

The Characteristics of the Ruling Structure during Early Chosŏn

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Introduction

One of the main features of modern historical studies in Korea has been the fact that a great number of scholars have focused on comparing the similarities between the development of Korean history and that of world history. As part of the process of establishing their own theories of history, these scholars have partaken in debates over the classification of the various periods of Korean history and the nature of society during each of these periods, as well as developed detailed study results and historical descriptions which have emphasized either the universal or unique nature of Korean history. To this end, scholars' perceptions of the historical standing of the Chosŏn dynasty, or of the characteristics of Chosŏn society, have tended to vary in accordance with the particular topic which these scholars' studies adopted. Nevertheless, very little debate has emerged when it comes to the ruling structure of Chosŏn, which has been generally defined as a centralized ruling system.¹ More to the point, early Chosŏn has been perceived as a period in which Koryŏ's centralized system was not only inherited, but strengthened. Furthermore, early Chosŏn has been regarded as having featured a centralized ruling

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structure that was more robust than the ones in place during the middle and late stages of Chosŏn.

That being said, despite the fact that these scholars have employed the term ‘centralized ruling structure’ in their studies; one is hard-pressed to uncover any consistency in their arguments. This inconsistency is in large part based on the differing opinions of these scholars over fundamental questions such as which period of Korean history Chosŏn should be included in, and consequently how the characteristics of Chosŏn society should be perceived within the wider developmental process of history. Researchers who emphasized the universality of Korean history have tended to identify the Chosŏn period as one marked by a medieval or feudal society. Even when we leave aside the assertions of North Korean researchers, who have argued that a feudal system was established in Korea as early as the Three Kingdoms Era, the existence of differing opinions pertaining to the onset of the feudal system in Korea, with assertions ranging from the Unified Silla period to Late Koryŏ, makes the presence of a gap in terms of the positioning of Chosŏn inevitable.

The perception of Chosŏn as either an advanced or a complete feudal society, or as a society at an advanced stage in the process of becoming a feudal society, makes the existence of qualitative differences in the usage of the commonly accepted term ‘centralized ruling structure’ unavoidable. The question of the characteristics of this commonly used term ‘centralized ruling structure’ becomes even more tangled when we take into consideration the gap that exists in terms of the perception of land ownership. The width of the gap associated with the usage of this term becomes even wider when researchers who, emphasizing the uniqueness of Korean history, have defined the Chosŏn period as one which featured a modern society are included.

Further compounding matters is the fact that to date no study has been conducted which has defined the particularities of the contents and characteristics of this centralized ruling system. In this regard, researchers who, based on their perception of Chosŏn as either a medieval or feudal society, have focused on the substructure of the notions of land ownership

and relations of production, have tended to ignore the actual contents of the centralized ruling system. Moreover, while the studies conducted by researchers who have approached Chosŏn society as being a modern society have yielded significant results in terms of the analysis of the political institutions of early Chosŏn, few have conducted an in-depth analysis of the contents of the centralized ruling structure. As such, the widespread acceptance of the assertion that Chosŏn society was one which featured centralized rule has not been followed up by concrete efforts to uncover the actual structure of this ruling system.

As a result, existing studies on the social characteristics of Chosŏn have inherently been saddled with flaws in terms of the concreteness of their results. While the lack of studies on the superstructure of the feudal system makes evident the shortcomings of those who have defined Chosŏn as a feudal society, deficiencies have also emerged in terms of those studies which have been based on the perception of Chosŏn as a yangban-centered bureaucratic state or yangban-centered bureaucratic society, in that these studies have been inherently incapable of explaining how the centralized system was connected to the interests of the yangban, or to those of the yangban bureaucracy.

This study is not aimed at revealing the characteristics of the centralized ruling system in place during early Chosŏn in one big swoop. Rather, this study analyzes the problems and possibilities opened up by existing studies. In this regards, it is hoped that this study will help to spur on further research on this topic.

Land ownership and the centralized ruling structure

The assertion that Chosŏn was a society which featured a centralized ruling structure can, at the most basic of levels, be understood to mean that the central government exercised control over local areas. In turn, the central government's control over local areas can be regarded as stemming from the central power, or Seoul-based ruling class', use of

organized institutional mechanisms to control local residents nationwide. However, under circumstances in which agriculture represented the most primordial of industries, actual control over the people could not be achieved without control of the land, more specifically, of agricultural lands. In other words, control of land became an essential element of any efforts on the part of the central power group to establish its rule over local areas. While on the surface the central power group's control over local areas was exposed in the form of the ruling structure or human relationships, internally, land constituted a crucial medium through which this control was established. In this regard, a detailed analysis of the characteristics of landownership during a specific period can be seen as being directly linked to the definition of the characteristics of the ruling system in place during this specific era.

While Chosŏn did in fact accept the central ruling system first developed by Koryŏ, it is also true that the general socioeconomic conditions of Koryŏ had already begun to change in a manner that facilitated increased decentralization during the latter half of the dynasty. Some of the important factors which led to this decentralization during the Koryŏ dynasty include the large-scale population movements which occurred as a result of invasions by Japanese marauders and the Red Turbans, the growth of the p'umgwan (品官, formal bureaucratic ranks) within local communities, and the development of agricultural estates (nongjang) which exercised private controls over the lands and farmers. The widespread use of the kwajŏn (科田, rank land) system under the Chŏnsikwa (田柴科, Stipend Land Law) during the Koryŏ period leads to the assumption that the centralized ruling system of Koryŏ was an inherently weak one, and that this weakness served as an important cause of the decentralization which took place during the late period of Koryŏ. The reorganization and strengthening of the centralized ruling system that began prior to the foundation of Chosŏn was designed to, at the political level, reverse this flow towards decentralization. It was amidst the development of nongjang and the consequent attempts at strengthening the state's control over public lands marked by the implementation of the

Kwajōnbōp (科田法, Rank Land Law) that Chosŏn was founded.

Nevertheless, many opinions exist with regards to the issue of landownership during early Chosŏn. Historical materials from the Chosŏn era advance the notion that while the king of Chosŏn was the owner of all territory within his realm, members of the yangban bureaucracy, as well as the commoners (yangin) and lowborn (ch'ōnmin), nevertheless possessed land. As a result, claims that Chosŏn was a state in which private ownership of land was the norm have been met with competing claims that it was in fact characterized by the state ownership of land. However, as these two assertions are based on fundamentally different viewpoints, their understanding of the characteristics of Chosŏn as a state, or of its centralized ruling system, has also been complicatedly intertwined.² These problems can be seen as having their origins in the powerful centralized ruling system which Chosŏn established.

