Central Power, Local Society, and Rural Unrest in Nineteenth-Century Korea: An Attempt at Comparative Local History

Anders Karlsson
SOAS, University of London

ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century Choson Korea experienced frequent and at times violent conflicts between central power and rural society. This phenomenon has often been seen as an indication of general nationwide socio-economic trends of the period, despite the fact that rural unrest was largely dictated by local conditions. The present study suggests that the concept of “social arenas” provides a suitable framework for comparative local history which is needed if conclusions are to be drawn about the nationwide situation from varying local circumstances. This concept presents a dynamic understanding of the relationship between central power and local society and can be used to connect the larger trends of the late Choson period with outbreaks of rural unrest. The analysis focuses on the Hong Kyongsae rebellion that erupted in the northwest in 1811 and the riots that spread over the southern part of the peninsula in 1862. The study will show that these two outbreaks of rural unrest, despite their different characteristics and the distinctly different social milieus out of which they developed, can be understood in relation to changing relationships between central power and local society.

Keywords: Late Choson, local history, rural unrest, social arenas, centralisation, taxation

Prologue

On the eighteenth of the twelfth month, 1811, two police officers from Sŏnch’ŏn county in northern P’yŏngan province arrived at the county office in neighbouring Kwaksan. They delivered a secret message to the magistrate Yi Yongguk from his Sŏnch’ŏn colleague Kim Iksun. In the message Yi Yongguk was requested to arrest three inhabitants of Kwaksan – Pak Songun, Kim Changsi and Chang Hongik – and send them to Sŏnch’ŏn since their names had been mentioned in connection to a conspiracy directed against the central government.

This must have been troubling news for Yi Yongguk as these three alleged conspirators all belonged to the local elite of the county. Pak Songun was the highest military officer (Sugyo) at the county office and he also played an important role in county fiscal administration. Kim Changsi had the previous year received a licentiate literary degree, and being a well-known person in the region he frequented many of the county offices in the company of magistrates. Chang Hongik, finally, came from a family of military officers even though he himself held no position (he was referred to as a halfyang). Frightened by the disheartening content of the mes-
sage, the magistrate ordered officers and close followers to arm and guard the county office.

In the end, they only managed to arrest Pak Sungun and Chang Hongik, as the whereabouts of Kim Changgi were unknown. A group consisting of the two prisoners, the two Sŏnch’ŏn policemen and more than ten officers, clerks, guards and runners from the county office set off for Sŏnch’ŏn. About two kilometres from the county town they passed Kim Changgi’s house where seven people—including Kim Changgi’s father, brother, and son—came out with food and joined the group. This they were probably allowed to do since the prisoners were respect-
ed members of the local elite.

After a while, the group approached the Sin pass on the border between Kwaksan and Sŏnch’ŏn counties. There Chang Hongik’s younger brother Chang Hoik and Pak Sungun’s son Pak Inbok—an Executive Officer[łupsa] at the county office—together with public slave tyong also approached the group and asked if they could join them. This they were allowed to do. When the group had almost reached the pass another inhabitant of Kwaksan county, Yi Sŏngjong, suddenly appeared from the other side. He had a good look at the group, asked who the policemen were, and then returned to the other side of the pass, this time accompanied by Chang Hoik and Pak Inbok.

This made the police officers even more cautious and they rode tens of metres in front of the others. Suddenly, the rear group heard agitated voices from the other side of the pass and rushed forward to see what had happened. The two horses on which the policemen had been riding stood by the roadside and the police officers lay dead on the ground. The group that had killed them—Yi Sŏngjong, Chang Hoik, Pak Inbok and a certain Kang Sinŭm—was led by Kim Sayong, a central figure in the plans for a rebellion against the central government that were in fact being made in the area.

The overpowering of the police officers had probably got out of control, because Chang Hoik asked Kim Sayong why they had to kill those “innocent people,” one of the officers in fact being his brother-in-law. Kim Sayong drew his sword and wanted to kill Chang Hoik too, but Pak Sungun prevented him from doing so. However, Kim Sayong brandished his sword and shouted at the group of clerks and guards so that no one dared to escape.

The group now set off on their return to the county town of Kwaksan. Near the town they made a stop at the military training field. Pak Sungun called on a military runner at the county office and ordered him to find out the situation. He also ordered one of the county town’s military men to enter the county office and get a suit of armour which he then made Kim Sayong wear. The leaders armed themselves with spears and swords and ordered the others to carry wooden clubs.

They ran through the town shouting and smashing doors, but when they stormed the Magistrate’s Office it was empty.

Yi Yonggik was hiding in a closet and was pulled out by Pak Inbok. The group tied him up and placed him on his knees in the courtyard. Kim Sayong sat down in the main hall and reprimanded the magistrate asking him why he had imprisoned one of the county inhabitants. The magistrate answered that he had done this because the person had illegally used money from the way-station store-house[ch’ikko]. To this Kim Sayong replied that the money had been taken for a special purpose and he asked the magistrate how he could be so ignorant of the will of Heaven. Kim Sayong wanted to behead Yi Yonggik, but the others in the group persuaded him not to since “he had been a benevolent ruler.” Instead, they put a wooden collar on the magistrate and locked him up in the clerks’ room.

Introduction: Rural Unrest, Socioeconomic Change, and Comparative Local History

On the same day Yi Yonggik was overpowered, another group of rebels stormed into the county town of Kasan and killed its magistrate. This was the start of the Hong Kyŏngŭe rebellion of 1811-1812, the most serious challenge to central power the Chosŏn dynasty had so far experienced.

Rural unrest of this kind plagued the Chosŏn dynasty throughout the whole nineteenth century and the manifestations were manifold. In small-scale incidents inhabitants of the counties attacked the county office[p’onggu]; stole the county office board symbolizing royal authority[py’ae]; condemned the officials at the county office[an’yang]; sent petitions regarding the misuse of magistrates [hongsin]; spread malicious rumours about the magistrate[sŏn]; shouted out their discontent within hearing distance of the county office[sado]; amplified the effect of this by doing it at night carrying torches[hŏhwâ]; and spread leaflets criticizing the magistrate[al’so].

Sometimes the unrest was more violent. Bands of robbers[my’ōngwŏgi] rampage around the countryside, attacking county offices and killing local officials, smashing prison gates, and stealing official documents and military equipment. Often the conflict was between different groups involved in the management of county affairs. In 1808 in Tamgong, Hamgyŏng province the local administrative elite[hyangso] attacked the magistrate armed with clubs and chased him away. In Pukch’ŏng, that same year, local officials at the county office attacked the representatives of the local bureau[h’yanggo] and cursed the magistrate.

