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# Rethinking the “Large Family” Thesis of Chosŏn Korea: Postcolonial Critics

## *Abstract*

In colonial and postcolonial Korea, both scholars and general public took it for granted that “the large family [TaeKajok, 大家族]” was the norm in Chosŏn. The large family has been considered as one of the quintessential aspect of pre-modern Chosŏn society in modern Korea. The fantasy of “large family” still functions as a key cultural component in the construction of gender relations in modern Korean society.

However, the large family thesis of Chosŏn Korea needs to be scrutinized. This paper uses detailed examination of the scene of late Chosŏn society to question the basis of the widely accepted postcolonial knowledge on the period. Through this, I argue the need for “revision” of the modern intellectual conviction and confusion regarding the ‘patrilineal large family of the Chosŏn period’. This study historically analyzes the ways in which the myth of large family were constructed and consumed, focusing on the ways in which it functions as the node between colonialism, modern consumption of Confucianism, construction of the modern gender system and nationalism.

*Keywords:* modern, knowledge, old custom, household, Japanese imperialism

## *1. Introduction*

In 1973, Chŏng Yo-Sŏp argued that ‘women in the Lee Dynasty treated as inferior to men looked upon their home as a unique activity stage’ and “taekajok (大家族), the large family” system based on the patriarchal rights made it difficult for the newly married to move out and, consequentially, became the reason the women had to suffer from a hard

married life living with their parent-in-law'. As the main negative effects of large family system, he also pointed out the hindrance to the development of personality and capability of individuals, the intensification of people's dependence on their relatives and the damage to social justice due to the tendency to give priority to one's family.<sup>1</sup> According to him, Chosŏn's "large family system" was the root of various social problems and the obstruction of development.

The above argument by Chŏng Yo-sŏp shows the ways in which the modern Korean society typically understands "family" in Chosŏn. "Large family system" has been the basis of the knowledge on the Chosŏn society. This research began from a simple question I had while analyzing a household register (hojŏk, 戶籍) of the Chosŏn period. The term "family (kajok, 家族)" was not used during Chosŏn period. However, while contemporary scholars have discussed the size and succession of families in Chosŏn, they do not define the meaning of "family" itself. They do not distinguish family from clan or household, excusing their obscurity as unavoidable since Chosŏn is a "pre-modern society". As a result, their arguments regarding the size of Chosŏn families varied depending on which unit – clan or household – they considered to be a family. This paper intends to discuss the process in which this fictional knowledge of "large family society" regarding Chosŏn has been constructed as well as its problems. Through this, I would like to suggest that we free ourselves from the net of knowledge regarding Chosŏn, which was produced during the colonial period.

## 2. *The Construction and Utilization of the Knowledge about "Chosŏn's Large Family" during the Japanese Colonial Period*

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Imperial Japan tried to forge a new family system centred on the household head in Colonial Korea by applying Japan's modern Civil Code. Japan continuously reorganized the household registration system in Chosŏn after 1909. The Japanese Empire combined Japan's emperor-centred familism and the concept of modern small family to constitute their unique family system in colonial Chosŏn. The Japanese colonial legal system was hybrid system. In order to identify Korean customs, the government-general commissioned nation-wide customs surveys: *Customs Survey Report (Kanshu chōsa hōkokusho)* between 1908

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<sup>1</sup> Chŏng, Yo-Sŏp. 'Chosŏnwangcho sitae e issŏsŏ yŏsŏng ūi sahoechŏk chiwi', *ASIA Yŏsŏng yŏnku* 12 (1973): 119-120.

and 1911. The customs surveyed by the Japanese colonial state, rather than being an accurate reflection of existing practices, were a colonial invention.<sup>2</sup> Today's common notion of the "large family system" in Chosŏn is deeply related to the process of the construction of a patriarchal family system in Colonial Chosŏn suitable for Japan's domination and ruling.

