

**Modern Korean Historical Faultlines in the
“Reclaimed Area”:
Review of *Korean War and Reclaimed Area* [Hanguk
jeonjaeng gwa subok jigu]**

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**I. The History of Inje County through Microscope
and Toothpaste Photos**

This book is a local history of Inje County in Gangwon Province combining all of the virtues of historical studies, such as gathering and analyzing a large number of documents, on-site investigations and oral records. The author complements this historical depth with a biological analysis of the Inje area closely observing cells in a microscope as well as a geological analysis examining the faultlines that have accumulated over the centuries. In its comprehensiveness and novelty, the book is a masterpiece demonstrating the virtues of local, biological, and geographical history.

The historical faultlines in the region are extraordinary. Referred to as the “Reclaimed Area,” this is a region that has experienced a variety of regime shifts through rule by the Japanese Empire, U.S. military, Republic of Korea, and Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Thus it has seen changes in ruling elites, political ideology, economic order, and

policy goals. These dynamics have certainly affected historiography on the region, which reflects the legacies of colonial rule, foreign intervention, people's democracy, and nation-building. Considering these transitions, the author suggests that the Reclaimed Area may be linked to a more general comparative study on post-socialist transitions. In other words, the author contends, it is possible to discern an experience in the Reclaimed Area similar to that of Eastern European countries that underwent a transition to democracy and market economy (25).

The author focuses on three points to analyze the historical faults of the Reclaimed Area. First, there was the change in the relations of land ownership, which provided the economic foundation of the region. Just as land reform was the biggest national challenge for many countries in Europe after World War I, so it was for the majority of Asian countries achieving independence after World War II. Thus, comparison of land reforms under the colonial and postcolonial systems may serve as an important basis for understanding the overall political development of the two systems.

Second, the author analyzes changes in the power structure that transition brought to the Reclaimed Area. Who gained power? What political interests were formed? What were the overriding policy objectives and ideology and what did they produce? These are key questions in studying the history of transitions.

Third, the author analyzes patterns in identity changes among the people experiencing this transition. This is also a very important analysis considering that identity change reflected the very essence of the Cold War: ideologies and their means of realization.

The composition of the book is analogous to its analysis of these three subjects of land reform, power structure, and identity. What follows is an overview of the theoretical implications and issues of the book's main findings.

II. Legacies of State Corporatism during Colonial Rule

The analysis begins with the colonial structure of land ownership. According to the author, during the colonial period land ownership in the region was based on a landowner system, but the degree of land concentration was moderate compared to the Hwanghae or South and North Pyeongnam provinces. Together with the “sharecropping committee” implemented by the Japanese colonial government to mediate land conflicts, this ensured that tenant disputes were less severe here than in other regions (65-67).

The “Committee System,” as noted by the author, demonstrated the typical characteristics of the Japanese state-corporatism system introduced to the Korean Peninsula during the colonial period. State-corporatism is the very antithesis of democratic corporatism. While under the former the state itself organizes society and absorbs potential conflicts, the latter is characterized by more of a “bottom-up” process. The basic model for the Committee System originated in the conservative administrative system of Prussian Germany, which tried to manage society through bureaucratic administration instead of introducing political democracy. The same is true of the power structure of various administrative organizations, such as administrative agencies, agricultural cooperatives, farmers’ associations, bureaucrats’ union, organizations for established elites (commercial, transportation service, brewery farming), etc. (71-77, 87, 96). The Committee System was the epitome of the Prussian model of taxation, administration and local election systems. It systematically adopted discriminatory political policies with regard to asset levels to restrict democratic suffrage and electoral rights.

Although the author references just some of the examples of such practices, her analysis of the Inje area in the colonial period convincingly reveals the emergence of a pseudo-democratic administration system reflecting the Prussian system Japan adopted after the Meiji Restoration.

This finding is likely to be significant for Korean academia in the future, allowing others to further analyze the relationship between local power structures formed under this administrative system and the greater dynamics of contemporary Korean politics stemming from local hierarchies.

