

Rural Development: *Lessons from the Liberalization of Korean Trade**

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Abstract

With strong government thrusts toward agricultural trade liberalization to increase high-tech export volume, South Korea's rural communities have had to brace for significant adjustments brought about by agrarian modernization. Rural "development" of the past few decades has failed to restructure the farming sector for international competition, largely due to favoritism toward big corporations and ineffective government policies characterized by top-down management and minimal communication efforts. Following such shortcomings, the considerable reduction in the number of farms and a widespread realization that reform has to come "organically" from within organized rural communities, rather than imposed by development, this paper argues for possible change through human agency and shows how one community is tackling "self-reform" toward a more sustainable life in a globalizing rural area, while trying to dodge the global reflexes from overemphasized modernity.

Keywords: rural reform, rice, family farming, cooperative pooling, agricultural autonomy, trade liberalization, KORUS FTA, land issues, democracy, reflexive modernity

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Introduction

The ambivalences of current circumstances in rural South Korea indicate profound changes in the making. Governmental policies driven by market fundamentalism have favored large farms while ignoring small farms. Life conditions for the mostly elderly smallholders have deteriorated. Many young people, particularly women, have chosen to move to the cities in search of more opportunity and a higher standard of living. Other young families have returned to the countryside due to diminished prospects and an underlying sense of urban disillusionment. At the same time, the number of foreign women living in rural areas has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. These are mostly immigrants from other Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, and the Philippines who have married Korean farmers. A contrast can also be seen in the older generation of farmers who continue to use chemical fertilizer, compared to a new, younger generation whose members embrace organic farming with a strong awareness of a changing market and a healthier future for their children. While many of the former try to keep their autonomous entrepreneur status, the latter increasingly engage in cost-benefit pooling organizations.

High rates of Internet use is now common in the farming sector, but at the same time, quite a few elderly farmers are living in greenhouses alongside their crops for lack of proper housing. Simultaneously, small numbers of highly educated, young, urban workers are returning to the countryside as part of the *gwinong undong* (back-to-the-land movement).¹ Although there are no hard numbers, this

1. This movement was triggered by the harsh economic repercussions of the 1997 IMF crisis, after which many disillusioned, largely Buddhist urbanites started to develop ideas, plans, and dreams of life in the countryside. Meanwhile, in tandem with the “well-being” movement and other alternative living groups, a new awareness of “true life” instigated start-ups in alternative industries, green university programs, farm job search engines, renewable energy education, international food autonomy solidarity campaigns, vocational training for adult farmers, green real estate developing, Buddhist Arguenon seminars to reinstate a green impetus to leading a life in harmony with nature, and other ideas to create a “new culture for green peasant life” (e.g., see www.refarm.org; www.fulssi.or.kr; [\[www.kci.go.kr\]\(http://www.kci.go.kr\)](http://www.energyvi-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

movement gradually surfaced as the IMF crisis of 1997 caused growing unemployment in the cities. Nostalgia for Korea's agrarian past has waxed and waned, twice accompanied (if not triggered by) cinematic blockbusters,² as have economic hardships. Perhaps due to the realization that golden city dreams still bypass most mortals, the urbanite's view of the farmer's social status seems to have entered an overdue transformation, from tenacious social disregard to greater acceptance.

Ambivalent generational differences also are apparent in second-tier politics. The last remnants of old-style top-down hierarchical politicians are juxtaposed with a newer brand of democratically more conscious, lateral communicators who promise to carry out public responsibilities with more transparency and increased local representation. Finally, there have been changes in local and global macroeconomics, with a drift away from the market-orthodox approach of relentless "free" trade at any price toward a more comprehensive approach to global trade with renewed, genuine interest in farming and traditions, as well as in the protection of and respect for the livelihoods of rural workers.

The data for this article comes from qualitative anthropological fieldwork in three of Korea's main agricultural provinces: Gyeonggi-do, Jeollanam-do, and Gyeongsangnam-do provinces. Following pilot studies over three, three-month-long periods of study in 2000, 2001, and 2002, full-time research was conducted from 2006-2008, with periods of language study in Seoul in 1999 and 2004. With a specific focus on the cultural contexts of rice farming in Gyeongsangnam-do,

sion.org; www.enet.or.kr, etc.).

2. In 1994, the film *Seopyeonje* unexpectedly became one of Korea's greatest cinematic successes. Viewers related to feelings of nostalgia triggered by the film's dramatic ability to stage a post-Korean War rural context for *pansori*, a form of epic opera that occupies a high status in traditional Korean culture. Recently, a similarly unexpected success and avalanche of feelings was attributed to the low-budget documentary, *Wonangsori* (Old Partner), a 2009 release that chronicles the last days in the life of a forty-year-old cow and an eighty-two-year-old farmer to whom she belongs.