*Chosŏn of "clans": the symbol of backwardness*

(1) Chosŏn as a primitive clan society

Chosŏn occupied an inferior position to Japan in Japan's evolutionary view.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, draftsmen of the Japanese Civil Code had an evolutionary perception of the organizational unit of a nation. Especially, Hozumi Nobushige, who had studied under Herbert Spencer in Britain and played central role in drafting the Meiji Civil Code, advocated evolutionary jurisprudence. The modern Japanese jurists perceived the forms of inheritance and family from an evolutionary viewpoint when they evaluated the inheritance system of Japan. Such perception formed the foundation of their understanding of Chosŏn's family system. That is, a society evolves from religion-based ancient society to military-based medieval society and to economy-based modern society. And the custom of succession evolves from clan-centred succession of ancestral rites to family-centred succession of status and to individual-centred succession of property.<sup>4</sup> The Japanese colonial bureaucrats and jurists denigrated the traditional family system of Chosŏn as a "clan" or "tribal" system. According to them, "Chosŏn has a kind of clan system based on male line descent". Thus, "in Chosŏn, clan was the basic unit of individuals as well as of the national social system".<sup>5</sup> One of the famous jurists of Japan also asserted that " Ilchok i kot ilkayŏssta: a clan was a family" in Chosŏn.<sup>6</sup> Chosŏn was an inferior society based on

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<sup>2</sup> Lim, Sung yun. *Enemies of Lineage: Widows and Customary Law in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*. PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical study of the historiography on Chosŏn and China based on the Japanese historians' sense of superiority as well as the negative perception on Confucianism, see Hiroshi, Miyajima, *Ilbon ūi Yŏksakwan ūl Pyp'anhanta*. Changbi, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Hozumi, Nobushige(穂積陳重). *Ancestor worship and the Japanese Law*. Tokio: Z.P. Maruya & co., LTD., 1901.

<sup>5</sup> Yasuda, Mikita(安田幹太). 'Chŏsen ni okeru kazoku seido no hensen', *Chosŏn* 296 (1940): 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Nomura, Chotaro(野村調太郎). 'Sosen no saishi to genkō no Hōritsu'. *Shihō Kyōkai zasshi* 5.4 (1926): 86.

“clans” and therefore a past that needed to be overcome in order to place Chosŏn at the primitive stage of clan society, which was inferior to Japan. In other words, they were asserting that Chosŏn was a primitive society based on the inheritance of ancestral rites and clan, while Japan was a medieval feudal society.

This was an intentional and systematic misreading which was to justify Japan's colonial rule over Chosŏn as well as the oddly formed family system they intended to construct in their colony. During the 1930s, the Japanese Empire supported an extensive study of the household registers of Chosŏn. The study revealed that households of 3 to 4 people were common in Daegu area in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was simply concluded as an exception of the urban area. Regardless of their actual findings, researchers argued that Chosŏn had a large family system which they assumed to have been developed in the form of *tongjokpurak* (同族部落: kinship villages) in rural areas.<sup>7</sup> No empirical evidences could break the premise that Chosŏn had a "large family system".

(2) *"Clan" as an obstacle to the colonial rule*

The "tribe" or "clan" Japan observed in Chosŏn was "*munjung*", the clans of *yangban* class. *Munjung* was the basic unit where the powers of *yangban*, Chosŏn's elite class, were unified. The Japanese Government-General of Chosŏn regarded such clan groups based on the patriarchal lineage as imperative to Japan's colonial rule over Chosŏn, as they could unsettle the colonial governing system centred on the Japanese emperor system. Therefore, the clan system was explained as the symbol of Chosŏn's inferiority and the root of the country's backwardness and problems.

2) *The peculiar fusion of Chongbŏp (patrilineal principle) and small family*

(1) *The dissolution of clan system and the construction of hierarchical small family system*

The Japanese Government-General of Chosŏn introduced a new family system centred on the household head system with a direct line family as a unit in colonial Korea. In 1916, the Government-General ordered to cancel all family registers in case a father and his first son registered

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<sup>7</sup> Shikata, Hiroshi(四方博). 'Chōsen ni okeru daikazoku sei to dōzoku buraku'. In *Chōsen shakai keizaishi kenkyū Chū*. Tokyo: kokusho kankō kai, 1976(1937): 261.

separately so that such registers should be merged into a single one.<sup>8</sup> The household head system introduced by Japan was, on the one hand, to divide the clan groups into small-family units, and, on the other hand, it was to consolidate the patrilineal succession system.