In the second month of 1811 riots erupted in Kocsan county, Hwanghae province. Local clerks had embargoed public rice and sold it at a considerable profit in the markets of neighbouring Pyŏngyang province in collaboration with wealthy farmers and local merchants. The magistrate found out about this and when he...
arrested those involved an angry mob attacked and seized the county office. Later the same year, as we have seen, the Hong Kyŏngné rebellion erupted further to the north in northern Pyongan Province. 1862 saw large-scale riots spread over the southern part of the country. From 1858 fragmented riots broke out all over the country but especially in Kangwon Province. This unrest finally culminated in 1894 with the Tonghakt rebellion.

Although these cases are very different in character, one thing that almost all had in common was that they were directed against the representatives of central power and their agents, or were concerned with the management of county affairs. As we have seen in the Prologue, this was the case in Kwalsan county in 1811.

In Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China, Philip Kuhn asked whether the social unrest underlying the Taiping rebellion was just another example of a decaying dynasty ready to be replaced by a new one, or really indicated the collapse of the traditional Chinese social order and thus meant a first step in the modernization of China. The frequent outbursts of violence in Korea in the nineteenth century are equally crucial for understanding the problems the Chosŏn dynasty was facing. The question of the character and significance of this period and these outbursts of violence in Korea is equally important.

A main theme in modern Korean historiography has been to describe the late Chosŏn dynasty as a transition period in which Korean society moved from the “feudal” stage towards modernity. Many scholars have concentrated on the disorder of the nineteenth century and in this they see the collapse of the old order. In the frequent riots and revolts they see the development of a new social force, the “people” (minjang) taking the lead in the struggle for a more equal, that is modern, society.

A key element in South Korean historiography underpinning this view is the theory of economic development during the second half of the Chosŏn dynasty that has been elaborated since Kim Yonggŏp’s pioneering work in the 1960s on agricultural change. According to this theory, increased agricultural productivity led to a division of the peasant class into wealthy farmers and landless peasants. The wealthy farmers became “entrepreneurial” in their cultivation of land, and the landless peasants either worked for them or turned to handicraft and trade. Large-scale farming in turn led to increased productivity, and the wealth generated by this stimulated handicraft and trade. According to these studies, the aristocratic yangban class also divided into one group that managed to adapt to the changes and increase their wealth, and one that slowly lost their social standing. This bifurcation of the peasant class is said to have created a large group of landless peasants vulnerable to exploitation, and at the same time a large group of wealthy farmers feeling restrained by the social order. From the group of fallen aristocrats also came a new layer of intellectuals who could lead the peasants. Resentment of the social order among these groups allegedly played an important role in the riots and uprisings of the nineteenth century.

If the socioeconomic trends of late Chosŏn are described in terms of development, the political situation of the nineteenth century is depicted in terms of decline. Since King Sunjong (r. 1800-1834) was underage when he was enthroned 1800, Queen Dowager Chongyang (1745-1805), the Queen of Yongjo (r. 1724-1776), administered state affairs from behind the scenes, and the young king’s father-in-law Kim Choung (1765-1831) managed to gather almost all political power into the hands of his line of the Andong Kim descent group. Although the in-law family in power changed over time, this was a phenomenon that characterized political life throughout the nineteenth century, since all the kings enthroned in that century were either minors or relatively young. Through this control of royal power the royal in-law families came to dominate state affairs under a system called sodogônghui, in-law government.

The common view of this period is that state administration deteriorated due to the scramble for power and wealth at the top, and that this also spread to the countryside where greedy magistrates and local officials took advantage of the disorderly political situation and mistreated and exploited the populace. This misrule in state and local administration coincided with an era of extremely frequent natural catastrophes and accompanying famine. The populace grew unruly and the unrest later turned into large-scale riots and rebellion.

The period is thus described in terms of both development and decline, and both of these trends are seen as contributing to the social unrest. Since the socioeconomic changes described for late Chosŏn resemble those described for Tokugawa Japan (1603-1867), the island neighbour constitutes an appropriate point of comparison. Japan was also plagued by social unrest during this period and interesting research has been done on the relationship between this phenomenon and social change.

Tokugawa Japan was characterized by a differentiation of the rural work force into largely market-oriented entrepreneurs and landlords, increasingly market-oriented farmers, and a class of small farmers, landless peasants, and casual labourers who were able to stay in the villages because of the non-agrarian economic opportunities available. But the conclusion drawn for Tokugawa Japan is that this resulted in a decline in community cohesion and an increase in the potential for conflict among social groups. And at the same time it is also assumed that

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6 Han Sanggwon, 1991
7 Kuhn, 1970
8 A good introduction to the voluminous research on this period can be found in Pak Ch’ansong, 1988. No T’adon et al., 1991.
9 These influential articles are collected in Kim Yongseop, 1970-1971.
10 For an overview of research on this topic, see Lee Young-hoon, 1989.
11 For a good overview of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rural unrest, see Han gyeol yi hyeok yi, 1993.
12 Sunjo was eleven when he was enthroned, Hīnjong (r. 1834-1849) was eight, Ch’odong (r. 1849-1861) was nine, and Kjongjo (r. 1863-1897) was twelve.
13 Some scholars have challenged this commonly held view, though. See for instance O Such’ang, 1991.
this development would reduce the likelihood of collective political protest since this would presuppose village unity.\textsuperscript{13}

This assumption is corroborated by statistics. Among the 7500 recorded instances of socio-political conflict during the Tokugawa era, more than 3500 are conflicts within the commoner class, many of them food riots and other protests by lower-status commoners against higher. The number of incidents of collective political protest against official institutions, agents or policies is also high, 2000, but still lower than the number of intra-class conflicts. Disaggregating the picture, the statistics show that social conflict characterized the regions that underwent economic development, while political protest was still the predominant form of contention in the less economically developed parts of Japan.\textsuperscript{14}

Although these findings do not invalidate the picture of nineteenth-century social unrest in South Korean historiography, they indicate that any link between the described socioeconomic development and political protest against central government must be analysed in greater depth and not be taken for granted.\textsuperscript{15} These findings also bring into question the argument that the unrest of the period was based on a coalition between rich and poor, both groups dissatisfied with the social order.

This study will attempt to understand the rural unrest of the nineteenth century in relation to the socioeconomic changes of the period. But the character of these changes and their relationship to social disturbance needs to be reconsid- ered. One of the main flaws of many previous studies is that when dealing with the role of central government many of them still adhere to the Japanese “colonial view” of Korean history, describing the government of late Chosön as predominantly corrupt, stagnant and inherently conservative.

