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# Feudalism, Estate, and Prebendalism in "Pre-Modern" Korea

HAN GU KIM\*

**ABSTRACT**— This paper analyzes three phases of feudalism in Korea. First, the genesis of Korea's feudalism, which developed from the end of the ninth century to the late fourteenth century. Secondly, the continuum of feudalism in Korea, which the author believes stemmed from power conflicts among the elite and the ensuing decline of the Silla dynasty. It is noted, also, that Korean feudalism has been transformed gradually from a decentralized form to a centralized one. Thirdly, structural distinctions are noted between the above two sub-types of feudalism. The analysis indicates that centralized feudalism has been characterized by absolute monarchism and various social and political systems, notably the estate, prebendalism, and *kwako* (civil service examination) systems which were lacking in the decentralized feudalism.

No social-cultural anthropologists are known to have previously attempted to analyze Korean feudalism. Seemingly, most students believe that there has been no feudalism in Korea throughout its history. Nevertheless, the words *pongŏn*, meaning feudalism, and *pongŏn cheto*, meaning feudalistic system, do appear in the Korean language and in some literature. A brief survey and discussion of feudalism indicate that it played a definite role in the development of Korean society and culture.

## Roots of the movement in Korea

The Koreans, one of the distinct geographical populations in Far East Asia with their own language and culture, have more than 2,000 years of national history. According to available archaeological and historical sources, the nation's innovative era appears to have begun sometime during the period of Silla Korea, 735-887 A.D. This era was marked by the achievement of an early Korean civilization.

However, the latter part of the Silla dynasty was characterized by the rise of decentralized feudalism, and this system was transformed eventually into centralized feudalism. It appears that the origin of Korean feudalism results, above all, from power conflicts and disintegration among the nobility, the ruling elite of the dynasty, which no doubt produced Silla's serious political disorder and weakened the absolutism of monarchical power. A series of such events were recorded in the history of late Silla Korea (Kim Bu-Sik, 1145. Kim Gyon-Myong, c. 13th century. KHRC, 1950:151-154). These power conflicts were mostly struggles for succession to the throne. It may be said that these power conflicts led to the political

disorder and condition wherein Silla's noble warriors (who were the local administrators) started to train their own private soldiers, first for the sake of political and economic security, and later for expansion efforts. This, then, was the starting point for the emergence of Silla's decentralized feudalism at the end of the ninth century.

## Decentralized feudalism

The word "feudalism" derives from the Germanic "fehu-od"—"property." According to Praver and Eisenstadt, feudalism is a type of social and political system which originated in Western and Central Europe and then prevailed there during the greater part of the Middle Ages. On the other hand, according to Marxist usage, feudalism is a social and economic movement characterized by serfdom. In this view, feudalism generally succeeded the economic systems based on slavery and preceded that of capitalism. (Praver and Eisenstadt, 1968:393-402). It should be noted, however, that in Korea feudalism was not followed directly by modern capitalism as was Western feudalism.

In this frame of reference, decentralized feudalism may be defined here as a social order based upon the relation of landlord to vassal, established through mutual agreement by oath rather than by legal contract, in which the cardinal obligation of the lord is to protect the vassal and to grant him a fief. In return the vassal is to render absolute military and social loyalty and obedience to the lord.

Bellah makes the following statement in his study of Japanese dominant value under that nation's feudal structure: "In the dominant value system filial piety is subordinate to loyalty; polity overrides family; and in case of conflict of loyalty, the first duty is to one's lord rather than to one's family" (Bellah, 1957:18).

Broom and Selznick's statement on Western feudalism of the Middle Ages will help us better understand the preceding definition:

In the heyday of feudalism, a great hierarchy of lords and their respective dependents, all knit together by bonds of loyalty and protection, gave the

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social order a remarkable symmetry and a precarious cohesion. . . . Lordship was an alternative to the bond of kinship. Some men sought the protection of lords, who were not their relatives, because there was no kin group capable of establishing order at the local level (Broom and Selznick, 1963: 40).

Marion Gibbs supports Broom and Selznick's observation by saying that a good feudal lord of seventh-century England would give material support to his subject as a father helps a son, plus social protection as kindred give each other (Broom and Selznick, 1963:40).

The rise of decentralized feudalism in Korea, however, was a phenomenon which changed the political system of Silla by effecting the transition from centralized monarchical power to localized political domination of the unarmed masses by noble warriors. Each noble warrior, as a feudal lord, establishes his own politically-economically independent domain in his local region with his vassals as administrators and other subjects, including serfs and/or privately-trained armed soldiers.

It may be assumed that soldiers and farmers or serfs could not be clearly distinguished, because during a war farmers became soldiers, and after the war they returned to the manorial lord's farmland. In this sense, a farmer actually had dual status. Here it must be emphasized that, at that time, the division of labor in Silla Korea was not yet developed sufficiently to accommodate both professional soldiers and specialized farmers.