Patrilineal principle (*Chongbŏp*, 宗法) served as a useful stepping stone for this. Such patriarchal household head system was proper for the construction of the family-nation, according to the hierarchical order with the Japanese emperor at its centre. The household head system maintained the hierarchical *Chongbŏp* while de-constructing the clan groups of Chosŏn into small-family units.

(2) *Chongbŏp and Confucianism: recognition of the yangban culture and the connection with Japan*

The Japanese colonial bureaucrats emphasized that *Chongbŏp* originated from Confucianism, which was the cultural mediator to merge Japan and Chosŏn. They asserted that it was easy for Japan to assimilate Chosŏn because they shared the spirit of Confucianism. In 1910, Hayashi Kaoru (林薫) argued in 'Matter of Governing Chosŏn after the Annexation'<sup>9</sup> that 'it is fortunate that Chosŏn is a Confucian nation. Japan has put on a dress of new civilization over her Confucian spirit. Therefore, it must be much easier for Japan to assimilate Chosŏn than for the western nations to rule the territories of heathendom', emphasizing that "clan" was a way to claim that Japan and Chosŏn shared not only the Confucian spirit but also the basic Confucian social structure.

Utilizing Confucianism and *Chongbŏp* was the way in which Japan constructed the new "power of household head" by connecting it to the traditional customs of Chosŏn. Japan also intended to reduce the resistance of the *yangban* class against the Japanese rule by acknowledging their principle of inheritance.

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion on the ways in which Japan utilized *Chongbŏp* as they institutionalized the household registration system with household head at its centre in colonial Chosŏn as well as the process of its institutionalization, see Lee, Jeong-Seon. 'Shingminji chosŏn-taeman esŏui kajedo ūi chŏngch'ak kwajŏng hoju-kajok kwa hojusangsok' kaenyŏm ūl chungshim ūro' (A Study on the Transplant of Japanese "Ie" in the Colonial Korea and Taiwan). *Han'gung munhwa (Korean Culture)* 55 (2011): 270-281.

<sup>9</sup> 'Heigogo no Chŏsen tochi mondai dan', *Taiyō*, 1 October 1910.

### 3. Resolution of the contradiction: throwing the blame on the old customs of Chosŏn

The Japanese Empire constructed a family system based on very strong household head system by combining the patrilineal principle and the modern ideology of small family. From the social evolutionary point of view discussed earlier, it could also be viewed as progress to establish the rights of the household head in Chosŏn, which was claimed to still be a “clan society”. In 1925, Nomura Chotaro (野村調太郎) explained the new colonial family system and emphasized that ‘the (new) family system is based on the rights of household head. A family is unified under the authority of its household head and all family members should ‘obey’ their household head. Paternal rights and parental rights are to be absorbed into the rights of household head. Therefore, a family is represented by the head of the household, and he is legally granted with a special status’.<sup>10</sup>

Although the colonial control was justified by the need for progress and glorified with the new modern values, they declared that kind of strong paternal power in actuality. Especially, Japanese Empire designed the colonial household head system based on autocratic patriarchal power and that contested with so-called modern ideal form of small family based on love marriage.

In the newspaper, we can find articles that criticized the “Large family system” and “rights of head of family” and household head-centred relations as feudal, old-fashioned custom of Chosŏn. People of colonial Chosŏn criticized the new system as a relic of a bygone age stained with conservative, feudal, old-fashioned ideas. For two days in a row on 4-5 May 1920, *Tong-a ilbo* carried an article titled ‘To the Old Folks of Chosŏn’. The article criticized the “family system” as the ‘historic remains of a bygone age’ and argued that the old folks of Chosŏn were exercising their rights as heads of families, which was similar to the absolute power of an autocrat, and restrained the liberty of individuals, thus, preventing their children from displaying their originality.

