

EXCERPT FROM THE SAMBONG CHIP: CHŎNG TOJŎN, ON LAND

Introduction

By the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, arable land had come to be concentrated in the hands of wealthy families and powerful Buddhist temples, leading to a situation in which many people were forced to become tenants or to cease farming altogether. Land reform was one of the first priorities of Chosŏn founder Yi Sŏnggye (1335-1408; later known as King T'aejo), and as a result, in 1390, even before the official proclamation of the new dynasty, he had the old land records burned and proceeded to revamp Korea's land ownership system. Chŏng Tojŏn (1337-1398), who here describes the rationale for the reforms, was one of the Neo-Confucian scholar-officials closest to the new king.

Selected Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpt from the Sambong chip: Chŏng Tojŏn, On Land

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His Majesty King T'aejo had personally witnessed the evil effects of this chaotic land situation while he was still a private person and was determined to abolish the private land system as one of his future missions. He believed that all the land in the country should revert to the state and should then be given to the people based on careful account, in order to revive the rectified land system of ancient times. ...

[Translated by Yŏngho Ch'oe]

Question:

1. What do you think the relationship was between land and political power or control in an agrarian state like 14th-century Chosŏn? Do you think this has changed? Why might land reform have been high on Yi Sŏnggye's list of things to do after his coup?

Longer Selection

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In ancient times, all the land belonged to the state, and the state then granted land to the people; thus, all the land that the people cultivated had been given them by the state. There was no one who did not receive land, and there was no one who did not cultivate land. Therefore, there was no excessive differentiation between the rich and the poor and between the strong and the weak. Because all the produce from the land went to the state, the state was prosperous. But as the land system began to disintegrate, powerful individuals acquired more and more land. While the land of the rich extended far and wide, the poor had no land even to stand on. The poor thus were forced to lease land from the rich to till. Even though they worked hard and diligently all year round, they still did not have enough to eat. The rich, however, did not cultivate their land and remained idle. Instead, they hired men to work their land and collected more than half of the yield. The government took no measures to alleviate the plight of the poor and did nothing to bring benefit to the state. Thus, both the people and the state became increasingly poor. It was this situation that gave rise to the theories of limited land and equal land. These theories are, however, no more than makeshift measures. The best land policy is for the state to grant land to the people to cultivate. ...

According to the land system of the Koryŏ dynasty, there were lands for royal descendants, government officials in active service, merit subjects, graduates of the civil service examinations, soldiers, and non-active officials. They maintained their living by collecting rent from these lands. The people who worked the land were allowed to reclaim new land for their ownership, and the government did not intervene. Those who commanded considerable manpower extensively reclaimed new lands; those who were weak and lacked manpower were obliged to submit to the powerful in order to lease land from them. After cultivation, the harvest was divided, half going to the landowner and half to the tillers. This was how there came to be two consumers for every tiller. The rich thus became richer and the poor poorer until the poor became unable to support themselves and were eventually forced to abandon their land and become vagabonds. It was these people who turned to petty occupations and, in extreme cases, even became thieves and bandits. Alas, how can one describe the evil effects of all this? ...

His Majesty King T'aejo had personally witnessed the evil effects of this chaotic land situation while he was still a private person and was determined to abolish the private land system as one of his future missions. He believed that all the land in the country should revert to the state and should then be given to the people based on careful account, in order to revive the rectified land system of ancient times. But the old families and the powerful lineage groups, realizing that His Majesty's plan would work against their interests, slandered and obstructed the plan with all the power at their command. Because of their obstructions, the people were

unable to gain the benefits of this reform. It was indeed lamentable! His Majesty, however, together with two or three like-minded ministers, investigated the laws of the former dynasties, deliberated about what would be good for the present situation, and surveyed and measured all the land in the country in terms of *kyŏl*.¹ [His Majesty then instituted the land reform in the year 1390.] He established court land, military provision land for state use, and office land for civil and military officials. Also, off-duty military men residing in the capital as guards for the royal court, widows remaining faithful to their deceased husbands, government workers in the local magistracies, postal station workers, and river ferry workers, as well as commoners and artisans performing public duties, have all been granted land. Although the distribution of land to the people may not have reached the standard set by the ancient sages, the new land law has restored equity and balance. Compared to the evil system of the former dynasty, the new land reform has brought infinite improvement.

[Translated by Yŏnggho Ch'oe]

Questions:

1. What do you think the relationship was between land and political power or control in an agrarian state like 14th-century Chosŏn? Do you think this has changed? Why might land reform have been high on Yi Sŏnggye's list of things to do after his coup?
2. What were some of the "evil effects" of the old (Koryŏ) land system, according to Chŏng? How did these effects come about? Why did the rich become richer, and the poor become poorer, according to his account?
3. Why does Chŏng (echoing the king) prefer state ownership of land (with land then distributed to certain classes of people for their use), rather than private ownership of land? Do the reformers make compromises?
4. Why are "ancient times" significant for Chŏng?
5. Many people think of history in terms of rulers, battles, and big political events. If we instead focus on land, farming, and other sorts of economic resources and activities, how might our overall understanding of the past be different?

¹ *Kyŏl* refers to a unit of land area. This term is no longer used in modern Korean.