First, let us analyze the assertion that Chosŏn's land ownership system was based on the notion of private ownership. Those who adopt this view perceive the expression, 'the king is the owner of all the territory within his realm' as carrying the meaning that the state is the symbolic landlord of the nation. With this in mind, this group, ignoring the view that the state represents the sole proprietor of land within the nation, argues that while the land ownership system features a structure in which the state, landlords, and farmers all coexist, landlords represent the central element within this land ownership system. However, differences of opinions emerge within this camp over the relationships between the state and landlords and the state and farmers, relationships which are characterized by the interference of the state's centralized ruling system. Although complex in nature, the main factor at the root of these variations can be identified as the gap that exists in terms of the understanding of the sujokwŏn (收租權, tax collection rights). Some have perceived the sujokwŏn, which was introduced as a means of providing economic benefits to government officials who belonged to the landlord class during these initial stages marked by a low level of agricultural productivity, as having been utilized for political ends during the process

of founding Chosŏn. In other words, this group argues that not only did government officials, in their capacity as landlords, exercise their rule over the farmers from an economic standpoint through the landlord-tenant farmer system, but that the sujokwŏn meant that this economic power was in effect reinforced through the political powers which they were given in return for their loyalty to the state and for serving as government officials.³ From this standpoint, the sujokwŏn can be perceived as a political right bestowed solely to government officials. The typical type of sujokwŏn involved government officials receiving stipend land (kwajŏn) on the land which they already possessed. When we focus on the fact that the sajŏn (私田, private land) on which sujokwŏn could be received from the state was only established in the Kyŏnggi area, while the farmland in the other seven provinces was organized as kongjŏn (公田, public land), the argument that although the land on which the sujokwŏn was setup was designed to strengthen public authority, the rights of the farmers who possessed the relevant lands were actively protected can, when viewed from a macroscopic standpoint, be seen as being rooted in this reality.⁴

However, other researchers have advanced different theories. These scholars argue that as the system used to oversee small-scale farmers had yet to take roots during this period, much importance should be placed on the agricultural development and relief policies in place at that time. Policies, which as a result of which, the state was able to begin to exercise a higher authority when it came to matters related to private ownership of land.⁵ Meanwhile, others have argued that as the state's ruling system penetrated local societies through well-to-do households (chuho) and the households subjugated to the former (hyŏpho), the state's control over land was in effect carried out through these households.⁶ In addition, others have, in accordance with the assumption of an overarching landlord-based ownership system, argued that as the state had the right to collect all taxes during this period, it in effect, functioned as a sort of super landlord.⁷ Viewed from this standpoint, government officials were the party which effectuated the state's ownership or higher authority through the exercise of their sujokwŏn rights, a stance that is supported by

the fact that the officials who received sujokwŏn rights were referred to as chŏnju (田主, owners). Those who argue that the state was the actual landlord also base their argument on the fact that the private ownership of land was limited. During the 15th century, landowners could exercise effective ownership over their land as long as the latter was used as farmland. However, when the land was not used for farming purposes, the state often took away ownership of the land and gave to other individuals; many such cases have been discovered involving the kwajŏn.⁸ Nonetheless, considering the fact that the practice of placing ownership restrictions on unused land reemerged after the Hideyoshi Invasions when the sujokwŏn-oriented land control system in effect disappeared, the conclusion can be reached that this was in effect an attempt to exercise public authority in order to increase the overall wealth of the state. Nevertheless, regardless of which standpoint one adopts, the fact that the state possessed the basic authority to limit the private ownership of land is one that cannot be denied.

The taxation system of Chosŏn represents a much more complex matter to understand than the exercise of state authority in order to limit the private ownership of land. This is because the taxation system underwent such repeated alterations as a result of the socioeconomic changes that significant gaps emerged between the amounts and rates allocated by the state and the actual amounts and rates applied to the farmers. Despite the fact that they had to pay three different taxes, the taxation burden which Korean farmers faced during the 15th century was not a particularly heavy one. The taxes which farmers were responsible for were the chŏnse (田稅, rice revenues) which involved the collection of a certain amount of the crop yield from the land owners, kongmul (貢物, tribute products), which revolved around the collection of specialized local products from farmers included in the commoner class, and the yoyŏk (徭役, corvée labor) levied to mobilize a labor force for the state. Nevertheless, attention should be drawn to the fact that the changes wrought to the taxation system, such as the problems associated with military labor which caused the establishment of the military cloth tax (kunp'ŏ), and the changes that

resulted in the Ŭich'ang (義倉, Righteous Granaries) state granary system (hwan'gok) previously used as a means to provide relief and ordinary loans becoming an actual tax item, and the advent of the pangnap (防納, indirect payment system) which resulted in the reorganization of the kongmul system into the Taedongbŏp (大同法, Uniform Land Tax Law), started during the middle of the 15th century. Based on these facts alone, the state can be regarded as having taxed the farmers in its role as the only landowner or the highest authority in the land. However, as the state during the 15th century regarded all the above-mentioned matters as illegal actions, this results in a logical contradiction in which the state denied the fact that it occupied such a position of superiority in the first place.

Let us analyze the above arguments relating to the formation and maintenance of a powerful king-oriented centralized ruling system during the 15th century. First, let us review the interpretations of the sujokwŏn rights granted under the kwajŏn system. The meaning of sujokwŏn rights is expanded when the various interpretations of these rights during the Koryŏ era are included. However, there is one point that is clear, and that is quite simply that while the officials who received kwajŏn at that time were called chŏnju, the individuals who possessed land under the kwajŏn system were called chŏn'gaek; thus these sujokwŏn rights intricately related to state authority occupied a position which was superior to that of private ownership. In addition, the belief that the establishment of sujokwŏn rights was an act based on political objectives is enhanced by the fact that after having reorganized Koryŏ's bureaucratic system Chosŏn proceeded to provide kwajŏn to all ranks of officials and to recognize these officials' sujokwŏn rights as well. In particular, when the government's desire that all government officials reside within the royal capital area is combined with the establishment of the kwajŏn system solely in the Kyŏnggi area surrounding the royal capital, the conclusion can easily be reached that the provision of kwajŏn in effect represented the first step towards strengthening the centralized ruling structure.

