

“Constructions of State and Society in Late Chosôn Korea”

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Korea of the late Chosôn dynasty, from the mid-17th to mid-19th centuries, did not feature a market-centered, urbanizing economy. In contrast to important parts of China and Japan, the country ran predominantly on agricultural production and locally-limited exchange. Some of this might be attributable to Confucian asceticism regarding monetary activities, but if so, such an ethic determined the behavior only of the socio-political elite. Plenty of aristocratic reformers wrote about the need to unleash the potential of the lower classes, but always within the bounds of the established conventions or social order and state direction. This was testimony to the power of the authority structures of state and society to enforce stability, and given the dynasty's endurance over five centuries, which survived even the devastations of what can be called the “half century war” in East Asia from 1592 to 1644, this system seemed to have succeeded stunningly. These hierarchies were very much conscious constructions, although not of a single moment or period. But interestingly, the constructions of social order and of the state, while working together to maintain stability, originated in different sources and often remained at cross purposes. Depending on the circumstances, this tension could be productive or restrictive.

By the late Chosôn dynasty, the construction of the Korean social order could look back upon a millennium of systematic development, but it always fell back on the principles that characterized the earlier kingdoms and represented elaborations of tribal practices: The unstinting domination of an aristocracy, the composition of which changed very slowly, and the consignment of the rest of the population to lower hereditary statuses that determined access to resources and privileges. The system of the late Chosôn evolved considerably from this basic pattern and gave rise to many more hereditary status groups, particularly those that served in a buffer role of separating the aristocracy from the majority commoner and slave

populations. The intricate means by which these changes arose bespeak the social dynamism of this era, but equally notable is that ultimately, the fundamental arrangement of aristocratic domination and systematic determination of hereditary privilege never faltered. The reinforcements, then, to the construct of Korean social order ultimately prevailed over the many challenges to the *status quo*, at least until external threats racked the country beginning in the 19th century.

The state actually was closely integrated into the development of this social hierarchy in the late Chosôn, not necessarily because the state acted as a superstructural handmaiden to aristocratic rule (although one could argue that this was indeed the case), but because the state, while also seeking stability, served as the prevailing site of contestation over the workings of the social order. Indeed, in contrast to the construction of society, the construction of the state of the late Chosôn began definitively in the 14th century with the conscious and comprehensive incorporation of the blueprint laid out in the *Rites of Chou* and other Confucian sources. These sources seemed to endorse the primacy of the state and of meritocratic considerations, in pertaining even to the monarch himself, in running the state. By the late Chosôn, such ideals that had driven the dynastic foundation gave rise to a highly sophisticated state apparatus, whose comprehensive authority ranged from cultural production to management of financial resources, and whose reach extended both horizontally across the country's over 300 counties and vertically into the workings of village and even family life. Indeed, as seen in the designs of powerful monarchs motivated by both personal and idealistic considerations, the state might have been on the verge of overwhelming the deeply entrenched constructs of social hierarchy. But this did not happen, at least not to a meaningful level.

There seems to be tension, then, from the vantagepoint of the "early modern" world, between the relative sophistication of the state and the constraints of a longstanding social hierarchy. But in the framework of Korea's historical development, it made sense: the constructions of both the old social hierarchy and the state sought above all stability through the comprehensive, systematic reinforcement of order. It is easy to forget that

there was no prevailing sense of “progress,” but rather a continuing quest to emulate the classical models, both domestic and Confucian, through situational improvement and response. While many of my fellow Korean historians might disagree, I see no reason to integrate such an experience in Korea into the conventional flow of world or even East Asian history in order to “validate” Korea’s own history. This smacks of modernism, to say the least, but also deprives us of a real appreciation of diversity.