

Taking another Look at Land Reform in South Korea: A Focus on Kinship Networks

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Two of the most important events in South Korea of the 1950s were clearly the Korean War and the land reform. The South Korean land reform is commonly evaluated as having established the foundation for the capitalist development of South Korea through its dismantling of the landlord system and the creation of a system based on independent farmers. To date, a number of economics-based case studies of the land reform have been carried out. Such studies, however, have rested on a methodological presumption of individualism that risks overlooking the more complex network of social relationships that typified the daily lives of farmers, and which influenced the process of land reform. This article aims to analyze the South Korean land reform by focusing on a region called Chilliansok, part of Jangheung-gun's Yongsan-myeon in Jeollanam-do, and a place where the system of traditional authority continued to exert a tangible influence for years after national liberation. It demonstrates that in the case of Chilliansok, those who had been traditionally marginalized in the local society took advantage of the opportunities offered by the land reform to increase their land holdings and status. However, the institutional limitations of that land reform—namely the small size of distributed land plots—meant that true economic independence still eluded them. Ultimately, it was the “leading families” of the region who were able to mobilize their more established and powerful kinship and power networks in transactions of land outside of the land reform to strengthen their position relative to the ordinary and more marginalized families. Without such traditional networks, the “ordinary families” had a more difficult time in reaping the benefits of the land reform. Unable to sustain their livelihoods, the last resort for many marginalized rural households was to move out of the countryside.

Keywords: land reform, kinship network, traditional authority, structure of land ownership, small-scale farmer

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