

Conclusion

I conclude by referring to what I regard as one of the consequences of the intended purposes of the *kye* discussed so far. I have noted that *kye* bring together affluence and festivity to the extent that *kye* business meetings easily turn into festive functions. This regularly happens as business passes over to the enjoyment of a good meal and eventually into collective merriment. Significantly, even purely business-minded *kye* often invest part of their gains in the eating and drinking which concludes a meeting. Indeed the festive function may be the main incentive for members to attend. It is also of note that many *kye* hold their meetings at times which coincide with communal festivals or public holidays, and therefore with periods already marked for relaxation and enjoyment.

NOTES

1. Dieter Elkemeier, "Law, contract, and covenant: aspects of a mutual insurance venture." In *Anthropology of Law in the Netherlands* 116, *Essays on Legal Pluralism* (Dordrecht, Floris Publications, 1986), pp.260-287.
2. The two characters are 契 and 契

THE RISE OF CHUNGIN AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

LEE SŎNGMU

The Concept of *Chungin*

During the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) there was a social status group, the *chungin* (lit. "middle people"), lower than the aristocratic *yangban*, but higher than the commoner *sangmin*. The term *chungin* was not only used as a general name for this status group, but also had several other meanings:

1. *chungin* could have a moral connotation to designate people of mediocre character;
2. *chungin* could mean people who were only moderately wealthy;
3. Professionals (*kisulgwan*) who lived along Seoul's central street—the translators, physicians, mathematicians, lawyers, ūm-yang specialists, calligraphers, calendar specialists, and painters—were called *chungin*;

4. the descendants of *sadaebu*, who for generations were active as professionals, were also called *chungin*;

I concentrate in this study only on the social meaning of the term, that is, on *chungin* who are socially placed between the aristocracy and the commoners. In a narrow sense only professionals were actually called *chungin*. The broader meaning of the term was mainly used in the second half of the Chosŏn dynasty, but I believe it does no harm to use this meaning for the whole dynasty.

The Development of the *Chungin* Class

I have shown elsewhere that the *chungin* became an independent social class at the beginning of Chosŏn.¹ How did this happen? The roots of the *chungin* were in the *yi* of the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392). *Yi* were an independent group that stood in contrast to the civil and military aristocracy and included various administrative specialists. Moreover, one group of *yi* formed the *namban* (*nam* = south; *ban* = class or order) who, together with the *tongban* and *sŏban* were called the *samban* (*tong* = east; *sŏ* = west; *sam* = three). The term for each "ban" group reflects a descending order of official positions —*namban* through *tongban* to *sŏban*.

In the course of the establishment of a *yangban* bureaucracy in Koryŏ the *yi* gradually declined until they led only a parasitic existence. This existence became marked particularly towards the end of the dynasty. Their promotion to the ranks of aristocracy was blocked, and those in the *namban* changed their name to *namhang*, that is, those who provide a road for the protection of appointees entering government office. Their root was downwards, and by the beginning of Chosŏn the *yi* had deteriorated into the *chungin*. *Chungin*, as a lower ruling elite, came to be differentiated from the *yangban*, the higher ruling elite. This differentiation occurred gradually and marked the expansion of the ruling

class. It thus had considerable historical significance. In this paper, it is necessary to investigate in some detail the process by which the *yi* became *chungin*.

First I want to digress slightly and investigate the transformation of another group, the *hyangni*. The *hyangni* were the source of the *yangban* bureaucrats of Koryŏ, but they were also the local rulers of small administrative units to which no magistrates were dispatched by the central administration.² Their semi-independent existence proved an obstacle in the centralization of Koryŏ. Through the examination system and the office of *sori* a number of *hyangni* became officials, but a policy to suppress them was imposed which, when strengthened, meant that their position weakened. By the end of Koryŏ, the admission of *hyangni* to the civil service examinations was restricted, and those who passed the examinations were no longer exempted from corvee labour. Consequently, the occupations of the *hyangni* group became despised.

The anti-*hyangni* policy was strengthened further at the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty. Except for those who had passed the civil *mun'gwa* examinations or had acquired special merits, all *hyangni* who held office below the third rank were ousted; their ownership of land (*oeyŏkchŏn*) which had been granted by government was nullified and their salaries were stopped. Moreover, with the district and area reorganisations of *kun* and *hyŏn* and the forced migration of people to the northern frontier regions, many *hyangni* left their original *pon'gwan* (the places of their lineage's founding ancestors) and moved to other localities. The *hyangni* had been prominent in their localities, but they were now up-rooted and expelled to distant places where they became post station attendants. The local *yangban* who remained behind founded associations known as *yuhyangso* and *hyangya*, and these were critical of *hyangni* influence. The measures against *hyangni* proved decisive. They lost their standing as local strongmen and were demoted to administrative officials. And thus the *hyangni* gradually became *chungin*, distinct from the aristocracy. In fact, most post station attendants, literally named cattle

herders, resembled *hyangni* but were even lower on the social scale.