However, if this was a period of substantial socioeconomic change, it natu- rally resulted in changes in the character and role of central power and its relation- ship to local society. The most conspicuous change during this period was in fact the centralization of political and economic power and efforts by central government to improve its control over the situation in the countryside through its represen- tatives, the magistrates.\textsuperscript{16}

In describing the changing features of late Chosön, a frequent weakness of earlier studies has been that while the source of socioeconomic change has been sought in local society and local conditions, conclusions are drawn concerning the Korean people as a whole (minjok) with a homogeneous history (an essential feature in nationalist historiography). To prove these socioeconomic changes—encom-
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This study will make an attempt to compare the local societies of the south with those of the northwest in relation to the rural unrest of the nineteenth century. For the sake of comparison it will inevitably provide a somewhat simplified picture of these societies, but it is hoped that the larger themes that can be suggested by this approach will compensate for any such weakness.

**Background: Central power, local society and the loss of the balance of power**

Given the negative character ascribed to central government in modern historiography, the manifestations of the alleged rapid and extensive socioeconomic changes are not sought in national and central institutions and their finances, but rather at the local level—in structures of private landowning, and developments in small-scale private trade and handicraft. A “progressive people”, with its economic foundations ultimately in the countryside, is pitted against a corrupt and conservative aristocracy centering on the capital and the royal family. It is argued that the nationwide socioeconomic changes were ultimately based on developments in agriculture.21

One of the main weaknesses of such an approach is the lack of consideration given to the role of the state. It is simply collapsed into a tool for the interests of the ruling class and only seen as an obstacle to social change. However, for a fuller understanding of socioeconomic change in late Choson, existing studies concerning agriculture, trade and local society need to be complemented by a more detailed description of the role of the state and of changes in the institutional structure of the country.

Central Power, Local Society, and Rural Unrest in Nineteenth-Century Korea

The Choson dynasty managed to create a homogenous nationwide institutional structure in which the influence of central power reached down to county level. At that level the representative of central power, the magistrate, worked together with the local elite in ruling the countryside. The most conspicuous feature of this structure was the balance maintained between the interests of central power and those of local society, or at least the interests of the local elite. Both sides were dependent on each other—the magistrate needed the local elite to rule the county and ensure tax inflow, and for the local elite it was the connection to central power that ensured a continuously strong position. This connection was also crucial for them to maintain large landholdings.22

A main reason for the presence of central power in the counties was of course to control tax inflow. Consequently, large amounts of resources came under the control of the county offices. As the market system developed and many goods became commercialized during the late Choson period, these resources, in turn, became a source of income. As they were under the control of both magistrates and the local elite, both sides could engage in lucrative money-making activities. For central power it was an opportunity to obtain income through means other than ordinary taxes, and for the magistrates and the local elite it was an opportunity to earn money privately.

Figure 1 seeks to present the provincial administrative structure of the late Choson dynasty and the relationship between central power and local society. Although state authority stretched down to village level, the question of social order was, in fact, largely delegated to local organizations, as was tax collection. As the counties were the central unit of the provincial administrative structure, rural resources were exploited at this level. The counties’ resources were therefore gathered mainly in the county towns in the various granaries and storehouses managed by clerks. Local affairs were thus mostly managed in the county towns by the magistrates and the institutions of local society.

The most important contribution of the recent trend for local histories in South Korea has been a deepened understanding of the complex institutional structures of the counties and sub-counties—structures displaying both similarities and diversity nationwide. However, since there has been a tendency to regard class structures as more important than institutional structures in the study of socioeconomic changes, these structures have often been reduced to mere reflections of class-based power structures.

But these institutional structures played an important role in all aspects of local society—political, economic, social and cultural—and much understanding can be gained if these are treated separately from class structures.23 The relationship with central power was also more dynamic than is often described. In most previous research the most important questions have been whether central power con-

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trolled the institutions of local society, or whether the magistrates were controlled by the local elite. This article will maintain that a better understanding of the institutional structure can be gained if interaction, dialogue and potential reciprocity are stressed rather than power.

In the institutional structure of the Choson dynasty the provincial governors had very limited influence in the counties under their jurisdiction. Instead, the county magistrates were the representatives of central power who were in closest contact with local society. Their duties were extensive, but much had to be delegated locally. The counties had a complex institutional structure which facilitated dynamic interaction between the different actors engaged in the management of county affairs.

As for different groups and interests within local society, the administrative elite represented their interests through positions held at county offices and local bureaus. Originally it had been the landed local elite that controlled the local bureaus, but it has been argued that they were replaced by the administrative elite later in the Choson dynasty.21 The landed elite mainly exerted its influence through the community compacts.

When examining local interests, we need to look not only at the institutional structures, but also at the question of local community. It is difficult to define “community” as a unit. Sometimes the community to which people feel they belong is the village, at other times the county or province. Still, this study will maintain that local community must be conceived in relation to central power, and in the late Choson dynasty the unit that was involved in a dialogue with central power can be said to have been the county. In this sense, the organizations of local society working in contact with the representative of central power represented the local community. However, in areas with strong influence from the local landed aristocracy, the unit of community could be found at sub-county level, as these local landed elite often acted through the community compacts.

Furthermore, this study conceives of communities in terms of structural relationships rather than shared values or mutual help. As the Sino-Korean word for community, tongdangje, literally means a body of people acting together, community often has positive connotations representing a “spiritual bond” between people that has been lost in the individualistic modern world.22 But as “community” in this study refers to relationships, it includes both negative and positive elements, both sharing and conflict.23

The county towns and their county offices and local institutions were thus not just means by which central power exploited the countryside, or the local ruling class “oppressed” the other segments of local society, but can also be seen as “social arenas” where the interests of central power and local society interacted alongside the differing interests of various groups within local society.

But in the longer term perspective, the balance between the interests of central power and local society was threatened. In the early nineteenth century both central and local government had severe fiscal problems.24 To remedy this it was important to improve procedures at county offices so as to eliminate the corruption of local clerks and to make sure that a larger share of the generated profit was sent to the capital.

Late Choson, and especially the early nineteenth century, thus saw an increased interest in county administration. Starting as early as in the mid-eighteenth century, Secret Inspectors [amuhrong ou] were dispatched more frequently to the countryside, and in contrast to earlier periods when their main duty had been to censor the magistrates, an important function was now to investigate the general situation.25 In 1808 King Sunjo dispatched such agents to all eight provinces to examine the situation in the countryside in detail. In 1809 he further ordered all magistrates and governors to report rural problems and give their opinions on how to solve them, and in 1811 booklets describing the rural situation were compiled.26

Part of these efforts was also the compilation of Man’gy or ian in 1808, a handbook of financial and military administration. The fact that county administration was a main concern of central power at the time can also be seen in the compilation of administrative instruction books, private reform programs by scholars such as Chong Yagyon, and more extensive records kept by magistrates of their work.27 The main theme of Chong Yagyon’s magnum opus Mongmin simul is the struggle between the shepherds of the people [monmin’gwan] – that is, the magistrates – and the wicked local officials. Of course, the magistrates are heavily criticized, but mostly for their inability to control the local elite. This can also be seen in his Essay on Local Functionaries [Hyangch’on sahoesa].