Chosŏn engaged in widespread efforts to use the state ownership of

land to establish a centralized ruling system during the period immediately following the foundation of the new state. For example, the Chosŏn government compelled those belonging to the class of individuals who had secured the status of p'umgwan (formal bureaucratic ranks) but were not eligible for kwajŏn, to perform their military duties in the capital area in exchange for kunjŏn (軍田, military land). The individuals who were forced to conduct pŏnsang siwi (番上侍衛, undertake low level military or royal court duties in the capital on a rotating basis) in exchange for kunjŏn were called hansan kwalli or hallyang p'umgwan. It has been pointed out by some that the duties of these individuals possessed a greater significance from a political standpoint than a military one.⁹ However, as the middle of the 15th century bore on, the kunjŏn system was abolished and the use of the kwajŏn system, which was also eventually abolished, was decreased tremendously. As such, this was a part of the process of abolishing the actions taken by a powerful state in accordance with its sole or superior ownership of land, actions which were designed to support the economic interests of the main bureaucrats and p'umgwan class who played an important role in maintaining the centralized ruling system. Moreover, as the state authority pertaining to the ownership and control over land was actualized through the king, the above-mentioned changes also resulted in alterations in terms of the degree of strength and characteristics of the centralized ruling structure. During the period which spanned from the reign of King T'aejong to that of Sejong, the following changes emerged: while former officials holding the rank of Tanghagwan or higher were given the right to reside in local provinces, officials of Rank 2 (2 p'um) or above were allowed to visit their agricultural estates (nongjang), and elderly officials were even allowed to move to local areas.¹⁰ This would seem to indicate that while Chosŏn had on the one hand successfully established a stable foundation for its centralized ruling system, it was also painfully aware that the nature of this centralized ruling structure would have to undergo changes in the future.

The argument that while the ownership and control over land exercised

by a strong state and king allowed the officials and members of the p'umgwan class who were the major beneficiaries of this strong state to accumulate a major portion of the taxation revenues for themselves, farmers' taxation burden nevertheless remained small is not one which can be supported. It should have been impossible for the state amidst the poor economic situation wrought by the advent of successive natural disasters during the reigns of King T'aejong and Sejong to accumulate the large-scale military supplies it needed without exploiting the farmers.¹¹ Nevertheless, no large-scale dismantlement of the agricultural class took place during this period. This seemingly contradictory phenomenon can be seen as having been the result of the fact that the state's active performance of its public authority function during this period in essence meant that the principles governing landlords' payment of chŏnse (田稅, rice revenues) and those covering the collection of the regulated taxes were thoroughly applied. As such, the state properly implemented its public authority function during this period in which its control over lands was strong. On the contrary, once the state's control over land began to wane from the middle of the 15th century onwards, the number of cases involving the distortion of the exercise of public authority increased, which in turn resulted in a gradual increase in commoners taxation burden. This reality is clearly evidenced by the gap between the objectives of the kongbŏp (貢法, Tribute Tax Law) and the actual results of its implementation. Meanwhile, the burden of the landlord class gradually decreased as the kongbŏp began to be applied at the national level, and the application of the lowest level of yŏnbun (年分, land classification method based on the estimation of the harvest potential of different plots in accordance with the weather conditions in a particular year) to the landlord class eventually became the norm by the end of the 15th century, all of which resulted in the nominal chŏnse rate on overall rice products falling to only 1-1.5%.¹² As the 15th century bore on and the state's ability to use sujokwŏn rights to secure control over land disappeared, state authority started to be used to protect the interests of yangban landlords, the so-called ruling class of Chosŏn consisting of

government officials and landlords.

The centralized social structure and institutions

The theory that Chosŏn was a state that featured a centralized ruling structure is a widely accepted one. However differences have emerged amongst the researchers who conducted their studies based on the theory of modern society, with some depicting the social structure of Chosŏn as having been based on a bureaucratic society, while others have argued that it was in fact a yangban society or a yangban bureaucratic society. Meanwhile, researchers whose studies have been based on the feudal society theory have, while conceding the existence of the features of a centralized ruling system, defined the social structure of Chosŏn as being based on a feudal society. These differences between researchers who advocate the Chosŏn as a modern society theory have been the result of the gap that exists in terms of their perception of the social status system in place during the Chosŏn era. On the other hand, as researchers who advance the feudal society theory have defined the characteristics of Chosŏn society without ever clarifying how the centralized state system was incorporated into the feudal social system, their assertions pertaining to the social characteristics of Chosŏn will have to be given more substance in the future.

The social status of Chosŏn has been perceived of consisting of four classes; the yangban (civil and military officials), chungin (middle men), yangin (commoner), and ch'ŏnmin (lowborn). However, the introduction of the so-called 'yangch'ŏnje' (良賤制, commoner and lowborn system) touched off a serious debate within academic circles.¹³ Those who have advocated the yangch'ŏnje theory have argued that social status in Chosŏn could in fact be separated into commoners and lowborn, based on the fact that the rights and obligation of the state under the law represented the key to the concept of social status during this period. According to this theory, the yangban and chungin were in fact a part of

the commoner class. A comprehensive analysis of existing research reveals that the yangban and chungin started to become separate from the commoner class sometime around the end of the 15th century. However, it was at the beginning of the 17th century that yangban became a social status in itself, a change which was occasioned by the fact that the yangban began to receive privileges from the state.¹⁴ As such, the definition of Chosŏn society as a yangban society or yangban bureaucracy society is better suited to the period from the 16th century onwards.

Social status during early Chosŏn can rightfully be seen as having been based on the yangch'ŏn system. However, attention should be drawn to how this yangch'ŏn system differed from the social status system in place during Koryŏ. The Koryŏ dynasty featured various hierarchical groups within the yangin class, each of which was situated at different levels in terms of their political rights and obligations towards the state. While these varying levels were not completely removed during early Chosŏn, the contents of the laws which were put in place reveal that individuals within the same class were at least formally regarded as equals. For this reason, the yangch'ŏn system implemented during early Chosŏn has been called a unifying yangch'ŏn system, and this change cannot be separated from the establishment of a powerful centralized ruling system.¹⁵ The major change which accompanied the implementation of this unifying yangch'ŏn system was the reorganization of the kunhyŏn (郡縣, county and prefecture) system. Although less than perfect, the reorganization of the kunhyŏn system which occurred during the reign of King T'aejong nevertheless resulted in the advent of a unified administration system. The local administration system during the Koryŏ era was managed based on the notion of a hierarchical structure in which residents were assigned differing obligations and rights based on the status and presence or absence of local governors in the administrative kunhyŏn unit to which they belonged.¹⁶ Therefore, the centralized ruling system of early Chosŏn was one which featured, from a social standpoint, the advent of unified yangch'ŏn and kunhyŏn systems.