During the period of decentralized feudal Silla, known as Hu-Samguk (literally, Latter Three States), two powerful feudal domains appeared: Hu-Paektche (latter Paektche) and Hu-Kokuryō (latter Kokuryō). Territorially, Hu-Paektche (892-936) occupied chiefly the southwestern region of modern Korea—the Chōlla provinces (both North and South) and part of the Kyōngsang provinces — and was led by Lord Kyōnhwōn, a noble warrior of Silla. Hu-Kokuryō (892-935), also known as Machin and later T'aepong, occupied the northwestern central region of modern Korea—the provinces of Kangwōn, Kyonggi, Ch'ungch'ōng, and Hwanghae. This region was under the lordship of Kungye, who was also a noble warrior of Silla. Each "feudal domain" contained at least thirty fiefs administered by the Vassals. During the Hu-Samguk period, there were frequent feuds and wars between these two powerful feudal domains for the sake of territorial expansion. At that time, the king was merely an ornamental figurehead and existed by the grace of the feudal lords (KHRC, 1950: 154-159. Yi Hong-Jik, 1965: 60, 818, 1595-1596).

In 935, after a number of severe feuds and wars among the lords, Hu-Kokuryō's lord, Wanggōn, with his powerful army, overthrew the ever-weakening Silla dynasty and subjugated the Silla king and his public officers. According to Yi, Wanggōn (877-943) was one of the eminent vassals of Hu-Kokuryō's ex-lord Kungye (Yi Hong-Jik, 1965:1597). There are feudalistic repercussions in the fact that after his surrender, the last king of Silla, Kyōngsun, became Wanggōn's son-in-law by marrying one of his daughters and, therefore, received a por-

tion of land as his private dominion (CEACS, 1964: 33).

After more success in battle, Wanggōn soon brought Kyōnhwōn's feudal domain, Hu-Paektche, under his authority as well. In the same year Wanggōn founded a kingdom which was called Koryō, proclaiming himself as the first king and governing by absolute monarchical power.

There are two different opinions among historians concerning the periodization of the Koryō kingdom; one insists the kingdom began in 918, the other, in 935 (McCune and Grey, 1950:11. KHRC, 1950:156. Yi Hong-Jik, 1965: 1597. McCune, 1966:20). The main reason for these conflicting opinions seems to be the confusion in distinguishing between the structures of a feudal domain under a lord and a kingdom ruled by a king. The latter date, 935, seems more acceptable for the following reason: Wanggōn's feudal domain began in 918, and from 918 to 935 Wanggōn was a feudal lord, not a king. He became a king only after he overthrew the Silla monarchy and established Koryō, in 935.

In the early Koryō period the name "Korea" was officially adopted as the formal international name of the country. Literally meaning "the Highly Splendid," the word was linguistically derived from "Koryō" (McCune and Grey, 1950:11). In Korea customarily the first kings of the Koryō dynasty and the ensuing Yi dynasty have been called T'aecho by the people (Yi Hong-Jik, 1965:1597).

### Centralized feudalism

After 935 the basic social structure of Koryō was characterized mostly by its centralized feudalism. Centralized feudalism may be regarded here as a type of social order which is based upon the estate and prebendal systems notably, under highly centralized monarchical rule.

This centralized authority functioned not only within the bureaucratic political organization, but also in the social, economic, religious, and educational affairs in terms of reformation. For example, Wanggōn issued a tax law to collect revenue for the dynasty, declared Buddhism to be Korea's national religion, and established a national academy to train candidates for public office under the Koryō estate system, which was socially and legally enforced by the dynasty.

According to Max Weber a prebendal system is a legal institution, pertaining to land tenure, which defines one's right to use a certain portion of land in return for his public service (Weber, 1947:351. Weber, 1962:438, 442). Likewise, Bergel sees the system as an institution combining public officer and landed estate (Bergel, 1962:123). Under this system King Wanggōn appointed all of those who had been his vassals while he was feudal lord of Hu-Kokuryō to public offices of the Koryō kingdom, granting each of them a certain appropriate portion of land as a prebend for his public service, just as feudal lords granted fiefs to their vassals during the late Silla period (KHRC, 1950: 157-158, 165-166, 173-174, 177-178, 288, 296-298. Yi Sang-Baek, 1954).

Under its newly framed constitution and in conjunction with the prebendal system, the Koryŏ dynasty in the mid-tenth century adopted the *kwakŏ* system, a state examination system, for selecting public officers. This system stipulated that a Koryŏ public officer had to be a well-educated literary scholar whose scholarship was officially certified by the dynasty through his performance of the *kwakŏ*, as in classic China (KHRC, 1950: 310-316. Weber, 1962:444). However, in both culture areas the content of civil examinations had nothing to do with a candidate's skills or abilities in management of civil administration.

Along with the prebendalism, the dynasty practiced the estate system (*sinbun kekŭp cheto*); there is a direct link between the two (KHRC, 1950:283-288). On the other hand, Ginsberg correctly pointed out the historical origin of the estate system in Europe when he said: "In Europe the estate system arose, for the most part, gradually out of [centralized] feudalism, and until the end of the eighteenth century retained many of its features, especially hierarchical subordination and dependence" (Ginsberg, 1963:165).