Oh, you magistrates, how lamentable it is! Since childhood the magistrates have accumulated knowledge of the texts and the histories and have luckily entered the path of officialdom. After labouring hard for ten years they might luckily become magistrates. But from the moment they arrive, who is not trembling with fear and anxiety, afraid that they may not live up to their responsibilities? They want the people to praise them, they want the governor to commend them, they want to abide by the law, and they want to accomplish their official duties within the given time. But after a couple of months the local functionaries start to mislead them saying: “The greed of the people cannot be satisfied, the governor is so far away so there are ways to lure him and conceal things from him, if we gather and distribute the grain according to our schemes the gain will be tenfold, there is no harm in passing on the official duties.” Then

21 See, for instance, Hyangch’on sahoesa 20.1, 1960.
22 See, for instance, Kim Yongjik, 1990:27.
23 For a view on communities emphasizing relationships, see Sabeau, 1984:27-30. For a study describing conflict within communities as a result of contact with central power, see Lee, 1997.
26 O suo King, 1900:88-85. The booklets produced in 1811 can be found in Pibyoom waistong 20.292-309.
they make business together and share the profit, they steal together and share bribes, they slaughter the populace together and use their power. [...] If a man with no taste for women is thrown into a kisaeng house, even if he is able to resist for several months, in the end there will be few who can resist the temptations of the level women. [...] The magistrates of large and small counties are just guests. It is the masters of the houses that are ruining them, but it is the guests who get the blame. Is this not lamentable?35

Late Chosön was thus a period of great changes in the relationship between central power and local society. The central government made efforts to secure more thorough control of both the work performed at the county offices and the lower levels of the administrative structure. The magistrates also came to play a much more active role in the management of county affairs. This centralization was not only due to efforts to overcome the fiscal problems of the early nineteenth century. It was also part of a larger trend, and factors enabling central power to assume a new role in local society have been traced back to the political situation of the early eighteenth century and the rebellion of 1728. High officials belonging to the Nolun-faction, after eliminating other factions from power, tried to strengthen their position by elevating the status of the representatives of central power in the provinces. This increased magistrate influence in rural society and thus weakened the power base of other factions. The rebellion was an effort on behalf of the eliminated factions and the local landed aristocracy to stop this development. But the rebellion failed and consequently the power of the magistrates increased even more.36

During the reigns of Yongjo and Chongjo royal power was strengthened. Royal power was supported by new military institutions and a group of close loyal ministers. Through this the kings wanted to achieve more direct control over the people. But in the end this system meant that the group with access to power was reduced to a small clique with royal connections. So in the end, royal power was actually weakened even though the influence of central power increased. In the nineteenth century this resulted in in-law family politics. Political power was centralised to the capital and the influential families there. Since this group had no real power base in the countryside they had to rely on the magistrates to control local society.37

Not only political power but also the wealth of the country too was concentrated in the capital, and central government had great concerns for the economic situation and development of the country. The magistrates for economically important places such as Ui and Tongnae were picked by the Border Defense Command[Piakyŏn]. This agency also had special officials to handle the markets in Seoul, and they often came from the most influential descent groups in the capital.38

All these efforts on behalf of central power to strengthen its influence in local society of course had a negative impact on the balance that had existed between the interests of the two, and this was going to play a crucial role in nineteenth-century rural unrest.

Local societies of the north and south compared

To understand the relationship between the socioeconomic changes of late Chosön and the rural unrest of the nineteenth century, this article will look at and compare the Hong Kyŏngt'ang rebellion and the riots of 1862 within the framework of local characteristics. To be able to do this we first need to look at the institutional and socioeconomic characteristics of the northern and southern parts of the peninsula.

For a long time research on the rural society of late Chosön mainly focused on the southern part of the peninsula, and the situation there is now a well known picture. The local landed aristocracy traditionally had a very strong position and to a large extent exerted their influence through community compacts based at the sub-county level. Consequently the organizational and authoritative structures of the counties were clearly divided into a county-level and a sub-county level. The magistrates and employees of county offices represented the county level, while the local landed elite represented the sub-county level. The community compacts were placed between the county offices and the villages. Even though the compacts in this sense were located on a lower administrative level than the county offices, the local landed aristocracy through its authority and organizations still controlled the local officials at the county office.39

The community compacts had lost some influence during the late Chosön dynasty; and central power stretched its authority more directly into the villages through the magistrates and the county offices, but the unit of community was still the sub-county with the local landed aristocracy and the peasants as its main constituents.

The trend of single-surname villages[longsong ch'ollak] and the break-up of administrative villages[pumong] is said to reflect the weaker position of the local landed aristocracy as their influence became more isolated to the villages that they dominated. But it is also said that the single-surname villages were one of the dominant forms during the period, which would mean that the landed aristocracy was still influential in the countryside.40 This is even more so the case if we consider how villages were connected by the strong ties that existed between the different local landed aristocratic families through marriage. The aristocracy thus still exerted a high degree of influence in the local community and occupied a position between central power and the people.41

Recently the attention of local historical studies has turned toward the north.42 P'yŏngsŏng province lacked a strong landed aristocracy and hence influential

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32 Hyangniron.
34 Nam Chidae, 1990:183.
37 Ch'ong Ch'ongryong, 1998:346. According to a survey performed during the 1930s more than half of the villages in Korea were single-surname villages, see ibid. p.303.
39 Two examples of this are O Seokyang, 2003 and Kwŏn Naehyon, 2004.

36 Hyangniron.
34 Nam Chidae, 1990:183.
community compacts. This phenomenon had several causes. First of all, the Chos
ön yangban class consisted of descent groups whose power rested on long tradi-
tions of regional dominance stretching back even before the establishment of the
dynasty. The history of P'yongan province—a border area for long periods of
Korean history under the domination of non-Korean kingdoms—obviously pro-
hibited such a yangban class from evolving traditionally. The government was also
quite restrictive in sending people from the yangban class there, although small
numbers had been sent to the area during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth cen-
turies. Central government was afraid that sending yangban to P'yongan province
would disturb the traditional way of life for them in the south, and it was not
regarded as an area suitable for yangban families.

Another prerequisite for yangban control over local society was a stable situ-
ation, which was also lacking in this border area subject to invasions and raids by
northern neighbours. Furthermore, since yangban families in the capital looked
down upon P'yongan province, marital ties were not established with its families.
Such ties were important in maintaining yangban status, and this also prohibited a
strong yangban class from appearing. Bordering China, P'yongan province
required strong defence and was perceived as an area where military skills were
most important. This military character was of course another reason to disregard
the area since the civil bureaucracy had clear predominance over the military dur-
ing the Chosön dynasty.

