restrained the Yuhyangp'umguan themselves for their strong locality which hindered a centralized government. Examples of such restraint can be found in two cases. First, in 1406, King Taejong's sixth year at throne, the Yuhyangso system was nullified to adopt Ming dynasty's Shinmyongjong(申明停) to enforce the Shinmyongsaek(申明色) in February 1417. Second, King Sejo had temporarily nullified the Yuhyangso system again because the Yuhyangp'umguan participated in the Lee Shi-ae Revolt(李施愛亂) of 1467. However, the Yuhyangso's self-government could not be suspended by nullification because it was not officially a government organization but a local body for self-government. But to operate openly as a self-government organization the system needed to be restored. So in 1488 Seongjong's 19th year at throne, the Yuhyangso system was restored. This, in a way, allowed the Sarim, such as Kim Jongjik(金宗直), to start their political careers.

Even after restoration the Yuhyangso was placed under the control of the capital liaison office. Dissatisfied with this, the Yuhyangp'umguan established the Samaso(司馬所), a village council or meeting composed of the Jinsa(進士, Literary Licentiate) and the Sangwon(生員, Classics Licentiate). Furthermore, led by the Kimyo(己卯) neo-Confucian literati who had taken over the political circle during Jungjong's reign, the village code propagation movement and the private grain loaning system(社倉制) was intensified along with the drinking ceremonial parties(鄉飲酒禮) and archery contests(鄉射禮) purported for teaching etiquette. Afterwards the Yuhyangso flourished as the neo-Confucian literati gained power during Sonjo's reign.

But as the centralized government system intensified after the seventeenth century the Suryong obtained authority to designate the Hyangim(鄉任) of the Yuhyangso, which formerly belonged to the Kyongjaeso. And the Yuhyangso local agency went under the control of the Suryong to be setback as a petty official.

Meanwhile after the sixteenth century village codes were enforced in rural villages. The first village code was the *Village Code of Yu's*(呂氏鄉約) made by the Yu clan(呂氏) who lived in Lantian(藍田) of the Song(宋) dynasty. However

the village code that was enforced in the mid Choson dynasty originated from the modified version *Village Code of Chu Hsi* (朱子增損呂氏鄉約) written by Chu Hsi.

But due to the difference in physiology, custom and climate it was not easy to adopt the Chinese village code in a Choson village. In fact, the Korean people had their own village regulations and organizations such as the Hyanghon(鄉憲, village rules), Hyangdo(香徒, an organization which held religious services to pray for village peace), Kye(契, a mutual assistance association) and Ture(두리, a labor cooperation organization in agricultural districts). As so, the title “*Village Code*” (鄉約) or “village rules” (鄉規) was used. So when “village code” is mentioned, one must not mistake it to exactly refer to the *Village Code of Yu’s* or the *Village Code of Chu Hsi*. Though the title may be the same, the actual contents can vary according to the enforcing subject, objective and the time. In the case where the Confucian literati is the subject of enforcement the village code is a Confucian Literati Village Code(士族鄉約) or a Hyanggyu(鄉規, regulations on the organization and authorities of the Yuhyangso). When the local prefect is the subject, the village code is a prefect Village Code(守令鄉約). If the village code is enforced for solidarity and order in the dong(洞, town), Myon(面, township), Ri(里, village) or Ch’on(村, settlement) organizations it is called the Dong Village Code(洞約, the town’s self-governing regulations), Myon Village Code(面約), Ri Village Code(里約) or Ch’on Village Code(村約). The title is merely a title. What is important is the enforcing subject, content and objective. Regarding this, the village code of the Choson Dynasty can be largely classified into the Confucian Literati Village Code, the prefect Village Code and the Dongri Village Code(洞里鄉約).

The Confucian Literati Village Code was operated mainly by the Hyanghoe(鄉會, the village self-administration council) which was composed of Hyangwons(鄉員). The list of the Hyangwons was called the Hyangan(鄉案). The fund for running the organization was raised by the Hyangkye(鄉契). The Kye(契, mutual assistance association) was generally run with membership fees or by fund interest. A Kye could be organized by adding “Kye(契)” after the name of a project or business. This is why the village code(鄉約), Dong village code(洞約), Ch’on village code(村約) and the Jong village code(宗約) are also called Hyangkye(鄉契), Dongkye(洞契), Ch’onkye(村契) and Jongkye(宗契).

