The Effects of Man’s Remarriage and Adoption on Family Succession in the 17th to the 19th Century Rural Korea: Based on the Andong Kwôn Clan Genealogy

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ABSTRACT

Based on the demographic data from the Andong Kwôn clan genealogies, the rates of men's remarriage reached a peak in the late 17th century but it gradually fell afterwards. Men's remarriage was no longer considered as an effective means of having a legitimate son. On the other hand, having too many legitimate sons could cause a risk of degrading the family's financial strength and social status. To control the risk, the rates of adoption increased beginning in the late 17th century and soared in the 19th century. People were giving up on their efforts to have a legitimate son and instead making an attempt to maintain the family's social status and financial means through a kyeja. As the only son, the adopted heir could inherit the family's property all alone and the rest of his family members at his original home could control the dispersion of the family's financial resources caused by the continued practice of the partible inheritance. Especially under the situation where the social status and financial strength of the high class was getting weaker in the 19th century, the distribution of property through adoption helped stabilize the household economy.

Keywords: remarriage, adoption, family succession, inheritance, heir, genealogy

Introduction

It is generally accepted that in the Chosôn Dynasty, it was not until after the 17th century that the unity of patrilineal descent groups was significantly consolidated. Examining the succession of descent in the unit of family as exhibited in the changes in the inheritance system and the tendency of adoption, Mark A. Peterson presents some causes of the change to support this general theory. Before the 17th century, he observes, the necessity of adopting a son to a family was not strongly felt even when there was no son in the family because daughters enjoyed an equal share in inheriting their parents' property. Peterson pays attention to the fact that by the late 17th century, however, the number of daughters inheriting their parents' property sharply decreased, while the instances of patrilineal adoption increased. The eldest son of a family was playing an increasingly important role in maintaining the family ritual for his ancestors, which reinforced his rights to the family property and ritual. This tendency resulted in the formation of the 'patrilineal system based on the 'Confucianized patrilineal ideal,' Paterson reasons.

Family succession refers not only to the inheritance of the family property but also to the inheritance of the rights to perform the family ritual for the ancestors and supervise the family members, which means the inheritance of the...
socioeconomic status of the family. When a family line was about to come to an end, it was a very important and serious business to find a reliable heir to succeed and maintain the family's socioeconomic status. On the other hand, having many sons in a family was also a problem. There were no worries about an heir, of course, but it still posed the problem of having to determine who among the sons would be recognized of his legitimacy and how to divide the family property among them in such a way as not to degrade the socioeconomic status of each son. The incomplete primogeniture, or the system of inheritance (sangsok 相續) where the eldest son was granted a larger portion of property than his brothers, and the adoption (ibyang 入養) were some of the many strategies for the succession of the family line. However, the inheritance system in the late Chosŏn has often been understood as having strongly favored the elder son, probably because the patrilineal descent groups which were formed following the family order of a clan code were taken into account.

In parallel with the tendency of the eldest son taking the largest proportion of inheritance in the late Chosŏn, however, it should also be noted that the partible inheritance continued where the other children also inherited their share of inheritance, although not as large as the share to the elder son.2 The partible inheritance worked as a minimum fund by which the other descendants formed a family of their own on a stable basis. On the other hand, it also could lead to the demotion of the social status of the family members following the dispersion of the financial means of the family. While the partible inheritance remained in place, such possible socioeconomic crises of families produced a variety of family strategies of the family succession.

Regarding the family succession and inheritance, a new research method has already been proposed with individuals as a unit of observation in addition to households.3 Historical demography has made an effort to trace the family history by means of the demographic behaviors of individuals, such as births, marriages, deaths, and creating a new family together with succession and adoption. This paper intends to observe how the family succession was affected by the characteristics of the marriages during the Chosŏn Dynasty, especially by the aspects of man's marriages and adoptions as recorded in family genealogies.4 The observation

2 For the inheritance and family, see Son Byung-giu, “Chosŏn hugi sangsok kwa kajok hyŏngt'ae ui pyŏnhwa” [Changes in the inheritance practice and family structure in the late Chosŏn] Daedong munhwamun'gu 61 (2008). For the inheritance practice of the Tokugawa Japan, the established theory of primogeniture has been challenged by the views that offer a variety of inheritance practice in the rural society of the later Tokugawa era. See Hayami Akira, “EAP (The Eurasia Project on the Study of Population and Family History) working paper,” http://www2.ipcku.kansai-u.ac.jp (2000).
4 In Korean genealogies, adopted son is recorded as ‘kyeja’ (子弟, heir), and departed son is recorded as ‘ch’ulgye’ (出孫) or ‘ch’ulhu’ (出後).