Those who held the position of *sōri* officers in Koryō received grades sixteen to eighteen in the office land system (*chōnshigwa*), and there were no obstacles set in their way to stop their advance to the ranks of *yangban*. However, with the gradual enlargement of a *yangban* bureaucracy, their position also began to deteriorate. After the implementation of the rank land system of *kwajōnbōp* in 1391, land was no longer given to *sōri* officials. They were no longer appointed as magistrates, and were made to wear a white pointed hat (*kat*) that further emphasised inferior social status.

With the beginning of the Chosōn dynasty, prejudice towards *sōri* officials intensified. They were at first given the office of *ch'aejik* and awarded a salary, but from 1466 this ceased. Moreover, the *sōri* were divided into two groups: the higher ranking *noksa*, who could become local magistrates, and the lower *sōri* who could only hope to become officials of the lowest rank as post station attendants (*yōksūng*) or ferry-point guards (*tosūng*). Even *noksa* were given lesser posts as army officers (*kapsa*), however, but because the bi-annual quota was only ten men, most were given sinecures without salary or prescribed duties.

The period in office necessary for advancement was made unusually long: for *noksa* and *sōri*—514 days and 2,600 days respectively. In comparison, a *yangban* official of rank seven and below needed to serve for just 450 days before he could advance one grade. Thus, the *sōri* could not escape from the lowest ranks of officialdom. In such a situation, there were few *sōri* aspirants, even though each township had to supply them from among the students of local schools every three years. Consequently, discrimination was the main reason why the *sōri* became differentiated from the aristocracy as they too sank to *chungin* status.

The professional class, too, began to be differentiated from the *yangban* from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards. During Koryō they had enjoyed a salary and were

ranked as grades fifteen and sixteen (the *chōnshikwa*). Even during the first half of Chosōn, sons of *yangban* pursued the same occupations and occupied the same grades. But from the second half of the fifteenth century such technical appointments were turned into *ch'aejik* positions which no longer received awards of land. Professionals were still treated as civil officials, but they were no longer allowed to attend court standing alongside local gentry. Rather, they had to stand with the *sōban*. It was thus made difficult for technical experts to advance into the ranks of the aristocracy. The *yangban*, in their turn, no longer wanted to be appointed to such low grade posts and eventually came to despise the occupations which accompanied them. Consequently, technical offices gradually became hereditary duties held by the professional groups.

From the beginning of Chosōn the secondary sons of *yangban* concubines (*sōōl*) were subject to discriminatory treatment. They could not take civil service examinations and thus could not be appointed to *yangban* offices. Only the commoner secondary sons of officials of second rank and above (*sōja*) could be appointed to technical offices, whereas the sons of slave mothers (*ōlcha*) could receive only minor appointments. Since the secondary sons of officials below the second rank were not granted protected appointments, they stood little chance of getting any official position. At first, they were only prevented from holding important *yangban* offices, but after the promulgation of the *Kyōngguk taejōn* national code in 1485 descendants of secondary sons were completely barred from office. This selection process was supported with appropriate Confucian morality by the aristocracy. Many of the descendents of *yangban*, as *sadaebu*, thus also moved to the *chungin* group.

From this brief account it can be seen how at the beginning of the Chosōn dynasty the ruling elite began to separate into two groups, the *yangban* and the *chungin*. The latter consisted not only of the various groups discussed above, who had separated through a gradual process of differentiation through discrimination from the ruling elite, but also rich commoners who advanced into their ranks. The latter group

were also an important element in the growing *chungin*. By becoming students at local schools (*hyanggyo*) or military personnel (*sŏnmu kun'gwan*), people of commoner stock attempted to escape from active military duty. Such students had the possibility to become interpreters or *sŏri*. The fact that after the second half of the fifteenth century commoners entered local schools in order to avoid military service shows that this was one path for social advancement. The same was true with military personnel. Wealthy commoners who were neither *yangban* nor *sangmin* were not given military tasks and thus came to be regarded as *chungin*. There were quotas for students at local schools, but any commoners who made substantial contributions would be admitted. There were also other methods by which commoners could become *chungin*, for example through the contribution of grain, military success, or the falsification of household registers (*hojŏk*) and genealogies (*chokpo*).

The rise of the *chungin*, which had begun with the diversification of the ruling class at the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty, became even more pronounced with the development of trade and a monetary economy towards the end of the dynasty.

The Composition and Nature of the *Chungin*

The composition of the *chungin* class was more complex than that of other social status groups. Some *chungin* were similar to *yangban*, yet some were lowborn (being born as *ch'ŏnmin*). The reason for this variety lay in the fact that the compensation received from the state and the social appreciation of *chungin* depended on a great number of services which had been rendered. Although in Chosŏn social status was a prerequisite for office, the actual holding of office was in turn a criterion for determining social status. It is therefore true to say that the social complexity of the *chungin* was a function of their occupational complexity.

The social differentiation within the *chungin* group was well expressed by the restrictions placed on the holding of offices. Professionals could advance to senior third rank (*tangsang*), but local officials (*hyangni*) had no official ranks (they in fact corresponded to fifth rank) and *sŏri* held the lower seventh rank. Among the professionals, translators, physicians, mathematicians, and legal experts belonged to an upper group (*tangsang*), but astronomers, painters, and Taoist practitioners remained in a lower group (senior seventh rank). The lowest technical posts, for example musicians, were manned by outcast *ch'ŏnmin*; these were not *chungin* occupations.