III. Land Reform and the Peoples' Experience of People's Democracy

According to the author, North Korean land reform was aimed at promoting the ownership structure of the people's democratic system rather than sweeping socialism. As a result of the reforms, the proportion of middle-income farmers grew to sixty percent, while the remaining forty percent became or remained poor farmers. Overall, the biggest benefits went to those who had been small-scale landowners. The reforms also did away with the cleavage structure of land ownership. Subsequent to the reforms, many poor farmers began to participate in people's committee elections and poor farmers came to occupy seventy-seven percent of the Labor Party. The reforms also facilitated the general adoption of the people's democratic political system. As a result, the author concludes, the power structure in the Inje area introduced via land reform took the form of a "unified front."

In Eastern Europe, several states were founded under the influence of the Russian Revolution in 1917 that underwent radical and comprehensive land reforms. In many countries, this removed the legacy of land ownership and the heritage of feudalism. Yet the political institutions adopted in these countries on the basis of standardized hierarchy were those of a very mature parliamentary democracy rather than a one-party socialist regime. It is thought that countries in Eastern Europe were influenced by Weimar democracy, which was ostensibly more democratic and mature, transcending the past counter-revolutionary and conservative bureaucracy of Prussia.

To what degree did North Korea carry out land reform compared with these Eastern European cases? While this question cannot be addressed within the confines of this brief review, it is fairly clear that North Korea endeavored to establish a people's democratic one-party system and a popular-front style socialist state based on the North Korean Labor Party largely composed of poor farmers, not laborers.

IV. The Characteristics and Results of Transition to the South Korean System

A power restructuring occurred with the transition to the South Korean system. After the 1950-53 Korean War, the Inje area fell under the jurisdiction of the ROK in 1954 following the transfer of administrative rights from the US military government to the South Korean government. Since the land ownership structure was shaken as a result of the war, social conflict emerged; there was no established principle of ownership. As had occurred with the transition from colonial rule, when the existing landlords resumed ownership of the land, the Rhee Syngman administration expanded the South Korean legal system without acknowledging the ownership status of the previous order. This meant the purchasing of farmland from landowners and distributing of lands to convert tenant farmers (land) into independent farmers (industrial capitalists). In 1958, however, new land reform was carried out in a highly qualified manner mainly targeting absentee landlords. But such lax reforms failed to dismantle the sense and culture of land ownership and establish stability for postwar farmers.

After the land reform, a new political power structure in the region was formed. The reorganization process had begun amid the Korean War under the influence of military forces, with army units and military officers then comprising fifty to eighty percent of the population in the region. Administration was generally composed of those who had served in the executive branch of the military government or former

bureaucratic elites of the Japanese colonial era. While majors were recruited from among those born south of the 38th parallel, village chiefs were recruited from among those native to the North. Labour Party organizations disappeared and the ruling and opposition party organizations moved in. Since 1958, however, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has remained dominant over the Democratic Party, with Liberal party candidates consistently elected under the influence of military officers, conservative paramilitary groups, and bureaucrats. As well, the influence of anti-Communism groups, including the Korean Youth Corps, was very strong.

While the journey to the North Korean People's democratic system from Japanese colonial rule exhibited some plainly intelligible characteristics, incorporation into the South Korean system was more complex. Although the author presents a persuasive analysis, the process did not consist of a simple transition from the North Korean regime to the South Korean capitalist system. In other words, the transition may also be interpreted as a temporary and exceptional political order that operated in the middle of the Korean War.

V. The Multiple-division System in the Reclaimed Area

The book presents an excellent analysis of the contrasting nature of the overlapping rules of the Japanese, US military, North Korea, and South Korea. Few studies have attempted to trace this long-run transition process. On the one hand, the author appears to view this process as a transition from the North Korean people's democracy system to the South Korean capitalist system. On the other hand, as suggested above, the task remains of elucidating a more precise understanding of this process in the East Asian context compared with the Eastern European context, in which an advanced socialist system transformed into an advanced capitalist market system.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to refute the author's conclusions. Highlighting the perspective of local Inje residents, she states the following:

The experience of the Reclaimed Area shows us what would happen if the unification of the two Koreas proceeded unilaterally. We need to realize the importance of mutual respect and systematic preparation for unification. When we understand the macro process of transition from the perspective of the local population, the "Reclaimed Area" could become a source of wisdom enabling us to change the boundary of the divided peninsula into a test area for unification in the future. (8)

This is the valuable wisdom the author uncovers through local history.