P'yongan province was thus not characterised by agricultural communities
at the sub-county level led by the landed aristocracy. Instead of agriculture, trade
and handicraft played an important role in local society for reasons that will be
described later, and these activities were based on the county towns and had close
connections to the county offices. We thus get a structure that was not as clearly
divided between county and sub-county level, and the community was rather
based on the whole county and led, not by a local landed elite, but rather by the
local administrative elite.

The south was predominantly agricultural, and the local landed elite relied
on its income as large landowners. The main interest of central power was the
incomes from land tax and the grain-loan system. This, of course, directly con-
cerned the peasants and the local landed aristocracy, and it affected both groups.
Taxation thus played a great part in the petitions ordinary people sent to the king.
For the landed aristocracy, the exploitation of the peasants through the grain-loan
system drew many of their tenants into vagrancy, and this of course had economic
consequences for the aristocracy as well as disturbing the order of local society.

Since the administrative elite were in charge of the grain-loan system, and
since they were not paid a salary, they used their position to squeeze money out of
the system. Their interests were thus in direct conflict with those of the local com-
mmunity; the landed elite and the peasants. Since it was merchants from the capital
and the north-western part of the peninsula that controlled national commercial
activities, the interests of merchants in the south often represented interests outside
the agricultural local community, creating tension.

The situation in P'yongan province was very different. First of all, agriculture
was not such a central part of life. The natural conditions of P'yongan province are
less favourable for agriculture when compared to the south. The area is mountain-
ous and lacks wide plains. Irrigation was difficult so the predominant form of agri-
culture was the dry field. It was only in the coastal counties that wet-field farming
was performed on a small scale. Consequently, the price of rice was always higher

41 Song Chambho, 1987:123.
42 O Such'ang, 1990:10.
43 Yanggup 204.
45 Han Sangyoun, 1990:191.
in Pyeongan province than in the south. The main crop in the mountainous areas was millet, and in the valleys of the coastal counties the peasants grew beans and barley.

In Pyeongan province trade and handicraft were important instead of agriculture, and played a more central role in local society. Trade had developed because the province bordered China, and it was not limited to any specific social group. Instead people from different social classes engaged in this cross-border trade and made money from it. Since much of the trade was performed through envoys going to China, official institutions in the province became very much involved in it. Official resources were invested in the trade and close ties developed between the administrative elite and merchants. Furthermore, the wealth accumulated from this trade was invested in local society and generated more wealth through handicraft and mining.

Exploitation by central power through taxation and the grain-loan system also existed in Pyeongan province, but the situation was not so severe since tax rates were lower and the grain collected mostly stayed in the granaries of the area.

Furthermore, in the late eighteenth century the total amount of grain in the grain-loan system of Pyeongan province was even reduced by more than half. It was actually the wealth accumulated through trade that was the main target of central government, and as we have seen, this was something that almost all groups in local society had a stake in.

Furthermore, in this conflict between local society and central power, county office employees did not side with central power since they belonged to the group that was the prime target of exploitation. This exploitation was often performed through coercive selling of administrative posts (munbyong). This did not only mean that the wealth of the province was exploited, but also that the local order was upset through a rapid increase in the number of people belonging to the local administrative elite.

**The Hong Kyôngnae rebellion 1811-1812 and the riots of 1862**

Before turning to the impacts that the interaction between socioeconomic trends and regional institutional and socioeconomic characteristics had on the conflict with central power and the outbreak of rural unrest, a short outline of the Hong Kyôngnae rebellion and the riots of 1862 is warranted.

The Hong Kyôngnae rebellion erupted in Pyeongan province bordering China in the north-western part of Korea. The rebellion lasted from the twelfth month of 1811 to the fourth month of 1812. It was preceded by a long period of preparation. The central figure was Hong Kyôngnae, the leader after whom the rebellion later got its name. Hong Kyôngnae was born in 1780 in the southern part of Pyeongan province in the county of Yonggang. His family background is not known, but he is said to have belonged to the Namyang Hong descent group. Though educated, he failed a civil service examination in 1798. Abandoning the idea of a career within the bureaucracy, he started to traverse the north-western parts of the country, studying and discussing with local intellectuals at temples and private academies.

For ten years he discussed the situation in the country with people he met, and gathered together a group of like-minded men intent on taking action to change the situation. This group was quite heterogeneous – some were intellectuals, merchants and men with military backgrounds but no official position in local society, while others were influential clerks and officers at the county offices. During the summer of 1811 this group commenced more concrete plans for a rebellion and started to build a base at Tabok village in Kaesan county in the north-

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**Table 1 Institutional characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South</th>
<th>North</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dominated by community compacts led by landed aristocracy</td>
<td>no strong landed aristocracy and thus no influential community compacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>division between county and sub-county levels</td>
<td>county office influence stretching down to village level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agricultural local communities on sub-county or village level led by the landed elite and excluding the administrative elite</td>
<td>local communities on county level, led by administrative elite and merchants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 2 Economic interests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South</th>
<th>North</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agriculture</td>
<td>trade and handicraft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>central power: land tax and grain-loan system</td>
<td>central power: taxation of trade and selling of official positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>administrative elite: county finances, especially grain-loan system</td>
<td>administrative elite: county finances and trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>merchants: represented external interests</td>
<td>merchants: trade funded by county resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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45 O'Such'ang, 1996:119-120
46 Pajang 327.
48 Kim In-gil, 1986:177
50 The following description of the Hong Kyôngnae Rebellion is based on Karlsson, 2000.
51 Whereas earlier studies based on the oral tradition of Pyeongan province regard him as a fallen jangbok, later scholars question this and argue that it is more plausible that he was a commoner.
When the rebellion erupted on the eighteenth of the twelfth month 1811, it had immense initial success and swept over large parts of northern Pyongan province within a few days. The first county seat to fall to the hands of the rebels was Kasan, not far from the rebel base at Tabok village. On the same day, the county seat of Kwaksan, further to the northeast, also fell into the hands of the rebels, as we have seen in the Prologue.

Within a couple of days the rebels were able to seize a large part of northern Pyongan province, and the rebellion divided into a northbound force and a southbound force. But on the 20th of the twelfth month, government troops left the Army Command in Anju and met the southbound rebel troops in the first big battle of the rebellion at Songnim village in Palch’i county. The rebel troops quickly started to disperse and their leaders had to retreat to the walled county seat of Chŏngju. The town was soon besieged by large contingents of government troops but they were not able to subjugate the rebels. In the meantime the northbound force holding counties north of Chŏngju was gradually subdued.