As far as the social status system is concerned, there is a need to

conduct a separate analyze to uncover whether the contents of the regulations established in accordance with the relevant laws and institutions were in fact strongly applied. The key to any analysis of this issue remains the yangban. With regard to the yangban, two conflicting assertions have been made: one is that the yangban exhibited more bureaucratic characteristics and the other that the yangban displayed characteristics which were more in keeping with those of the aristocracy. These two assertions are in keeping with the opposing viewpoints of Koryŏ as either an aristocratic society or a bureaucratic one. Those researchers who regard social status during early Chosŏn as having been based on the yangch'ŏn system tend to emphasize the bureaucratic characteristics of the yangban.¹⁷ Conversely, researchers who regard the social structure of early Chosŏn as having been based on four differing social statuses have emphasized the aristocratic characteristics of the yangban.¹⁸ However, it is difficult to ascertain which assertion is closer to the reality of the times, as both sides have developed their own assertions based on relative grounds. Although this situation suggests the need to utilize a new approach when conducting studies on the yangban, the most likely of these arguments is that the aristocratic characteristics of the yangban became stronger as the Chosŏn dynasty developed. For this reason, doubts have been raised as to whether Chosŏn can be defined as a yangban bureaucratic society.

There is very little in essence to differentiate a bureaucracy from a yangban bureaucracy. When the term yangban is used to collectively refer to civil and military officials, then the terms bureaucracy and yangban bureaucracy essentially become synonyms for one another. Therefore, the separation of these two terms is in fact meaningless. Therefore, the yangban should be regarded as a social status and the yangban bureaucracy as one of the classes belonging to this status. However, the terms bureaucracy and yangban bureaucracy are once again brought closer together when we consider the political significance of those bureaucrats from the yangban class. Nevertheless, differences can be found between the bureaucracy and yangban bureaucracy systems.

As Chosŏn was based on a monarchical system, the king, as the supreme ruler, was the effective source of the bureaucracy's ideological or actual power. In other words, a bureaucratic society indicates a society which is managed by bureaucrats whose authority has been entrusted in them by the king. A yangban bureaucratic society refers to a society in which officials from the yangban class led and managed the society. The power exercised by the yangban bureaucracy had its origins in a combination of the backing which they as bureaucrats enjoyed as representatives of the royal authority, and their economic base represented by their widespread ownership of land, the Neo-Confucian ideology, and the privileges which they enjoyed under the law. During the Chosŏn era, the role of their economic power underwent changes. As such, during the period in which the sujokwŏn-based land control system was maintained despite the abandonment of the kwajŏnbŏp (科田法, Rank Land Law) in favor of the Chikjŏnbŏp (職田法, Office Land Law) and Chinjŏnse (職田稅, Office Land Tax), high-ranking officials were able to establish a degree of economic power which while not as developed as the one enjoyed by their counterparts during the Koryŏ era was nevertheless significant. However, when the Chinjŏnse began to falter and was eventually abolished during the 16th century, officials found themselves unable to receive their emoluments in time,¹⁹ which obliged them to use their own economic power to maintain their standing. As a result, the independence of bureaucrats vis-à-vis the royal authority was strengthened; the yangban became a class independent from the yangin class, one which enjoyed a privileged status; and the aristocratic tendencies of the yangban were eventually strengthened. Given this reality, the assertion can be made that Chosŏn was transformed from a bureaucratic society to a yangban bureaucratic society.

In the previous sections, several arguments pertaining to the class that played the leading role in Chosŏn's central social structure, the yangban, were dealt with. However, a more essential problem is that of defining Chosŏn's state system as one which was anchored around a simple centralized ruling structure. When compared to modern bureaucracies, the

bureaucracy of Chosŏn can be said to feature aristocratic characteristics. However, when this bureaucracy is compared with the one in place during the Koryŏ dynasty, we can also see that these aristocratic characteristics in fact became less pronounced over time. This has led many researchers to define Chosŏn society as a bureaucratic one. In many ways, the definition of Chosŏn's state system as a centralized ruling system also has its origins in a relative evaluation. These claims pertaining to Chosŏn as being governed through a centralized ruling system do not take into consideration the fact that Chosŏn in many ways exhibited more decentralized aspects than the nationalism-backed modern state system.

The argument that the state system of Chosŏn was one based on a centralized ruling system has its origins in comparisons with the representative centralized feudal state in Europe during the Medieval period England, and with Chosŏn's immediate predecessor Koryŏ. These comparisons have yielded the conclusion that Chosŏn society featured a much higher degree of centralized power. However, no criteria has been advanced that could be used to classify whether a society is more centralized or decentralized even amongst similar feudal societies. Therefore, there is an urgent need to create indicators with which to establish the standards used to decide whether Chosŏn's centralized ruling structure somehow strayed from the commonalities that can be found throughout medieval societies.

One of the standard indicators which could be used in this regard is the local aristocrats-oriented ruling structure which existed within local communities and *pungdang* (朋黨, political cliques) politics. The *p'umgwan* class, the direct predecessors of the aristocracy (*sajok*), emerged within local communities during the final period of Koryŏ and eventually became the *sajok* during early Chosŏn. While establishing a relationship with the state authority, these local aristocrats simultaneously developed their own independent power structure.²⁰ While it is difficult to compare Chosŏn's *sajok* class with western feudal landlords who controlled the farmers living within their dominion. However, one is left with no other option but to regard the *sajok* class which acquired status-

related privileges from the state, emerged as a social group that established its own ruling structure, and exercised its own control over local areas, as a factor which clearly exposes the decentralized characteristics of Chosŏn's local areas.

However, while the decentralized and sajok-oriented ruling structure that existed within local communities was connected to central politics by pungdang politics, no major shift took place in terms of the overall centralized ruling system. The sajok class was able to strengthen their power basis and simultaneously ensure that their interests penetrated central politics by maintaining a close relationship with the central power group through the participation of some of its members in central politics, as well as through their ability to use the academic standing of one of its components, the sallim (山林, rustic literati) to have their opinions reflected in central politics.²¹ However, when such pungdang politics failed to function smoothly, the complaints of the local sajok exploded.²² As such, an important feature of Korean medieval society was that while a decentralized system did exist, it was overshadowed by the central ruling system. The problem however is that this shaded part cannot simply be ignored.

This assertion is supported by a look at the manner in which bureaucratic agencies were managed. The identification of an organization as an independent entity can be based on the presence of the following conditions: first, the existence of personnel-related rights, including the power to appoint the members of the organization, recommend candidates, and evaluate members performance; second, the power to enact laws regulating the management of the organization; third, the right to exercise judicial power, which includes the right to judge and punish individuals; fourth, the right to establish work plans; fifth, the right to set financial income and expenses.