The word "estate" ("etat" in French; "stande" in German) was officially used in pre-revolutionary France, referring to the "upper strata" (Bergel, 1962:80). Likewise, the estate system is seen here as a type of social stratification system established and enforced by law; thus, it can be classed as a legal institution. As Bergel has explained:

The caste system is based on religion. The estate or order system is based on law; it is a legal institution. Law establishes and maintains unequal strata; these strata have different rights and obligations, privileges and burdens. . . . The strata consist of families rather than individuals. The rank of every unit is determined by law. The status is inherited and transmitted to the descendants [ascribed status versus achieved status, as in the legally open class system]. Changes in rank and status depend on legal acts by a superior and not on achievements of the individual (Bergel, 1962:68).

The estate system consisted of three main hereditary social strata which were hierarchically ordered from highest to lowest social ranking as follows: (1) the privileged nobility (*yangbans*—rulers or political elite), (2) the ordinary commoners (*sang'ins*—peasants) and (3) the underprivileged, commonly known as *ch'ŏn'ins* or sometimes called *ch'ŏnmins*, literally "men of humble origins" or pariahs (KHRC, 1950: 284-288). It should be mentioned that Korean scholars differ slightly in their opinions about the stratification of the estate system.

Under the estate system, only those from the privileged *yangban* stratum were legally eligible to apply for and take the *kwakŏ* and to become public officers with landed estates or prebends. These were two of the most important legally institutionalized privileges given exclusively to the *yangbans* in terms of their basic rights and opportunities in the social, political, and economic fields. Accordingly, the other two social status groups—the *sang'ins* and *ch'ŏn'ins*—were institutionally disfranchised

from sharing these privileges with the *yangbans*.

Occupationally, besides cultivating the land the *sang'ins* sometimes engaged in trivial craftsmanship and commercial activities as artisans as well as journeymen or Peddlers. However, there is little specific information about the roles or activities of craftsmen and merchants in Koryŏ society.

On the other hand, the *ch'ŏn'ins* were engaged in menial tasks as public or private servants. Indeed, they were looked down upon and disgraced socially as slaves or *noyes* by the *yangbans* and *sang'ins*. Most of the slaves were privately owned by the privileged members of society as their servants, but a few were laborers in public offices. The privately owned slaves were bought and sold or traded from master to master, or they were given as gifts by an old master to a new lord (KHRC, 1950:284-288, 405-406).

Koryŏ's centralized feudalism was transmitted with no basic structural changes to "modern" Korea (ca. 1392-1910), ruled by the Yi dynasty's centralized monarchy. This centralized feudalism of modern Korea lasted virtually until the westernized Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, even though there was a social-cultural reformation (*Kapo Kyŏngjang*) in 1894. Finally, it might be said that Korea's centralized feudalism was ended due to the Western impact upon the peoples of Far East Asia in the nineteenth century.

#### Areas for further research

In any attempt to delimit the scope of feudalism in Korea, consideration must be given to the limited historical and sociological material available on the subject. Feudalism began as an offshoot of the decline of the Silla dynasty, with political power moving from a centralized monarchy to a decentralized system characterized by the establishment of localized areas of political hegemony. After 935, yet another change took place, the development of centralized feudalism.

In making a major structural distinction between the two sub-types of feudalism, decentralized and centralized, there are established two relevant correlations: (1) this study shows a correlation between decentralized feudalism and the lack of estate, prebendal, *kwakŏ* (civil service examinations) and centralized monarchical control systems, and (2) this study shows, in direct contradiction to the structure of decentralized feudalism, a correlation between centralized feudalism and the presence of estate, prebendal, *kwakŏ*, and centralized monarchical control systems through legal enforcement.

Hopefully, these comments will stimulate discussion in an area greatly in need of additional research.

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## Inventory Project for State's Natural Areas

Edward J. Cushing, associate professor in the Botany Department of the University of Minnesota, has assumed the directorship of a project launched by the Nature Conservancy of Minnesota to inventory natural areas of the state.

Headquarters for the inventory project will be in the office of the Minnesota Academy of Science.

The initial or planning phase of the program includes developing a preliminary list of sites to be inventoried from information compiled previously by government agencies and by individuals around the state. This list will be catalogued by counties, and as potential sites are indicated, they will be checked on available topographic maps and aerial photographs.

Cushing said it should then be possible to establish priorities for a field inventory, which will be the second phase of the project. This will be compiled by regions within the state, counties in the regions, and actual sites

within the counties. Endangered and rare natural communities will then be inventoried in more detail so that a balanced coverage of community types may be attained.

With such information in hand, a schedule is to be drawn up for field activity to be carried on from April through October. Further searching of maps and aerial photographs during this phase is expected also to turn up additional and promising natural areas.

One facet of the work will consist of drawing up check sheets so that information about the areas and descriptions of vegetation may be assembled in a standardized manner according to accepted practices in biological programs and suitable for a computerized information bank.

Classification of the plant communities for further analysis will follow the summer field work. Cataloguing of sites is then projected as a step for making information more useful and also for guiding efforts that might become necessary to conserve some communities.

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