On 19 March 1924, an article in *Tong-a ilbo*, under the title of ‘Let’s Reform the Family System’, asserted that the first cause of the ‘degeneration of the youth’ was their inability to have a happy family. It discussed that it was ‘mainly because of the large family system. Three to four generations reside[d] in the same house. [...] Moreover, the

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<sup>10</sup> Nomura, Chōtarō. *Chōsen koseki rei gikai*. Tōkyō: Ganshōdō Shoten, 1925.

dictatorship of the head of family cause[d] bitter complaints'. According to the article, the most important thing that needed to be remodelled in the society was to 'make a married couple the basic unit of a family' and to 'reform the degenerated lives that had been sacrificed under the head of family'.

The household head system with the strong authority of the household head conflicted with the ideal of modern small family. The Japanese "direct line family system", newly constituted by the household registration system was criticized as an old-fashioned custom of Chosŏn. In fact, the family system based on the absolute authority of the household head was a new system constructed by Japan. The contradictions and negative aspects implicit in the household head system were explained as the vestiges of Chosŏn's old custom. Then, Japan argued that the new household head system was more advanced than Chosŏn's traditional "large family" system.

The contradictory process which aimed at the modern small family system while, simultaneously, constructing hierarchical patrilineal family system in order to create the national subjects loyal to the Japanese Empire necessitated the imaginative knowledge of the "large family" system of Chosŏn.

#### *The definition and details of "household" in Chosŏn*

During the colonial period, the Japanese Empire created a new household registration system in Chosŏn with the direct line household of father to eldest son succession as its basic unit. In the process, Japan stigmatized Chosŏn's customary practice as an "old custom" and explained the family system in Chosŏn as a "large family system" based on clans. Then, how was "household" defined and constituted in the household registration system during the Chosŏn period? And what did it mean in the relationships of people at that time? This chapter examines "household", the unit of administrative governance in Chosŏn. I believe it would be meaningful to use the records of household register of the late Chosŏn as a tool to clarify problems with the notion of the Chosŏn family. It would help us understand how the Chosŏn family was invented by selectively picking and abandoning certain elements in Chosŏn.

#### *1) Household register as the legal and administrative basis*

In the Chosŏn period, the household register recorded households of each unit of local administration in the order of the placement of the houses. According to the regulations for the household register in *Kyŏngguktaejŏn*

(經國大典, Great Code of National Governance), a *ho*(household) was recorded in order of adult man, and his wife and children as well as the servants belonging to his household. Included in a household were a married couple, their blood relatives who lived with them, and the servants belonging to the household regardless of whether they lived in the house or not. This household registration system was reformed in 1896 as “Rules for Census-taking” were established. The new modern household registration system adopted a standard form of registration, recorded the condition of the house and its residents, and simplified the contents required to be recorded regarding the household members.

It was a rule in Chosŏn to take national census every three years. A household register recorded various information including social status, job, name, age, residence, marriage status, and death of the household head and members as well as information about the servants who belonged to the household. The contents were utilized as basic materials for administration such as aid, lawsuit, punishment of criminals, qualification for state examination, and so on. The "households" were not only the basis for the tax collection but also the legal and administrative basis with which people's social status and possession of servants could be identified.

Although there is no terminology of *Hoju* (戶主, household heads) in the law books of Chosŏn, they use *ho* (戶, household)'s *ju* (主, head, the first man of household), and the regulations on the position and responsibility of *Kajang* (家長, the heads of family) are found in several places. In *Kyŏngguktaejŏn*, *Kajang*, head of family, is defined as the venerable elder of a family, which included his wife and concubines, children and servants. This is similar to the composition of “household” discussed earlier. It can be said that the authority of “*Hoju*” of Chosŏn was explained through the authority of *Kajang*. Those who belonged to a family shall not be able to file a charge against the head of their family except for in cases of treason. It was strictly punished to slander or kill the head of their family. Meanwhile, the family head was punished, if there was an omission of a member in the register or wrongful personal information of any member. He was also punished if a member of his household indulged in luxury or violated prohibitions such as slaughtering or logging. These responsibilities of the household head reached detailed areas of everyday life in the late Chosŏn period. The rights and responsibilities of the household head were stipulated by law, and the state of Chosŏn had established a social structure in which the state

controlled its subjects using the household head as the mediator.<sup>11</sup>

2) *The composition of a household and the Succession of household head*

Then, who were recorded together in a household in actuality? Let me analyse the composition of households of those connected by marriage and/or blood ties, excluding servants:

Unit: Number of Households (%)

| Year | A            | B           | C               | D            | E             | F            | Total          |
|------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1678 | 192<br>(8.8) | 21<br>(1.0) | 1,524<br>(74.8) | 113<br>(5.2) | 288<br>(13.2) | 50<br>(2.3)  | 2,188<br>(100) |
| 1717 | 131<br>(5.1) | 74<br>(2.9) | 1,391<br>(59.9) | 144<br>(5.6) | 675<br>(26.3) | 149<br>(5.8) | 2,564<br>(100) |
| 1759 | 154<br>(5.6) | 40<br>(1.4) | 1,667<br>(65.0) | 130<br>(4.7) | 682<br>(24.7) | 91<br>(1.6)  | 2,764<br>(100) |
| 1789 | 136<br>(5.1) | 60<br>(2.2) | 1,560<br>(60.5) | 65<br>(2.4)  | 801<br>(29.9) | 61<br>(1.7)  | 2,683<br>(100) |

A. Single

B. Blended not including married couple

C. Married Couple and their Children

D. C + siblings

E. Grandparents, parents and Children

F. Blended and extended household: 2 more married couples and siblings

From 1678 to 1789, households of a married couple were the majority, comprising 50 to 70% of the entire households. However, the number of families including grandparents was increasing since 1717. Differences according to the social positions were not that big. Although there were

<sup>11</sup> Jung, Ji Young. *Chilsō ūi kuch'uk kwa kyunyōl: Chosōnhugi hojōk kwa yōsōngdūl*. Seoul: Sōgang taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 2015: 243-255.

more married-couple households and less direct line family households among lower class people, the overall rates and changing trends were quite similar.

Although most of the household heads were men who were the father or the husband, in quite a number of cases, widows (including those who had sons) or sons (including those who lived with their elderly father) were the head of their household. Although the number gradually decreased, women comprised about 10% of household heads in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. There are also cases where the father and his first son were registered as heads of separate households. With the state policy to allow the son to succeed his father's position of household head in the late Chosŏn period after the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the husband-wife succession of household head decreased while the father-son succession increased. When the household head was changed, the relation of succession was recorded.<sup>12</sup>

### 3) *The characteristics and significance of "household" in Chosŏn period*

There was no equivalent word for "*Kajok* (family)" in Chosŏn. They used either "Ka (house)" or "Ho (household)" in Chosŏn. It was not a clan but a "household" that was the basic unit of the Chosŏn society.

According to the records of Chosŏn Dynasty, it was discussed 'not to divide households even when the father and son were cooking their rice separately if their houses were near enough for the roofs and fences to be connected'.<sup>13</sup>

When the household registration system was reformed in the late Chosŏn period after the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was also stipulated that the head of household register correspond to the head of family. This reform was carried forward simultaneously with the state policy that promoted "direct line family" rather than small family as the basic unit of a household and the "father-son" succession of household head. We can see such change from the records of household registers from the time related to the composition of household and the succession of household head: "If a household includes the father, he is to be the head. Although there are sometimes cases where the son becomes the head when the father is too old, it is inappropriate. Even if the son has succeeded his father's position as the household head in practice, the father shall still be

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<sup>12</sup> Jung, Ji Young., *Chilsŏ ūi kuch'uk kwa kyunyŏl: Chosŏnhugi hojŏk kwa yŏsŏngdŭl*. Seoul: Sŏgang taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> *Pibyŏnsadŭngnok*, 146, Yŏngjo 40, 12 September 1764.

the head of the family. The son becomes the household head (after the death of his father) even when his mother is still alive because women are incapable of self-decision'.<sup>14</sup> What this guideline indicates is that now the father of the family should be registered both as the head of the family and as the household head. By reconciling the household head on paper and the head of family in practice, the state attempted to stipulate "family/household" as the basic unit of governance.