All of Chosŏn's central government agencies, which possessed their own rights and powers, demonstrated a certain degree of autonomy. Viewed from the standpoint of personnel-related matters, even in the case of drawing up the hongmunnok (弘文錄), which was the list of officials

recommended to be appointed to prestigious positions (ch'ōngyojik), the Hongmun'gwan (弘文館, Office of Special Advisers) exercised a degree of autonomy that was in harmony with the control which the central government's Chōngsūng (政丞, three top officials) and other core officials displayed. However, once the hongmunnok had been completed and the time came to proceed with the actual appointment of officials to important positions those who were already in prestigious positions were able to exercise a greater degree of autonomy through their ability to consent or oppose appointments.²³ In the military sector in particular, the chabyōk(自辟), a procedure through which generals selected their commanders that had to be submitted to a formal approval process, became entrenched as an importance practice. Thus, while the king possessed the right to appoint central government officials, the latter were able to control the appointment of sōri (胥吏, petty clerks) and hyangni (鄉吏, local functionaries).

With regard to the enactment of regulations related to the actual management of subordinate agencies, here again a certain degree of harmony between the autonomy of the relevant agency and control exercised by the central government can be found. Thus, potential legislation would be deliberated upon by the Ŭijōngbu (State Council) or Pibyōnsa (Border Defense Council) after having first been introduced by the relevant agency. Meanwhile, the relevant agencies also functioned as a judicial body when it came to dealing with criminal acts conducted during the performance of the various agencies' work duties.²⁴ The replacement of the Kukyongjōn (國用田, unified national taxation) system with the Taedongbōp generally resulted in the strengthening of the control by the central government over finance-related rights. However, as we can see from the management of the kulp'o and hwan'gok which emerged as new sources of taxation during this same period, the autonomy of each agency was never completely removed.²⁵ These facts prove that the centralized ruling system of Chosŏn shared some commonalities with the feudal system.

This particular problem highlights the need for a comprehensive

reinterpretation of the feudal system. As seen above, the characteristics of the Chosŏn bureaucracy cannot simply be explained by the term 'centralized ruling system'. In addition, any explanation of the Chosŏn bureaucracy that is based on the feudal system becomes difficult when a society in which feudal lords actually existed is used as the standard to define a feudal system. It is for this reason that certain researchers have used the term 'centralized feudal system'. However, as long as a new definition of the term 'feudal system' remains elusive, the application of this term to Korean history will remain problematic. Therefore, there is a need to address the commonalities and differences in terms of the link between production and the notions of humanity in Korean medieval society and in those feudal societies in which feudal landlords actually existed. From a spatial standpoint, local aristocrats (sajok) and high-positioned officials within the bureaucratic organization exercised rights similar to those granted to feudal landlords as part of their relationship with the king. As such, it would be more advantageous to analyze the characteristics of Chosŏn society based on the assumption that a feudal system can coexist with a central bureaucratic system within both a spatial and historical environment.

The centralized ruling structure and the exercise of political power

There can be no denying that a powerful centralized ruling system took form during early Chosŏn. This can be regarded as an outstanding characteristic of this period, especially as it pertains to the development of premodern Korean history. Moreover, the degree of centralization which Chosŏn exhibited during this period has hardly been found in the contemporary history of other areas. Such a powerful centralized ruling system could not have been formed without the presence of a powerful royal authority, and even if it had been formed under such circumstances, would have been impossible to maintain for a long period of time.

Reasons exist as to why a powerful centralized ruling system could be established after the foundation of Chosŏn. During the late 14th century, Koryŏ society found itself faced with the harsh reality that the inability of the state to carry out its functions in essence rendered them helpless against any foreign invasions. There can be no doubt that the scale of the changes which took place in the East Asian international order in the late 14th century proved to be too much for Koryŏ to overcome.²⁶ However, attention should be paid to the fact that the two invasions conducted by the Red Turbans and by Japanese marauders during the period in which the Ming dynasty was emerging to supplant the Yuan in China were not regular wars designed to achieve the destruction of Koryŏ or to secure certain political ends vis-à-vis the Korean kingdom. While the continuous meddling of the Yuan dynasty in Koryŏ's internal affairs until the middle 14th century greatly reduced the latter's ability to organize a strong military system, the simple fact remains that the inability of the state to protect its people from foreign invasions was one of the main reasons for the advent of serious doubts about the viability of the state itself.

The development of agricultural estates (*nongjang*) has usually been given as a decisive cause for Koryŏ's inability to carry out its functions as a state.²⁷ The large-scale exploitation of land by local power groups to form the above-mentioned *nongjang* and their ability to shirk their duties to pay taxes or provide labor to the state resulted in government officials becoming unable to receive their emoluments and in newly selected officials not receiving any land in reward for their services to the state. State finances during this period were to be used to first, pay for national rituals and diplomatic ceremonies; second, pay officials' emoluments; and third, manage the military. Therefore, Koryŏ's enemies were able to launch successful invasions because of the latter's inability to secure the financial resources needed to organize its military.

As such, significant lessons can be taken from the fact that it was Yi Sŏnggye, who played a primordial role in repelling Koryŏ's enemies, including the Japanese marauders, who founded the new dynasty of Chosŏn; that Koryŏ officials enthroned Yi Sŏnggye as their new king; and

that the Rank Land Law (kwajŏnbŏp), which was designed to decrease the amount of private lands and reorganize the majority of land as public land, was implemented prior to the establishment of the new dynasty. These facts point to the existence of a willingness to found a new state capable of protecting the people from foreign invasions and of a shared sense that the king should be the central figure in bringing this about. In other words, the foundation of Chosŏn meant the emergence of a powerful centralized ruling system centering on the kingship. Nevertheless, attention should be paid to the fact that many researchers, specifically, those who advocate the theory of Chosŏn as a modern society, have focused on the issue of the harmony that existed between the royal authority and meritorious retainers' power in their studies on the history of the 15th century.

Few would dispute the fact that legal and institutional power was vested in the king during the early stages of Chosŏn. It is also established theory that as an appropriate amount of power was allocated to the yangban bureaucrats, a high degree of harmony existed between royal authority and meritorious retainers' power. However, there is some doubt about to what extent the distribution of powers was possible under a powerful centralized ruling system. Political power is in effect the power at the societal level to make people obey orders as a result of the possession of the ability to take away what individuals value most if they do not. Thus, it is very difficult to allocate political power in a balanced manner without special mechanisms in place. Here, the problem is that scholars have not focused on the special mechanisms used to achieve a balance in terms of political power.