The secondary sons of *yangban* were also differentiated from sons of commoner mothers—who could hold offices as professionals —, and sons of slave mothers—who could only hold minor posts. Of course, office and rank restrictions depended on the kind of offices that an individual's forebears had held.

The *hyangni* were advisors to local magistrates, and here there were also several categories: the *hojang* could, in place of the magistrate, visit the king at the beginning of each year; some *hyangni* were in charge of the six departments of a magistrate's office (the *yukpang hyangni*); the *saengni* fulfilled all kinds of odd duties. Because the latter's duties were low, some scholars think that all *hyangni* occupations were low. Seen from the *yangban* point of view this is true, but seen from a commoner point of view the occupations are far from low.

Among *sŏri* officials there were also two categories, as we have seen. Even though the higher *noksa* denoted an office usually held by *sŏri*, it was possible to advance upwards from this position by taking the appropriate exams to *yangban* offices. No such upward mobility was possible for the lower *sŏri*.

There are similar differentiations amongst other social groups who belonged to the *chungin*. Because the composition of the *chungin* class is so complex, it is difficult to find a common denominator for all members. While the *yangban* constituted the upper ruling class in charge of policy

formulation, the *chungin* formed a lower ruling stratum that took care of administration. Their positions, therefore, did not come up to those of *yangban*, but were markedly higher than those of commoners. Moreover, the *chungin* began to clearly rise above commoners from the fifteenth century onwards, and by the end of the Chosŏn dynasty they had come to form a separate social status group.

During the Chosŏn period then, the *chungin* played an important role in the Korean bureaucratic system. The elite *yangban* left administrative tasks to *chungin* while they themselves enjoyed poetry and other literati arts and suitably glorified the Confucian rule of the kingly way. Because of this, the administrative tasks of *chungin* gradually became hereditary, and the *chungin* were more and more differentiated both institutionally and ideologically. *Yangban* did not intermarry with *chungin*. On the other hand, the *chungin* came to live like parasites on the *yangban* and, protected by the latter's authority, engaged in illegal activities. As their knowledge and economic power developed in equal measure to that of the *yangban*, the *chungin* continually tried to liberate themselves socially from the ruling aristocracy. And, because their administrative tasks were important for the state, their position became firmly entrenched and their practical knowledge became important in modernizing society. Consequently, they became the forerunners of Korea's modernization and the first willing recipients of Western culture.

Through the long administrative experience of *chungin*, their behaviour became refined, their life-style improved, and they increasingly looked after their self interest. Their writing-style, poetry and prose, and their attitude towards life—in short their culture—developed separately from that of the *yangban*.

NOTES

1. Lee's book contains more extensive details on social stratification from the Koryŏ period forwards. See Lee [Yi] Sŏngmu, *Chosŏn ch'ŏgi yangban yŏn'gu* (Seoul, Ilchogak, 1980).
2. According to Lee Man Gap [Yi Man'gap] *hyangni*, as the later *hyangban*, were gentry who had moved to the countryside but who held no official positions. Lee divides social stratification into seven groups from aristocratic *yangban* down to the outcast *ch'ŏnmin* below *sangmin*. See Lee Man Gap, *Sociology and Social Change in Korea*: 5-8, 34-35, 143 (Seoul, Seoul National University Press, 1982).

GLOSSARY

| | | | |
|-----------------|------|-----------|-----|
| ch'aejik | 遞兒職 | chapkwa | 雜科 |
| chŏnshigwa | 田柴科 | chokpo | 族譜 |
| ch'ŏnmin | 賤民 | ch'ŏnyŏk | 賤役 |
| Chosŏn | 朝鮮 | chungin | 中人 |
| hojang | 戶長 | hojŏk | 戶籍 |
| hyangni | 鄉吏 | hyangyak | 鄉約 |
| hyanggyo | 鄉校 | hyŏn | 縣 |
| kapsa | 甲士 | kisulgwan | 技術官 |
| Koryŏ | 高麗 | kun | 郡 |
| kunyŏk | 軍役 | kwajŏnbŏp | 科田法 |
| Kyŏngguk taejŏn | 經國大典 | | |
| namban | 南班 | namhang | 南行 |

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|----------------|------|-----------------|------|
| noksa | 祿事 | oeyōkchōn | 外役田 |
| ōlcha | 孽子 | pon'gwan | 本貫 |
| sadaebu | 士大夫 | saengni | 色吏 |
| samban | 三班 | sangmin | |
| sōban | 西班 | sōja | 庶子 |
| sōnmu kun'gwan | 選武軍官 | | |
| sōōl | 庶孽 | sōri | 胥吏 |
| tangsang | 堂上 | tongban | 東班 |
| tosōng | 渡丞 | yangban | 兩班 |
| yi | 吏 | yōksūng | 驛丞 |
| yuhyangso | 留鄉所 | yukpang hyangni | 六房御史 |