

Commentary

# Bier-bearing “Inferiors” and the “Skin” of the Community in Modern and Contemporary Village Society: Cases from Southern Gyeonggi Province by Ahn Seung Taik

Honda Hiroshi\*

In this ambitious article, Ahn Seung Taik asserts that a South Korean rural community (*maeul*) was being constructed and maintained by the immunizing function of subordinate, peripheral agents in and outside of the village, whom he calls “*araetgeot*,” or the lower, plebian people. To verify this hypothesis, he focuses on the practice of bier-bearing, which was looked down upon as a vulgar task executed by outcasts and other inferiors, as late as the 1945 liberation and subsequent land reform. Ahn’s discussion is relevant to two controversial questions steadily debated by socioeconomic historians and historical anthropologists of premodern and modern Korean society. Firstly, how have hierarchical distinctions embedded in South Korean rural communities—or social status in Weberian terminology—been reproduced even after the abolition of the premodern legal status system in the Gabo Reform (1894–96)? Secondly, how have rural community or communality-cum-locality been produced and reproduced, considering the dismantling of socioeconomic distinctions? In this vein, Ahn presents insightful interpretations as well as fascinating fragments of oral histories collected in

---

\* Professor, The University of Tokyo.

92 villages of the southern part of Gyeonggi Province.

By examining the spatial as well as historical distribution of modern and contemporary volunteer associations for bier-bearing, Ahn rightly indicates the fictiveness of village-wide (or life-sized, in terms of an embodied community as indicated below) communality purported by their members. For *yangban* families, as well as *nouveau-riches* who were eager to attain *yangban* status, executing this “vulgar” task by themselves could have been a threat to their claim of high prestige. Ahn’s data, which covers most of southern Gyeonggi, shows nuanced details of their struggles and conflicts during the process of South Korean grassroots modernization. In contrast, having a village bier for common use was a sort of luxury for the commoners and granted independence (or autonomy) to their community. That is, commoners were also bound to Confucian orthopraxy, though they carried the bier by themselves. Even after the 1945 Liberation and subsequent land reforms, where Ahn discovers the turning point for the adoption of communal procession, the ideal of communal cooperation (which Ahn characterizes as a “kinship imagination of community”) was often hard to accomplish, as is shown in cases where former subordinates were temporarily substituted by humble newcomers.

While Ahn’s insights on the transformations of former socioeconomically embedded status practices can be positively appreciated, his theoretical approach to community leaves room to be contested. Firstly, the cases of commoner villages where the communal bier was carried by fellow members clearly show equal participation in the community by neighbors, the relations based on “egalitarian community ethic,” as Vincent Brandt (1971: 25) has put it. Ahn’s hypothesis that community is constructed by the engagement of inferior others as backdrop proves to be invalid in these cases. Secondly, when we examine the examples presented by Ahn in detail, it is doubtful that bier-bearing was always an affair of joint responsibility among co-villagers.

This oversimplification of communal engagement in bier-bearing might be relevant to Ahn’s conceptualization of community as an organic body. The “skin,” or the boundary of his embodied community, is suggested as the liminal zone, which is constituted by “non-other others,” namely the inferior *araetkot*, and is the site where that which endangers the reproduction of “rational community” is immunized. So, what activates the immune system of a community facing a member’s death? In my understanding, it was precisely the vulgar task of bier-bearing, which was incompatible with

high *yangban* status or social prestige. As is shown in Ahn’s examples, however, the unit that asserted high status or prestige was not necessarily an embodied or corporate community but basically a family or a localized lineage of *yangban* origin or those of the upstarts. It would be misleading to claim that the village community as an organic body collectively asserts *yangban* prestige and makes inferiors in and outside of the village carry the bier.

Reflexive re-examination of the ethnographic literature on post-liberation South Korea indicates that rural communities should be examined in terms of actual practices of mutual aid and cooperation (cf. Brandt 1971; Itoh 2013). Or, I would rather say, some practices of bier-bearing would produce an egalitarian communality in Brandt’s sense: some might reproduce a hierarchical collectivity, as Ahn puts it, but others would simply be based on patron-client relationships between a particular family and its subordinates or a service offered on a commercial basis. Accordingly, Ahn’s metaphor of embodied community would be deconstructed into loose mutual regulations and provisional agreement among neighbors or dialectical relations between a practical “sense of community” (Brandt 1971: 156–157) and particularities of rural socioeconomic contexts (cf. Bourdieu 1990: 66–79).

In this sense, Ahn, as a native anthropologist, might be unaware of the fictiveness of communal village that might also be shared by the people in his field sites. He should have been more reflexive as to how community or communality-cum-locality is constructed or imagined in his home society.

## References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Trans. by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Brandt, Vincent S. R. 1971. *A Korean Village: Between Farm and Sea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Itoh, Abito 伊藤亜人. 2013. 「珍島: 韓国農村社会の民族誌」 [Jindo: Ethnography of South Korean rural community]. Tokyo: Koubundou 弘文堂.