First, let us analyze the infrastructure of this political power. Chosŏn introduced the kwajŏnbŏp which served as the basis of the new dynasty even before the actual foundation of the new state. The founder of Chosŏn, the military general Yi Sŏnggye was able to use the strong military organization at his disposal to grasp political power, an act that he then followed up upon by reforming the land system through the establishment of the kwajŏnbŏp and by proclaiming himself the first king of the new

dynasty. Therefore, the early kings of Chosŏn's ability to exercise strong royal authority was based on the military and economic power which constituted the direct source of their political power.

While the economic situation of Chosŏn was less than ideal at the time of its foundation, its leaders nevertheless proceeded to provide kwajŏn (Rank-Land) to all officials. Kwajŏn was provided in exchange for officials' agreement to become subjects of the new dynasty and king and to ensure their loyalty to the new state. The royal house of Chosŏn, which used the kwajŏn and the additional advantages associated with the kwajŏn it provided to its officials with great difficulty as a security valve, limited the area in which these officials could reside to the Seoul area. Furthermore, it utilized the promise of kunjŏn to entice local power groups to carry out their military or royal court duties in the capital area on a rotating basis (siwi). Such actions were clearly intended to stabilize the new dynasty. However, the ability to entice powerful individuals from local areas to conduct siwi in the capital area was short-lived, and the practice had already become weakened by the reign of King T'aejong. The amount of kwajŏn that was provided to officials gradually decreased, and this practice was eventually abandoned in favor of the granting of chikjŏn (Office-Land) during the late 15th century. In turn, this chikjŏn, which was only granted to current officials, was also eventually abolished after having been transformed to become a system in which the state collected taxes from the farmers and redistributed the taxes collected to officials. As a result, by the time the Yŏnsan'gun ascended the throne, officials had no reason to feel obliged to this Office-Land system that no longer ensured their status as government officials. Furthermore, as the amount of emoluments which Chosŏn officials received for their services to the state was significantly less than what their counterparts from the Koryŏ era received, they had no choice but to depend on their own economic abilities to maintain their status as members of the ruling class. This change meant that not only was government officials' dependence on the royal authority greatly decreased, but that the former group was able to gain a degree of independence that was so high that the sin'gwŏn

(meritorious retainers' power) could rightfully emerge as a challenge to the wanggwŏn (royal power). This change can be regarded as a major factor which came into play with regards to the frictions that erupted between the Yŏnsan'gun and his meritorious retainers during the period immediately following his enthronement.

Although smaller than what the royal house of Koryŏ controlled, the new royal house of Chosŏn at the outset possessed significant amounts of land. However, a considerable amount of this land was simply given away in connection with the marriages of princes and princesses. As a result, the royal household controlled very little land by the time King Sŏngjong came to the throne. During the 15th and even 16th centuries it was common practice for parents to separate their fortune equally amongst their sons and daughters. This practice also applied within the royal family as well. Unlike marriages between sadaebu (literati bureaucrats) families, women who were slated to become queens or royal concubines could not bring their family's fortunes into the royal household. Therefore, the royal treasury was inevitably decreased whenever a king had many children. When we consider that there were 27 princes and princesses during the reign of King T'aejong, 22 during the reign of King Sejong, and 28 during the reign of King Sŏngjong, the financial burden placed on the royal household must have been a significant one. As a result, the great majority of the royal household's nongjang had been given away by the reign of King Sŏngjong, with little left in their possession but slaves.²⁸ Although largely the result of his own disproportionate lifestyle, the depletion of the royal treasury can be regarded as one of the reasons why the Yŏnsan'gun began to focus on punishing rich officials and seizing their fortunes.

The relationship between the royal authority and military power underwent a similar change. As is well known, not only did the source of the power which Yi Sŏnggye used to found Chosŏn emanate from his ties to the military, but Yi Pangwŏn's own ascension to the throne was made possible by the military. The early kings of Chosŏn concentrated their efforts on the establishment of the military structure, especially the

Kūmgun (禁軍, royal guards) nominally controlled by the Chunganggun (中央軍, Central Army). Nevertheless, early Chosŏn kings' primary objective as pertains to the establishment of the military structure was that of ensuring the viability of the royal authority and central power. Thus, the number of Kūmgun regulated in the <Kyŏngguk taejŏn (經國大典, National Code)> was limited to 240. Therefore, the exercise of a powerful royal authority based on military power required that the kings of Chosŏn seize effective control over the military command structure.

The Qing dynasty founded by Jurchen can be regarded as the longest-lasting 'foreign' dynasty to have ruled over China. The Eight Banners Troops (八旗軍) controlled by ethnic Jurchens has been identified as one of the main reasons why the Qing could rule over China for such a long period of time. Qing emperors are known to have trained the Eight Banners Troops by making them take part in hunting expeditions over which they exercised direct command. In the case of Chosŏn, the cavalry represented the main element of its military until the 15th century. In particular, cavalry represented the majority of the military forces stationed in the Seoul area. The practice of using hunting expeditions to train these cavalry troops during Chosŏn, known as kangmu (講武, Military Plan), also involved the king assuming direct command over the manner in which they unfolded. However, the unavoidable large-scale damage caused to agricultural lands, and by extension farmers, whenever such a kangmu was implemented resulted in serious objections to the practice from civilian officials. As the number of kangmu and their scale decreased, many of the sites which had previously been used to conduct kangmu were turned into agricultural land.²⁹ The imprudent hunting practices of the Yŏnsan'gun served as the decisive factor behind the changes made to the manner in which the kangmu was implemented. The Yŏnsan'gun forcibly removed people from residential areas in Seoul in order to build large-scale sites on which he could partake of his hobby; an action which can be seen as the direct reason for the royal family's inability to implement kangmu after the enthronement of Chungjong.

King Sejo, who usurped the throne from his nephew, attempted to

alleviate the problems associated with the decrease in the number and scale of the kangmu by establishing the owi (五衛, Five Guards) system. This owi system, which enabled the king to exercise exclusive command over military units that featured different characteristics, was then combined with the chinbŏp governing the drills conducted as part of combat training. During the latter half of the 15th century, the owi were often mobilized to take part in chinbŏp training, and in many cases, the king himself took part in the training. Thus, in keeping with Sejo's original intentions, Chosŏn was able to alleviate the lessening of its military preparedness occasioned by the decrease in kangmu. However, even this chinbŏp-style training was abandoned during the 16th century.

As a result, the king of Chosŏn lost the tools through which he had asserted his role as the supreme commander of the military, and in effect became little more than a nominal supreme commander.