Eventually on the nineteenth of the fourth month, 1812, the government troops managed to storm the walled county seat after digging a tunnel under the wall and blowing a hole in it with explosives. Some of the rebel leaders, among them Hong Kyŏngnāe, were killed when the government troops entered Chŏngju. The county seat fell to 7-8000 government troops and of the 2983 civilians and rebel troops caught alive, 1917 were executed (those not executed were women and boys under the age of ten).

The riots of 1862 started on the nineteenth of the second month in Ch’ŏnju, Kyŏngsang province when, according to a report, several tens of thousands of inhabitants with white cloths on their heads gathered in the county town. They carried wooden clubs and burned the houses of local clerks.

The Army Commander, trying to disperse the group, went down to the market and was surrounded by the angry crowd. They reprimanded him for the exploitation of the county’s inhabitants and the corruption of the clerks. In an attempt to appease them, the Army Commander brought the unruly crowd to the army command and had two clerks punished. But the angry crowd grabbed the two clerks and threw them in a fire. They surrounded the Army Commander. They would not let him return to his office and harassed him all night long.

One clerk escaped from the office, but the next day the rioters searched him out. He was beaten to death and thrown into a fire. After that the group dispersed and, spreading to the outer villages of the county, they burned the houses of wealthy and powerful people.

Similar incidents then spread over the southern part of the peninsula and the riots lasted until the tenth month. Even though they were mostly concentrated in the south-western part of the peninsula, unrest was also reported in Hamhŭng, Hamgyŏng province. Violence was widespread – unrest was reported in more than 30 localities – but scattered, and usually violence in one locality only lasted for a couple of days. The rioters attacked county offices, burnt documents and looted granaries. During these riots more than 15 local clerks were killed and several hundred wounded and more than 1000 houses were destroyed.35

Consequences for social unrest I: Why

Having described the socioeconomic and institutional characteristics of the northern and southern parts of the Korean peninsula during late Chosŏn, and having given a brief outline of the Hong Kyŏngnāe rebellion 1811-1812 and the riots of 1862, what can now be said about the correlation between these regional characteristics and the outbreak of these two large-scale instances of social unrest?

Even though the relationship between central power and local society underlay most instances of social unrest in the nineteenth century, local conditions influenced the character of these conflicts. Given the regional characteristics of Pyongan province in which the local community was led by the administrative elite, a stronger and more aggressive central power caused a conflict with this elite, and the conflict concerned the management of county resources and the money that could be made by investing these in lucrative trade.

Central government’s new policy aimed at improving its control over late Chosŏn socioeconomic trends had negative consequences for this administrative elite for several reasons. First of all, up till the mid-eighteenth century the control of central government over Pyongan province had been relatively weak and this had made the local administrative elite considerably independent. Population figures for the province according to Ch’ŏnggo munhŏng p’yo [Revised Reference Compilation of Documents on Korea] increased considerably in the eighteenth century.36 An increase of as much as sixty-nine percent indicates that this do not reflect an actual population increase, and since this was a period when central government tried to get a clearer picture of the demographic situation in the provinces, it clearly shows that the control of central power over the province up till then had been quite loose. Efforts in the eighteenth century to get better knowledge and control of the provinces were, in fact, to a large extent directed against areas such as Pyongan that hitherto had been neglected.37

Secondly, the exploitation of agricultural production through taxation was a constant phenomenon, but a specific trend of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the central government’s efforts to straighten up procedures at the county offices and transfer more rice and money to the capital.38 The group on the losing end of this development was of course the local administrative elite.

The harsh natural conditions of the nineteenth century are often given as a factor behind the rural unrest of the period, causing destitution and concomitant discontent. However, to be able to understand the role of these natural conditions we once again must consider regional institutional and socioeconomic characteristics.

35 Mangyeon Han’gyoksa won’guk, 1988.
36 Ch’ŏnggo munhŏng p’yo 161:188-192.
38 Chang Tongpyŏ, 1999:64-47.
tics. The weather conditions of the early nineteenth century did play an important role in the Hong Kyŏngnae rebellion, although not as a direct cause of destitution and discontent. In fact, P'yŏngyang province was less afflicted by these natural catastrophes than other parts of the peninsula.

Rather, the harsh natural conditions and natural calamities underlay the unrest in the sense that they severely undermined the financial situation of the central government, and this in turn created tension in the institutional structures and the relationship between central power and local society. Consequently the role of central power in the counties changed. Previously official institutions in P'yŏngyang province often functioned as financiers for private merchants, and the counties' economic surplus facilitated the development of trade. Several actors in local society, including local officials, cooperated in making money on this economic surplus. Considering the harsh natural conditions from 1809 on, this economic surplus must have been severely effected and this in turn must have had grave consequences for economic life in the counties.

Furthermore, to overcome its own economic difficulties the central government reformed procedures at local institutions, eliminating what they called corruption, which in fact was the money-making activities of the local administrative elite. Movements of grain within the province were also banned. The representatives of central power thus assumed a tougher attitude, and at the same time they were no longer able to function as financiers for the merchants and thus not able to sustain their role as opportunity providers in the economic life of the counties. This must of course have created discontent and tension between them and local society.

As stated above, P'yŏngyang province was less afflicted by these natural disasters, and in a twist of fate this very fact could also have been one of the factors behind the outburst of violence in a more direct sense as well. To compensate for decreased tax income from the provinces mostly heavily stricken by disaster, and to cope with the difficult financial situation of central government, even more grain was taken from those provinces that had not been so severely effected. The harsh conditions of the early nineteenth century had thus depleted county resources in P'yŏngyang province, and on top of that the central government demanded more grain to be shipped to the capital. Resources were also moved from P'yŏngyang to Ch'olla province for famine relief. If central government was a part of the solution in the south through tax exemption in heavily stricken areas, in P'yŏngyang province it was a part of the problem.

In the south, on the other hand, where the local community was mainly agricultural and consisted of the landed elite and peasants, the conflict between central power and local society concerned taxation and the grain-loan system. In this conflict, the employees of the county offices, who had no other source of income, sided with central power in exploiting the resources of local society. It was thus a conflict between the representatives of central power and the local clerks on one side and the agricultural community of the landed aristocracy and the peasants on the other.

A central issue in taxation in the nineteenth century was the new practice of togyol. First appearing in the early nineteenth century, togyol did not develop through central government legislation, but instead started to be practised by magistrates independently as a means to simplify tax collection, cover increasing administrative costs, raise relief funds, and gain control over the profit that could be made through this collection. Simply stated, the principle of togyol was to tie all taxes to the land, basing them on kayŏl, and to gather it all in cash.

