

Book Review

Kim, Joo-Hee. 2018. *Dynamics of A Rice Cultivating Village in Korea, 1977–2015*. Seoul: Seoul National University Press. 364 pp. ISBN 9788952119841 ₩52,000

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English-language writing on Korea in anthropology began with a flurry of village studies in the 1970s and 1980s (Brandt 1971; Chun 1984; Han 1977; Janelli and Yim Janelli 1982; Knez 1997; Sorensen 1988), but since that time, anthropological interest has turned to urban Korea, where the overwhelming majority of the population now lives. Though many recent anthropological works *touch* on rural Korea, the most recent English-language anthropology monograph *about* rural Korea seems to have been published in 2005 (Prendergast 2005). A few of the 1970s ethnographers have revisited their original villages and written a chapter or article updating what has happened since their original research.¹ But apart from the present work, there is as yet no full-scale treatment in English of what has happened to Korean villages since these older works were published. Thus Joo-Hee Kim's longitudinal study of a village in Southwest Gyeonggi Province, near Pyeongtaek, fills an important gap in the literature. Joo-Hee Kim (1981) was among the first generation of Korean anthropologists to

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¹ See Janelli and Yim (2002); in Brandt (2014), chapter 14 is an update from 1992; Sorensen (2013), a paperback edition of the 1988 monograph, contains a new preface briefly mentioning changes in the village in 2012.

receive a Ph.D. in the United States. She subsequently taught at Sungsil Women's University until retiring in 2016. Throughout her career, she periodically revisited the village of Sanjin-ri to investigate changes in economy and lifestyle. Much of this research has been published as articles in Korean, but this book makes Dr. Kim's interesting work available for the first time in English. It is based on no less than eight site visits between 1977 and 2015.

Dr. Kim notes at the outset of her book that she has concentrated on change rather than continuity in Sanjin-ri because she believes change is what the villagers themselves are most aware of. She has thus organized the book thematically into nine chapters, beginning with research methods and general village settings. She then systematically assesses changes in population and households, economic activities, kinship, household organization, family survival strategies, social networks, and religious lives and ritual practices. As each chapter assesses changes relevant to its topic from 1977 to 2015, we encounter a wealth of rich data. However, this method of writing inevitably gives the book a somewhat fragmented quality since we go from 1977 to 2015 with a different topic in each chapter, making it difficult to get an overall feel for the village as a whole at any particular time. The writing is somewhat reflexive, but overall, the book is almost entirely in the voice of the authoritative ethnographer.

To summarize, what Dr. Kim presents us with is a picture of a village that in 1977–8 was socially and economically remote. Life was self-contained in a face-to-face community in which social and economic labor exchange (*pumasi*) initiated and maintained affective ties (*jeong*) among villagers. Families were the basic units of socioeconomic survival, and, since times were still hard for rural villagers in the 1970s, one's social position in the family (gender, marital status, birth order) strongly affected one's life course. Eldest sons had first priority for education, while eldest daughters often worked in factories to send their younger siblings to school.

Dr. Kim explains that much of this changed when mechanization in the 1980s reduced the need for labor, and labor exchange began to decline. Birth rates fell. More and more children were afforded higher education as living standards rose. Nearby restaurants on the highway between Seoul and Busan provided new employment opportunities for women. Men began working outside as well as inside the village, as part-time farming became a *modus vivendi* for some, while others concentrated on large-scale farming by renting additional land they could cultivate through mechanized

farming and family labor. In time, this diversifying economy provided a variety of paths to prosperity, and the old, clear-cut village stratification based on ancestry and land tenure became a thing of the past. An inevitable byproduct of this has been waning village solidarity as people's social ties expand to include outside organizations, so the strong *jeong*-based sociality of the past has withered among all but the very old.

The chapter on land tenure provides detailed information about changes in landholdings, even looking back to the period before the 1950 land reform when most villagers were tenants of two Seoul-based absentee landlords who used agents (*mareum*) to manage their holdings. Large landowners used "contracted farm servants" (*meoseum*?) for labor, while small landowners relied on labor exchange (*pumasi*). Analysis of the two village lineages shows that ancestor worship land had never been a large proportion of village land. The landlord agent families apparently fared well during the land reform. In recent years, however, there have been extensive changes in ownership as division between sons has become contingent on which sons get an education and which sons remain in the village.

As time has passed, families have become smaller and less complex. Stem families continue to form these days, though at lower rates than in the past and often based on a child other than the eldest son remaining at home. The family as an economic unit continues. Family members who have migrated to the cities even revisit the village to do farm labor during the busy seasons. Surprisingly, Dr. Kim found that unmarried adult children in this rural village (as in big cities) often live at home and commute to urban jobs by car, raising the specter of possible "parasite singles." One wonders here whether the immigrant brides found in so many Korean villages these days are a factor, but Dr. Kim is silent on this issue.

Among Dr. Kim's most interesting material is that covering religion and ritual. Christians were about 20 percent of the population in 1977-8, and that proportion has remained stable, unlike Brandt's village of "Seokpori," which has become entirely Christian since his original fieldwork in 1966. In 1977-8, the rest of the population of Sanjin-ri believed in *misin* ("superstition," but not understood by villagers in a pejorative sense). Even then, village communal rites had already disappeared, but worship of house gods continued, and new-found prosperity allowed widespread use of the two shamans resident in the village. Dr. Kim

found, in fact, that one in four households hosted *gut* in 1977–8, something only the wealthy could have afforded before the seventies. Yet in 2011–2, she found that *gut* had totally disappeared. Dr. Kim is quite aware of work by Chongho Kim (2003) and Laurel Kendall (2010) documenting continued patronage of shamans in twenty-first-century Korea. She notes, however, that by 2011 the resident shamans had moved out of the village, and their former devotees had become Buddhist. Dr. Kim attributes this change to two factors: (1) diversification and industrialization of the economy made former seasonal rituals less meaningful; and (2) decline in infant mortality led women to stop their regular patronage of shamans to protect the health of their children. Even so, one wonders here if the disappearance of *gut* in Sanjin-ri means the end of patronage of shamans altogether. Perhaps women were consulting shamans outside the village, having ceremonies at shamans' houses in town or at commercial *gutdang*, or patronizing *bosal*, who are Buddhist in name but shamans in fact. Dr. Kim documents that the commercialization of lifecycle rituals (weddings, funerals) has obviated much of the need for ritual cooperation among villagers, but she also devotes space to documenting the changes in ritual practice that have allowed ancestor worship to continue.

There is much more in this volume than the few tidbits I have been able to summarize above. Scholars of Korea would do well to pay careful attention to this book as well as the author's Korean-language articles that provide even more detail. I highly recommend the book as essential for researchers working on social change in Korea. Because of its high cost and the fragmentation of the narrative (alluded to above), however, I would have reservations assigning this book to undergraduate students in a course on Korea. They might find it hard to assimilate so much detailed material broken up between numerous chapters.

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