From a historical standpoint, the gradual decrease in the transcendental royal authority and the withering of the economic and military basis of the kingship can be seen as a natural phenomenon. It appears that early kings of Chosŏn such as the very clever kings T'aejong and Sejong, were well aware of this fact. They also understood that it was impossible to effectively lead a Chosŏn society in which literati-centered political traditions were on the rise solely on the back of economic guarantees, military force, and a transcendental royal authority. In these reasons, the early kings of Chosŏn strove to establish a powerful and effective ruling system.

Chosŏn's culture and institutions had already been well established by the time King Sŏngjong, whose reign has been regarded as marking the end of early Chosŏn, came to the throne. Various national rituals, music, history, and geographies had by that point already been compiled in book formats. In this regard, the most important achievement was the promulgation of the <Kyŏngguk taejŏn>, which completed the establishment of the ruling structure of Chosŏn by enacting the necessary laws and regulations. As such, a powerful centralized ruling system centering on the kingship was finally established. The main framework of

this ruling structure was designed by Chǒng Tojǒn and King T'aejong. Following the preparation of advanced contents during the reign of King Sejong, and the reorganization of the relevant names during the reign of King Sejo, the ruling structure of Chosǒn was finally given official form in the taejǒn (大典). Therefore, many researchers have described the ruling structure of Chosǒn established through these processes using the term 'king-oriented centralized system'. If that is in fact the case, then how efficiently did this ruling structure complement the royal authority?

The detailed manner in which political power was exercised can be differently explained depending on which classification criteria is employed. However, in this paper, for purpose of simplicity, I will analyze the issue based on personnel and inspection-related matters as viewed from the standpoint of legislation, judicature, and administration. As legislation was enacted through royal edicts, legislative power in effect fell within the range of the king's rights. In this regard, the statutes found in the <Kyǒngguk taejǒn> were summaries of royal edicts sent to government agencies, including the Yukcho (六曹, six ministries). In principle, the enactment of a law proceeded as follows. The relevant agency would first submit an initiative to the Ŭijǒngbu (議政府, State Council). After the members of the Ŭijǒngbu had deliberated on the matter, approval for the law was sought from the king. The law then officially came into effect once the Yejo (禮曹, Ministry of Rites) obtained the agreement of the Sahǒnbu (司憲府, Office of the Inspector-General) and Saganwǒn (司諫院, Office of the Censor-General).³⁰ However, the usual practice was for each government agency to draw up the regulations needed to deal with the administrative affairs that concerned them and then submit a report to the king for approval. These regulations were then approved and applied solely to the relevant agency. The majority of the laws enacted during the Chosǒn era consisted of regulations applicable to government agencies and officials and public ordinances promulgated by government agencies. As the king only rarely directly approved such regulations, legislative power was in actuality exercised by officials from individual government agencies.

This factor is also evident with regards to the issue of judicial power. While in principle the king exercised supreme authority over judicial matters, the main judicial bodies were the central government's Ŭigŭmbu (義禁府, State Tribunal), Hyŏngjo (刑曹, Ministry of Punishments), Hansŏngbu (漢城府, Magistrate of Seoul), and Sahŏnbu. Meanwhile, at the local level, the kwanch'alsa (provincial governor) and suryŏng (local governor) were the bodies endowed with the ability to exercise judicial power. However, each government agency was free to pass judgment and assign punishment in cases involving crimes that warranted punishments no more severe than a flogging.³¹ While the decision whether to assign the death penalty, a right closely associated with the very essence of power, was regarded as the king's prerogative, the opinions of the members of the State Council also carried great weight. However, as the exercise of general judicial power was mostly related to administrative affairs involving the public, officials from each government agency were nevertheless given a certain leeway to exercise actual judicial power.

The right to appoint personnel altered in accordance with the characteristics of a given period. Nevertheless, the right to appoint officials was regarded as one which belonged to the king. The appointment of high-ranking officials was conducted through royal edicts and did not require the agreement of the Sahŏnbu or Saganwŏn. However, in the case of the appointment of regular officials, recommendations were made by the Ijo (吏曹, Ministry of Personnel) and Pyŏngjo (兵曹, Ministry of Military Affairs), while in special cases, the recommendation of candidates was carried out by officials from the Ŭijŏngbu (State Council), Sahŏnbu, Saganwŏn, and Hongmun'gwan (弘文館, Office of Special Advisers). Although in theory the king was free to select and appoint any individual he liked, such instances rarely came to pass in reality. By the middle period of Chosŏn, the above-mentioned officials had moved beyond the mere recommendation of candidates to carry out the actual selection and appointment of personnel.³² Nevertheless, it remained common practice to seek the king's opinion when the time came to select individuals for the Ŭijŏngbu. Moreover, there were many cases

in which the king's opinion was sought in connection with the selection of potential candidates for the post of Minister of the Ijo or Pyŏngjo, as such officials became potential targets whenever the king attempted to dilute the power of a political clique by removing their leaders. In addition, the sŭngji (承旨, Royal Secretary), who played a role similar to that played by the modern Presidential Secretary of the Blue House, regularly submitted a list of candidates to the king, while making sure that those on the list fell within the range of individuals acceptable to the monarch. Therefore, the appointment of personnel was an area in which the king could exercise a greater degree of actual power than was the case in the legislative and judicial fields. However, the situation becomes somewhat different when we include the appointment of sŏri and hyangni, a right which belonged to local government officials. As such, among the personnel commission, the part that had actually influenced the public was seized by the officials.

Lastly, as pertains to inspection rights, the Sahŏnbu can be regarded as a government agency whose primary function was that of inspecting government officials. As the inspection of officials has been a common feature throughout Korean history, the establishment of inspection agencies has tended to be regarded as a natural phenomenon. However, this practice runs contrary to the manner in which inspection rights were applied in the Chinese dynasties, where, even prior to the onset of the imperial dictatorships, eunuchs who belonged to the emperor's inner circle carried out inspections. While during the early Chosŏn period, the king ordered officials from the Sahŏnbu and Saganwŏn to implement inspections, King Munjong ordered that such inspections be carried out by the eunuchs. However, his was an exceptional case. Due to the fact that the Saganwŏn and Hongmun'gwan, which along with the Sahŏnbu conducted inspections, also functioned as media outlets, they in effect possessed the power to restrain the king. Moreover, the fact that the kyŏngch'agwan and ŏsa dispatched to inspect local officials were also government officials clearly demonstrates that the bureaucracy of Chosŏn had its own purification function.