Both local and central government had fiscal problems, but at this stage it was difficult to increase revenues by putting more land under taxation. In fact, new land surveys resulted in a reduced tax base. In the case of the military tax, it was not possible to expand the tax base of adult males, and this tax base too was constantly decreasing due to the increasingly large section of the population who carried titles exempting them from this tax. Given this situation it was natural that the solution would be to increase tax on the existing land tax base through togyol.

As this new system was not stipulated by law, magistrates who wanted to implement it in their counties had to first discuss it at the village meeting, and being an effort to come to terms with the problems of tax collection at the time, it was mostly implemented with village meeting support. However, as this system was not based on legislation, there was much leeway for corruption by magistrates and local clerks, and since it increased the tax burden on certain sectors of local society, it inevitably caused conflict.

Secret Inspectors had criticized this practice already in the early nineteenth century when it started to appear. But it was not until the 1850s that it started to be heavily condemned by central state men and local Confucians as the source of the suffering of the people, and it was consequently forbidden.

However, as the simplest way to come to terms with the problematic fiscal situation of the county offices it was still widely practised and in the riots of 1862 it was one of the main sources of discontent, together with the grain-loan system.

The reason why the grain-loan system became such an important source of income for central government in the nineteenth century was similar to the reasons behind the development of togyol. Faced with increasing fiscal problems and no more land or people to tax, the grain-loan system, with its forced distribution and interest rates, became a way to increase revenue. However, as this was a system set up for the purpose of relief and price stabilization rather than taxation, the lack of standard rules created much leeway for corruption by magistrates and especially by the local clerks.

57 Yi Hoch'il and Pak Komp'il, 1997:183-186.
58 Samju 12:60a, in Choeot wonge suilde
59 P'yŏnsa tinggok 20:420-421; Simun sujog ojigi 14/12/1811 and 23/12/1811.
60 Ko Sŏkkyŏn, 1989.
61 This presentation of togyol is based on An P'yŏngguk, 1989, and Yang Chineuk, 1992.
Consequences for social unrest II: How

Institutional and socioeconomic characteristics can not only help to explain why rural unrest broke out, but were also crucial in shaping the forms of unrest. A conspicuous feature of the Hong Kyong-eun rebellion was that it was well-organized over a large area, something that differentiates it from most social unrest of the nineteenth century, up until the Tonghak rebellion of 1894-95. The situation in the north facilitated organization and mobilization on a larger scale since the local elite controlled the administrative system. It was the county towns and their county offices and markets that were the centres of local communities and these communities encompassed most of the counties. This can be seen in the fact that the rebels were identified by which the county came from, whereas during the riots of 1862, participants carried banners with the names of their sub-counties.

Furthermore, given the close links between the county offices and the merchants of the area, and the role of the trade with China in the economy of the province, inter-county contacts between officials and merchants in the counties along the trade route to China also provided an organizational network that meant that the rebellion could transcend county borders. In most counties seized by the rebels were the route to China.

A second conspicuous characteristic of the rebellion is the fact that it was only the magistrates that were attacked, whereas in most other instances of social unrest in the nineteenth century local clerks, wealthy landlords and farmers, and merchants were also attacked. Furthermore, it is hard to discern any hatred toward the magistrates. The main aim seems not to have been revenge for misrule, but rather gaining control of the management of the counties.

The only magistrate killed by the rebels was Ch'ong Si of Kasan county, and the reason he was killed was that he refused to surrender—an offer given to most magistrates in the attacked counties—and band over the official seal[insin] and the military tallies[gyeongbu], the symbols of political and military authority.

In contrast, in some counties where the magistrates had surrendered, local rebels defended them saying that they had been “benevolent rulers,” as we have seen in the Prologue. In Paldong county, the inhabitants of the county town gathered outside the county office and begged the rebels not to harm the magistrate.

In a famous incident in Sonch'on county the rebels first imprisoned the magistrate Kim Ilmun, but later released him and let him live in a house in the county town, providing him with food and clothing.

Thirdly, whereas local clerks and merchants were the targets of violence in the riots of 1862, in the Hong Kyong-eun rebellion they were among the leaders of the unrest. In fact, the initial success of the rebellion cannot be explained by the size of the rebel troops or the leaders’ ability to motivate and lead them, but must rather be explained by all the collaborators the rebels had at influential positions in the county offices in the counties seized. Hardly any fighting at all was involved in the capture of the counties, since local clerks had already seized political and military authority before the arrival of the rebel troops. The crucial role played by the local administrative elite is also reflected in the fact that most of the new rebel-appointed magistrates came from this group.

The local administrative elite that is depicted as the great villain of nineteenth century society, the exploiters of the peasants and the targets of popular anger, was thus in fact leading the peasants in this rebellion. The active role played by local clerks and merchants must of course be explained by the fact that they were the leaders of local society and that it was their interests that were at stake as the stronger influence of central power in the area threatened their control of profitable local trade.

### Table 3 Forms of social unrest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kasan</td>
<td>Yun Wonsipt</td>
<td>Influential family; position at the county office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwaldsan</td>
<td>Pak Sôngun</td>
<td>Highest officer at the county office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch'ongu</td>
<td>Ch'oe Iryun Kim Ilmun</td>
<td>Highest clerk at the county office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sôngch'on</td>
<td>Yu Munge</td>
<td>Influential officer at the county office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch'olsan</td>
<td>Ch'oeng Pogil</td>
<td>Highest officer at the county office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taech'on</td>
<td>Pyon Taek</td>
<td>Granary supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yongch'on Ch'ong Kyong-haeng</td>
<td>Former Regiment Commander from Ch'olsan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakch'on Han Iihang</td>
<td>Influential family; military position</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4 Rebel-designated magistrates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hong Iikun</td>
<td>Highest officer at the county office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim Iksun</td>
<td>Head of the Local Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pak Sôngun</td>
<td>Highest officer at the county office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch'oe Iryun Kim Ilmun</td>
<td>Highest office at the county office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu Munge</td>
<td>Influential officer at the county office</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pyon Taek</td>
<td>Granary supervisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

64 Source: wikipedia 2012/1811.
The rebel leader Kim Sayong arrived at our county town leading among others Kim Unnyong, Kim Sokha, and a person from Chindu. They are most commonly called “peasant resistance struggles” or “riots” in this study. In contemporary South Korean historiography they are therefore called riots in this study. In contemporary South Korean historiography, as the following account given by Ch’oe Iryun, head of Chang Pongch’ŏn, demonstrates, the rebels had seized the county towns, the mobilization was decided by the local landed elite. But in the late Chosŏn dynasty they underpinned the rural elite in tax collection and other administrative matters. In the early Chosŏn dynasty they underpinned the relatively independent control over local society exercised by the local landed elite. But in the late Chosŏn dynasty, as central power increased its influence, these meetings changed character and played an important role in tax collection and other administrative matters. They also facilitated the early Chosŏn administrative foundations of the riots were village meetings[hyanghoe] held just before the violence erupted.