We can learn several things from the above discussion: First, cooking rice together, that is, making a living together, was of significance for a household. Second, in reality, most households were small-family households of a married couple and their children. Third, although a household was generally of a small family unit, it was attempted in the late Chosŏn period to bind the members of a direct line family into one household. And, simultaneously, male-centred household head system and matching the household head with the actual head of the family were also attempted. And fourth and finally, such "household," different from the "clan" of the elite *yangban* class, was the basic unit of the Chosŏn. When we grasp the characteristics of the "Ka" and "Ho" more clearly, we will also be able to understand the significance of the *yangban* "clans" from a new vantage point.

#### 4. *The intellectual legacy of the colonial period and its reutilization*

The colonial researchers did not pay attention to the "household" based on small family units as the basic unit of Chosŏn's governance. Chosŏn was simply discussed as a nation of the "*yangban* culture", the "Confucian ideology" and the "clan groups".

Such line of knowledge continued in the postcolonial Korean society. Kim Tu-hŏn, an ethicist educated in Japan, was a representative scholar in the family system of Chosŏn. In his *Han'guk kajok chedo yŏn'gu* published in 1948, he explained that Korea's existence and development have been based upon the large family system, and our national social culture was also established upon it,<sup>15</sup> while separating the actual composition of families and the large family society by stating that 'although Chosŏn was a society of large family system, it does not mean

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<sup>14</sup> Jung, Ji Young. *Chilsŏ ūi kuch'uk kwa kyunyŏl: Chosŏnhugi hojŏk kwa yŏsŏngdŭl*. Seoul: Sŏgang taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 2015: 230.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, Tu-Hŏn. *Han'guk kajokchedo yŏn'gu*. Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1969. 9-10: 632-633.

that all families were large families'.<sup>16</sup> Later, Choi Chae-sök, a sociologist, revealed that it was common to have small families in the household register.<sup>17</sup> However, notwithstanding his actual findings, Choi asserted that 'it was the characteristics of the Korean families to be undivided from their clans'.<sup>18</sup> The perception that Chosön was a "large family" society has been a blind belief that no counter evidence could break. The studies on families of Chosön have either been to prove the existence of large families based on the "large family thesis" or to reduce the significances of the counter evidence.

Of course, it is necessary to consider the inside facts of kinship relations, symbolic bonds, and so on rather than the numeric data only when discussing the dominant structure of family in a society. However, such kinship relations and symbolic bonds in Chosön are meaningful only for discussions of the *yangban* class. Is it really fair to treat so trivially the fact that all subjects of Chosön regardless of their classes were organized by household units in the recordings of the household register?

Since the 2000s, researchers in the history of modern laws began to pay attention to the fact that the customs investigations by Japan was a process in which the customs of Chosön were "invented" through reorganizing the reality of Chosön within the Japanese frame of perception. It is a significant achievement of the critical studies on the knowledge construction during the colonial period. However, they still take the colonial knowledge for granted as they assert that the household head system of the colonial period disassembled Chosön's family in the form of kinship group into separate and standardized households.<sup>19</sup> The form of family in Chosön was simply treated as a kinship group in the process of explaining the characteristics of the household head system established during the Japanese colonial period. While critically examining the colonial system, researchers still remained within the system of knowledge on Chosön family constructed during the colonial period.

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16 Ibid., 370.

17 Choi, Chae-Sök. *Han'guk kajok yön'gu*. Seoul: Minjungsögwon. 1983:404-405.

18 Kim Tu-Hön. 'Söp'yong: Choi Chae-Sök <Hanguk Kajok Yöngu >'. *Asea Yöngu* 10.1 (1967): 114, 116.

19 Hong, Yang-Hee. 'Shingminjishigi hojökchedo wa kajokchedo üi pyönyong' *Sahak Yöngu (The Review of Korean History)* 79 (2005): 195-198.

Another postcolonial analysis of HyunAh Yang has pointed out and criticized that existing studies on formation of family laws during colonial period are based on a perspective that Chosŏn tradition was distorted by Japanese colonial occupation. Calling such view 'distorted customs perspective', she has argued that the processes of family law formation need to be seen as one by which Japanese institutions are transplanted into Chosŏn, mixed and entangled with local components. Her argument is a step forward from previous studies; however, I think that she is not immune to the perception of those who argue 'distortion of Chosŏn tradition'.