Thus, although Chosŏn's king-oriented centralized ruling system was on the surface designed to allocate the various political powers to the king, in reality it was the government agencies and officials who controlled the actual levers of these political powers. In other words, the ruling structure was designed in a manner which enabled officials rather than the king to secure the actual advantages that stemmed from the management of the state. This is how the actual history of Chosŏn developed. The following provides a pertinent example of this reality. When the kongbŏp (Tribute Tax Law) based on the concepts of Chŏnbun yuktŭng (田分 6等, land classified into six grades of fertility) and Yŏnbun kudŭng (年分 9等, nine-fold classification) was first introduced during the reign of King Sejong, rice revenues actually significantly decreased.³³ During this period in which agriculture formed the only significant industry, the rice revenues (chŏnse) collected from farmland represented the basic source of the state's finances. Once the kongbŏp was implemented at the national level during the reign of King Sŏngjong, almost all farmland was declared to have yielded poor harvests. As a result, the taxation imposed on the yangban landlords decreased, and this deficit in state finances was made up by further impositions on the farmers. It was from this period onwards that Chosŏn began to be managed in a manner which was designed to secure the interests of the yangban bureaucrats. Soon thereafter, meritorious retainers with fortunes greater than that of the royal household began to emerge. Therefore, the king-oriented ruling system of Chosŏn did not feature a taxation system, which formed the actual backbone of the control structure, that was designed to manage the state in a direction that would secure the interests of the king; and as such, in essence only meant that the king was positioned at the top of the ruling structure.³⁴

Conclusion

When viewed from a periodic standpoint, there is little doubt that a

powerful centralized ruling system was established during early Chosŏn. However, existing studies have tended to accept this fact as a historical truth, while failing to delve into the actual features of this system. The end result has been that researchers have in effect overlooked various aspects of the history of early Chosŏn.

First, no studies have been conducted on the topic of why this centralized ruling system was strengthened during the early period of Chosŏn. With regards to this issue, further study on the role played by internal factors needs to be conducted. However, in the case of early Chosŏn, the possibility exists that external factors may have played a more important role in establishing the centralized ruling system.

Second, if we concede that the land-based relationship between the rulers and the ruled also played an important role during the early stages of Chosŏn, then the possibility that this relationship may have acted as a constraint on the ability to move beyond a centralized power structure. In this regard, there is a need to analyze the limits associated with the relationship between rulers and the ruled and human relations in general within a medieval society. Thus as long as regulations were applied based on production levels and the economic development of the society, the central power found itself unable to directly communicate with the farmers. In addition, there is also a need to analyze the kind of social structure that was designed relative to the size of the society and the existing conditions created by the types of agricultural products produced and the characteristics of agriculture during this period. At this junction, it would appear that decentralized characteristics should be natural features of a medieval society.

Third, the characteristics of the contact point at which the centralized and previously existing local power structures intersected. As the structure in which the people emanating from the local power structure became a major element of the centralized power was not in place during the early stages of Chosŏn, this means that mistakes can occur when we simply apply the matters established after the middle period of Chosŏn to early Chosŏn *mutatis mutandis*. Truth be told, this fact may very well

have provided the conditions which led to the establishment of a powerful centralized ruling system during early Chosŏn.

A correct perception of history should be one that moves beyond the mere explanation of institutional regulations to explain individual members of a society's lives. In this regard, the classification of a society as a centralized ruling system or a decentralized local system should not serve as the basic criteria used to divide the concepts of universality and uniqueness.

Key Word : the Centralized ruleing structure, the kwajŏnbŏp, the kwajon, the sujokwŏn, the kongbŏp, the yangban, kyŏngguk taejŏn

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〈국문초록〉

朝鮮初期 支配體制의 성격에 대한 一考察

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조선시대의 지배체제가 중앙집권체제라는 데에는 한국사 연구자들 사이에서 별다른 이견이 없다. 특히 조선초기는 고려의 중앙집권적 체제를 계승하여 그것을 더욱 강화시킨 시기로 이해되고 있다. 그러나 조선초기 중앙집권체제의 세밀한 분석은 물론, 그것을 종합적으로 설명하려는 노력이 별반 이루어져 있지 않다.

조선의 지배체제는 인격이 부정되는 노비 등을 제외한 사회 구성원 전반이 국왕의 신민으로서 봉사하고 은택을 입는 형식을 갖추고 있었다. 모든 양인이 균역을 위시한 국역의 의무를 지는 한편으로 과거에 응시할 수 있었던 것이 이를 나타낸다. 한편 권력은 여러 제도 장치에 의해 국왕에게 집중되고, 이 집중된 권력이 국왕의 명령에 의해 또는 국왕의 명령에 따라 정해진 제도에 의해 다시금 각 관서와 관원에게 분배되어 행사되었다. 이에 따라 조선초기의 지배체제는 서양이나 일본의 봉건제와는 뚜렷히 구별되는 강력한 중앙집권적 성격을 띠게 되었다.

그런데 지배체제가 운영되는 실제 내용에서는 국왕과 백성의 중간에 위치하는 지배층과 이들이 소속되어 근무하는 여러 관서가 상당한 정도의 자율성을 갖고 중요한 역할을 수행할 수 있었다. 입법과 사법 과정에서 백성의 생활에 의미가 있는 부분은 관서나 주요 관원 선에서 결정되는 경우가 많았다. 주요 정책이 결정되는 과정에서 주요 관원들의 영향력은 매우 컸으며, 이는 관원의 임명 절차에서도 유사하게 작용하였다. 이러한 주요 관원들의 힘은 겉으로는 그들이 갖춘 높은 수준의 식견에 입각하고 있었지만, 실질적으로는 그들이 지닌 경제

적 사회적 기반에서 나오는 것이었다. 이러한 점에서 조선의 중앙집권체제는 내면적으로는 분권적인 봉건제도와 상당한 유사성을 보이고 있었다.

조선초기의 강력한 중앙집권체제는 고려말에 맞은 국내외의 위기를 극복해야 할 필요성과 새 왕조가 백성들로부터 긍정적으로 평가받아야 할 필요성이 결합되어 중앙 권력을 강화시켜 지배층의 권익을 적절한 수준에서 통제할 목적에서 나온 것이었다. 따라서 농장의 발달과 외적의 침입으로 대표되는 위기가 약화되고 새 왕조가 안정성을 확보하면 중앙집권체제의 강도와 성격이 달라질 개연성이 많았다. 15세기 중엽부터 나타난 변화는 실제로 중앙집권체제의 강도가 느슨해지고, 국가의 공적 이익보다도 지배층의 사적 이익이 추구되는 쪽으로 가닥을 잡아가고 있었음을 보여준다.

주제어: 중앙집권체제, 과전법, 과전, 수조권, 공권력, 공법, 봉건사회론, 근세사회론, 양반, 경국대전