The Yuhyangso was merely an administrative organization under the Hyanghoe(鄉會). The Yuhyangso office building was called the Hyangcheong(鄉廳, local agency). The Hyangwon with the best reputation were selected and designated as the Hyangim, the Chwasu(座首, head official of the Yuhyangso) and the Pyol

gam(別監, the assistant overseer) after receiving approval from the Kyongjaeso. The title Hyangjipgang(鄉執綱) represented the group of the Yuhyangso delegates composed of the Hyangseonsaeng(鄉先生), Hyangsu(鄉首), Hyangno(鄉老) and Hyangdaebu(鄉大夫). These delegates were generally the elderly with high virtue. Their term was for life and they would usually determine the public opinion of the organization. The Hyangjipgang would participate in the administrative affairs of the county such as personnel affairs, tax, drafting labor and local specialty offerings and imposition of taxes through the Hyangim. They were also concerned in personal matters of even those who were not registered on the Hyangan as well as those who were. As with the Hyangwon, only Confucian literati were accepted after the applicant's eligibility was verified concerning the three Hyangs(三鄉), NaeHyang(內鄉), Woehyang(外鄉) and ChoHyang(妻鄉).

The Confucian Literati Village Code was mainly focused on promoting solidarity and order among the Hyangwon and educating the local villagers. The T'oegye(退溪 李滉) and Yulgok(栗谷 李珥)'s village codes can be referred to as the origin of the Confucian literati village code. But after the Japanese invasion of 1592 the rural communities were divided into the Guhyang(舊鄉, the former existing power) and the Shinhyang(新鄉, the newly emerging power), and a conflict rose over the Hyanggwon(鄉權). Then as the local prefects came to support the Shinhyang, the Confucian literati village code fell into a fatal state. Under such situations, the Guhyang members erased their names from the Hyangan and made a new list called Yuan(儒案). The main objective of the Guhyang members was to abolish the existing Hyangan and make a new one(鄉案罷置). During the early Choson dynasty the government had supported the P'umguan group composed of rural Confucian literati as a means to suppress the local functionaries. But in the latter half of the Choson dynasty when the local functionaries were rather weak the government suppressed the Guhyang who were the main ruling class in the rural areas and supported the Shinhyang to achieve centralization.

The Chuhyon village code(州縣鄉約) was enforced in the district units do, Gunhyon, Myon, Ri and Dong under the management of the local prefect. It was mainly purported for intensifying the government Gunhyon and Myonri(面里) systems and for educating the rural residents. The Chuhyon village code was not practiced efficiently during the mid Choson dynasty when the Confucian literati village code flourished due to the uncooperative manner of the Confucian literati. Then as the local prefect's authority was reinforced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Chuhyon village code became popular. To reinforce it's

authority, the local prefects would support the Shinhyang's Hyangch'eong and the local functionaries' Chakch'ong (作廳, office or association of local functionaries) and restrain the Guhyang and as a result, the percentage of seats in the Hyangch'eong taken by the Shinhyang rose. Meanwhile, the authority concerning Hyangim was gradually taken over completely by the local prefects.

The Dongri village code (洞理鄉約) was part of the Chuhyon village code (州縣鄉約). But it had two factors which differed from the Chuhyon village code. One was the matter of joint payment (共同納, joint payment of taxes and expenses) and the other, the matter of combining with the traditional community organizations such as the Hyangdo (香徒), Kye (契), Ture (斗引) and Dongje (洞祭). The Yijong system (里定制) from the Articles for Appropriate Management of Military Services by Freeborn (良役變通節目) was also purported for joint payment of tax, grain exchange and draft labor. The government also built a Mingo (民庫, a warehouse for storing money and grain collected from rural residents to be used by local offices) to promote joint payment.

Despite the efforts, the joint payment system only brought about chaos in the three collection policies (三政) of land tax (田稅), military service (軍役) and grain exchange (還穀) due to the abuse of the Chokching (族徵, charging the unpaid tax paid to relatives) and Inching (隣徵, charging the unpaid tax to neighbors) and the unfair burdens the lower class had to bear. It was natural that the great burden went to the lower class because the Dongri village code was composed of the Confucian literati superior Kye (上契) and the inferior class's lower Kye (下契).

Additionally, the Dongri village code was enforced on the basis of the traditional rural community Kye rules such as Hyangdo (香徒), Hyangdo (鄉徒), Chonkye (宗契) and Dongkye (洞契). These traditional Kye rules formed the community organizations that enabled the Korean people to endure the many years of famine and foreign invasions and survive up to this day by helping each other. However, the Kye rules are rare today and hard to find because they have been practiced customarily. Today one can get a glimpse of these traditional Kye rules through the Confucian literati's Dong village code (kye).