The Compilation Processes of the Household Register in the Later Joseon Period and Its Character

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I. Forward

The Joseon Dynasty compiled the household register every three years. The objects of registration in the household register were, at least legally, the entire household. In order to elevate the effectiveness of compiling the household register the government provided even some institutional devices. Nevertheless, in spite of the intent of the state, the number of households and mouths entered in the household register was limited and did not totally reflect reality. Rather, as time passed, the compilation of the household register tended to become formalistic. In spite of this, it can hardly be denied that the household register is an excellent source of data that can realistically confirm the relationship between household and family, statuses, and occupational roles. The household register can be utilized in various fields of research, and this has been the case. Regrettably, however, there are few moves to investigate what kind of data the household register contains, that is to say, the household register per se.

Many researchers would like to explain the fluctuations of Joseon society by utilizing the data from the household register. However, as a rule, if the premises are wrong, correct conclusions cannot be drawn. Researchers should pay attention to any criticism of the household register as a source material. In this study, with such awareness of the issue, the processes of formulating the household register are investigated. Each stage in the formulation of the household register also proved to be a process of conflict and adjustment between state and society, principle and practice or illegality. Therefore, an analysis of the processes for completing the household register and its contents is an effective means of clarifying the character of the household register itself.

II The Formulation and Contents of the Household Registration Reports

1. The Formulation of the Household Registration Reports

The overall central supervisory institution for the matters related to the household register during the Joseon period was the Office of Hanseong. This Office prepared the official documents and rules for formulating the household register for transmission to local authorities. At the local level each locality established an interim organization called the office of household register, selected officials to be in charge, and informed the inhabitants of the pertinent matters. Then, in turn the inhabitants made two
copies each of the individual household registration reports recording the personal matters of members and changes at each household for filing. After receiving the individual household registration reports, government offices checked the reports against the past household register and returned one copy to each household, and used another copy as source data for formulating the household register. The period for the inhabitants to prepare the individual household registration reports for compiling at government offices varied to some extent according to locality and timing. An investigation of 132 cases of various individual household registration reports containing information on the timing of formulation of each locality resulted in conclusions as outlined below: ¹ First, while the timing for formulating the individual household registration reports was variable until the early part of the 18th Century, it was usually between the months of January and May in the year when the government compiled the household register. Second, in the late 18th Century the cases of individual household registration reports containing only the year of formulation and without an indication of the month completed increased on a large scale. And in cases where the month was indicated, it was January. Third, after the 19th Century such a trend further accelerated. It can be surmised from the foregoing that after the late 18th Century the formulation of the individual household registration reports was executed in January of the year when the government compiled the household register, or prior to that date. It may be conjectured that the fact that a large number of the individual household registration reports had no date of execution was caused by a formal difference by one year between the time of execution and the contents of the individual household registration reports. For this reason even those reports that had January as the date of execution had January of the household register year entered habitually, with a possibility that they were actually executed one year earlier. As the execution and filing of the individual household registration reports progressed, the intermediate process of the compiling of the household register was also extended. In this intermediate process, the total statistics for five households as one unit and the intermediate complete household register officially called the intermediate draft register for each village were completed. Also various kinds of complete volumes recording the changes in the households such as desertions, deaths, and migrations were compiled. Such intermediate processes were designed for a more realistic understanding of the household. However, at the same time such processes served to internally adjust the contents to be recorded in the household register.

The household register offices, after collecting the individual household registration reports, confirmed

¹ For data used in the analysis, see Collections of Old Documents, 8 (Documents of Government Offices), 1992, The Royal Palace Library at the Seoul National University; Collections of Old Documents, 27 (for Yeonggwang, Yeongwul Sin Clan), 1996 at Korea Spiritual Culture Research Institute; Collections of Old Documents, 32 (for Geungju, Gyeongju Son Clan), 1997.