Yang criticized the perspective which regarded the representative of family in Chosŏn as similar to the household head of the Japanese colonial period. That is, Yang explained the principle of the household head system of the colonial period in contrast with the customary practices during the Chosŏn period. Doing so, she still equates 'the representative of family' of Chosŏn with successor of *chesa* (ancestral rites), normally *chongson* (the lineage grandson, 宗孫). Her argument is that the position of the family successor was derived from the tradition of patrilineal descent during the Chosŏn period and thus different from the position of the "household head" specified on paper during the Japanese colonial period. That is, she understands Chosŏn as an era of lineage, kinship relations, *munjung* (clan), and ancestral rites while the Japanese colonial period was an era of state, system, separate family, and property management.<sup>20</sup> In short, Yang argued that the household head of the Japanese civil law was different from the representative of family in Chosŏn. While I agree to Yang that the differences between the two need to be discussed, I need to point out that her discussion overly simplified the differences.

It seems that her argument misunderstands the reality of Chosŏn society. The representative, *kajang* (Family head) in Chosŏn society, was present in a structure where the state rules its people through 'ka (household)', playing an important role in this system of governance. *Kajang* was closely related to the family head in the household register, and he was responsible for the separate families, not for *munjung* (clan). This knowledge of family system of Chosŏn could be maintained because researchers have not based their studies on multilateral and detailed analysis of the Chosŏn society. The imagination is based on the Japanese imperial viewpoint on Chosŏn during the colonial period. While Korean contemporary scholars have criticized the colonial view of history, their

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20 Yang, Hyun-Ah. *Han'guk kajokpŏb ilkki: chŏntong, shingminjisŏng, gender ūi kyoch'aroesŏ*. P'aju: Changbi, 2011, 163-167.

anti-colonial theories used similar notions on the Chosŏn family. Ironically, the more they attempted to counter the colonial view of Korea's history, the more they ended up reinforcing the frame of knowledge. The postcolonial knowledge was shaped by the intersection of adhesion and antipathy to colonial artefact.

I believe that we need to fight/argue against the modernist perspective that simplifies and appropriates the Chosŏn period without sufficient knowledge of it. The fantasy, created either unintentionally due to lack of knowledge or intentionally under necessity, functions as key cultural component in the construction of gender relations and 'normality' in modern Korean society. This means that even these scholars have not freed themselves from the thesis that Chosŏn's family was based on the "kinship group". Is the "large family thesis" within the influence of the intellectual legacy left by the Japanese colonial bureaucrats a black hole everybody falls into when attempting to explain the society of Chosŏn?

##### 5. Conclusion

The systematic misreading of the intellectuals of the Japanese Empire regarding the family of Chosŏn was deeply related to the resolution and justification of the contradictions of the peculiar modern "household register system based on the direct line household head", which combined the modern ideals and the hierarchical principles of Japan's emperor system. After emancipation, the discussions of Chosŏn's large family were placed within a different frame. Chosŏn's large family system was discussed as the past to be overcome in the nation's modernizing process, and the decrease of large families as the evidence of the social progress. They argued that the number of large families decreased with urbanization and nuclearization of family in the process of capitalization. On the other hand, the "large family culture" is also regarded as the key element of the national tradition, which was damaged by colonial rule and foreign influence. Though different in their attitudes on the modernity and tradition, both stay within the Japanese colonial knowledge system of the "large family thesis". Additionally, the so-called *yangban* culture of large family and clan has survived as the basis of the national identity of Korea.

This "large family thesis" got settled as the doubtless truth in the process in which it was utilized as the basis of the patriarchal family invented by the modern development nation. During the period of national modernization and development since the 1960s, the "large family thesis" was utilized as the key element to re-establish the

patriarchal household head system, familism and the hierarchical gender relations. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea, the western modernity, the legacy of the Japanese imperialism, Chosŏn's indigenous customs, the state-led modernization process, and the sexist family economy were entangled and constructed at various levels. The "large family thesis" was still effective as a means to conceal the contradictions. By de-constructing the historical process of the construction of a specific knowledge system, I suggest that we intervene to stop the operation of such imaginative, fictional knowledge.

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