These village meetings played an important role in the administrative structure of local society, and they can be said to have represented the stronger position of the local landed aristocracy in relation to magistrates and county offices. In the early Chosŏn dynasty they underpinned the relatively independent control over local society exercised by the local landed elite. But in the late Chosŏn dynasty, as central power increased its influence, these meetings changed character and played an important role in tax collection and other administrative matters. Still, the landed aristocracy’s influence was strong, and for the south it was at these community meetings that the interests of central power interacted with those of local society, rather than in the work performed at the county offices. The rebel leader Kim Sayong arrived at our county town leading among others Kim Unnyong, Kim Sokha, and a person from Kwaksan named Kang. We had already received orders to welcome them with propriety, so I and Idae led a group with banners, drums, and horns and welcomed them outside the town. After they had entered and seated themselves in the magistrate’s office they held an audience. They ordered that the grain-loan activities of the county town and the villages should continue as before, and that troops should be mobilized by voluntarily gathering able-bodied men of the county. Yi Chŏnghwan, a lieutenant commander of the county town, was put in charge of this, and he had the executive officer Chon Ch’onghyŏk, together with the other officers, mobilize 300 men.47

Compared with the Hong Kyŏngnai rebellion, the riots of 1862 were more dispersed, not as well organized and they displayed great variance from area to area.46 This was probably a result of the fact that the organizational foundations of both the local community and of the riots themselves were at a lower level in the institutional structure of the counties. As stated above, community compacts were influential in this area, and the organizational foundations of the riots were village meetings[hyanghoe] held just before the violence erupted.45

These village meetings played an important role in the administrative structure of local society, and they can be said to have represented the stronger position of the local landed aristocracy in relation to magistrates and county offices. In the early Chosŏn dynasty they underpinned the relatively independent control over local society exercised by the local landed elite. But in the late Chosŏn dynasty, as central power increased its influence, these meetings changed character and played an important role in tax collection and other administrative matters. They also facilitated the early Chosŏn administrative foundations of the riots were village meetings[hyanghoe] held just before the violence erupted.

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In this way, the local landed elite played an important role in these riots as the leading force of the community meetings. In fact, it was their inclination that decided whether or not the community meetings would turn against the magis-
This must be explained by the fact that the landlord-tenant system of agricultural production was much more prevalent in the south than in the north, which was characterized by a higher ratio of owner-cultivators; and that even though the conflict mainly concerned the relationship between central power and local society, in the heat of the rioting hatred against wealthy landlords was also vented.

The riots involved people with different backgrounds, corroborating the picture that the organizational base was the community of local society, and not any specific social group. Likewise, the object of mobilization was not any specific group but the inhabitants of the county as a whole, and it is interesting to note that the individual riots never transcended county level.

Concluding remarks

Studies of socioeconomic change in late Choson are divided into descriptions of development and descriptions of decline. Often texts dealing with the eighteenth century focus on development, whereas studies on the nineteenth century talk of decline, as the dynasty was threatened by escalating social unrest. It is the view of this study that the social unrest of the latter period was a natural consequence of the developments in the earlier period.

Although the socioeconomic changes that occurred in late Choson encompassed developments in agriculture, trade and handicraft, the feature of these changes that most influenced the rural unrest of the era was the new stronger presence of central power in local society, a presence that was, to a large extent, an attempt to control the above-mentioned trends in agriculture, trade and handicraft.

Stronger central power was an essential component in the new “positive” trends of the eighteenth century. It was also the cause of rural unrest in the early nineteenth century as the struggle over county resources grew more intense and both national and local finances were strained by the harsh natural conditions. In that sense, nineteenth-century unrest was a natural continuation of late eighteenth-century trends.

Interacting with regional characteristics, the stronger presence of central power in the north resulted in a conflict with the local administrative elite and merchants, since the central government tried to gain better control over the resources of the area and the profits that could be made through trade. The Hong Kyongnag rebellion was thus not progressive but defensive in character, defending the right of the local administrative elite to control the resources of local society, a right challenged by the new role of central power.

Later, in the south, the stronger presence of central government resulted in a conflict with the rural local communities led by the landed elite, and in this conflict the administrative elite sided with central power and were thus one of the main targets of violence. As this conflict more directly concerned the interests of the peasants, it could be interpreted as more progressive than the Hong Kyongnag rebellion.
Central Power, Local Society, and Rural Unrest in Nineteenth-Century Korea

rebellion, but we have to bear in mind that it was a reaction against changes in the relation between central power and local society.

However, as long as “the people” is not limited to peasants with “people’s consciousness” and their allies, progressive struggles are not the only way for the people to look after their interests. In that sense, nineteenth-century rural unrest was not an immature stage of later social movements to come, but a conscious effort on the part of participants to look after their interests in the face of a stronger central power taking more control over the resources of local society.

If we return to Philip Kuhn’s question, raised in the beginning of this study, the social unrest of nineteenth-century Choson is not just another example of a decaying dynasty that would have been replaced by a new one had not the presence of aggressive imperial Western powers changed the situation in nineteenth-century East Asia. Neither did it indicate the collapse of the traditional Korean social order.

The Choson dynasty was not crumbling due to efforts of progressive forces to change society. Central government had a stake in and played an important role in the socioeconomic changes that can be seen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Central government tried to secure better control over the provinces and their financial administration. But as the harsh natural conditions of the nineteenth century continued and both national and local finances became strained, this led to increasing conflicts with both local elites and tax-paying peasants and frequent outbreaks of violence. The former balance within the institutional structures had been lost. This situation of frequent conflicts with the populace and an ever-worsening financial situation must be borne in mind when dealing with the Korean response to foreign aggression in the late nineteenth century and the eventual demise of the Choson dynasty.

### GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Korean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>amhaeng osa</td>
<td>시행御史</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andong</td>
<td>안동</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anju</td>
<td>안주</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chang Chiæok</td>
<td>창기석</td>
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<td>Chang Hook</td>
<td>창호규</td>
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<td>Chang Hongik</td>
<td>창홍익</td>
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<td>Chang Pongch’om</td>
<td>창봉천</td>
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<td>ch’ikko</td>
<td>칠교</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>침 Dude</td>
</tr>
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Diverse forces, impossible to disentangle, were at work in producing this event. Each has a voice. Each cannot be discarded out of hand in any overall account. However, it is precisely the multiplicity of voices, and the difference between them, that also makes it difficult to understand the event as a whole. To recover these voices is to try to understand the past in a different way, which involves aiming at a more complex understanding of the historic experience. To recover these voices is to try to understand the past in a different way, which involves aiming at a more complex understanding of the historic experience.
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