Gyeongsangbuk-do, and Jeollanam-do provinces, data was collected through formal and informal interviews with individuals and focus groups, participant observation, and intense media investigation. As Koreans focused intently on media coverage of trade negotiations between Korea and the United States, in which rice played a crucial role (KORUS FTA, July 2006–April 2007), a major goal of my research was to document real-life aspects of rice farming and farmers' immediate reactions to the controversial negotiations.

During this phase I used rice as a gauge to monitor certain behaviors of the Korean people, i.e., actions, reactions, meanings, irrationalities, hopes expressed, etc., regarding their staple food. As a particular material “thing” such as rice can take powerful symbolic stances for several other things (Turner 1976), I wanted to get a grip on the “meanings of rice” and have these meanings “measured” against several concepts that they represent, according to Koreans: culture, heritage, and identity in general, but also aspects of food, health, regeneration, ancestors, religion, politics, and economics. As these particulars of rice are being analyzed for a more comprehensive exposition, the KORUS (KOR-U.S.) negotiations led to a separate data cluster that I will examine in this essay.

Revealing the Local Entangled with the Global

Main issues in the public media and academic literature regarding rural development vis-à-vis the KORUS and subsequent FTAs have been floating between farmers and politicians as general policy topics that suffer from insufficient communication and feedback. A large group of media-invited government experts, most with U.S. MBAs, spilled an endless array of incomprehensible FTA topics into farmers' living rooms during the FTA negotiation period. Farmers were largely left on their own to make sense of complex issues such as “import restrictions and free market orientation,” “structural adjustment,” “food autonomy,” “off-farm employment opportunities,” “fixity-factors of land availability,” “inflexible power structures of farmers'

unions and organizations,” “reduction of farm policy-dependency groups,” and “better price advantage and product choice for consumers.”

Only four percent of the rice in Korea is imported, which has drawn vehement protests, especially from potential American importers. As rice is Korea’s last bastion of food autonomy, with 97 percent import-protected self-sufficiency, American rice lobbyists’ idea of “free” market is unrestricted market access and unregulated consumption, despite their own government’s heavy subsidies for rice production. One main protest of potential importers has been that the Korean government has managed to keep rice imports from landing on market shelves. Instead, to keep the public from purchasing foreign rice, the small amount of imported rice has ended up in pet foods and cosmetics.³

Blatantly disregarding Korea’s food autonomy and traditional livelihood, economic experts oriented toward WTO goals have called for structural adjustment. Rural populations have been encouraged, coaxed, and forced to restructure under ideological principles of a self-regulating global “free” market, in which small farms enjoy no freedom of existence. Ironically, the latter play a significant social safety-net role by providing food autonomy to extended family households with below-average annual incomes. The dictates of WTO rules, according to farmers’ interpretations, hold that their state must not extend subsidies to farms, notwithstanding the artificial creation of advantageous scenarios for corporations.

A lack of positive considerations in such policies becomes evident when market rule is given free rein over investor-unfriendly farm union power and farm-dependent citizens in shortening the trial period of alternative options and shrinking vital traditional economic sectors. Instead, WTO-initiated goals taken on by the Korean government suggest a shift from small farms to small factories to increase rural off-farm employment, despite food self-sufficiency of approxi-

3. Refer to Reinschmidt (2003, 509).

mately 50 percent since 1999, down from 80 percent in 1970. Repeated government efforts to boost food autonomy have failed. In an unscrupulous twist for “food domesticity,” Daewoo Logistics Corporation recently made headlines by engaging in agricultural “land-grab” efforts in Madagascar and the Philippines. According to the United Nations, the *jaebeol* (Korean conglomerates) tried to buy huge tracts of arable land in a neocolonial manner that would have pushed residents of those nations into the same food deficits that Korea now faces. The Korean government backed Daewoo’s attempt as an inexpensive new strategy to address its own failures at boosting food self-sufficiency on domestic soil.⁴

The food autonomy and off-farm employment problem has led not only researchers but all vested parties to the chronic problem of arable land availability vis-à-vis land-price affordability and zone restrictions. According to Lee Jin-Soo (1996, 13-20), Korea’s land problems are unparalleled in the world. Overpopulation, a shrinking agricultural base, high urban concentration, excessive land-price inflation, lingering landlordism, inefficient taxation, and failed land reforms account for this state of crisis since the 1970s. Such chronic inequity can be best recognized in the land prices for Korea’s 12 largest cities, which increased a staggering 791 times between 1962 and 1993 for a compound average annual growth of 21.5 percent. This explains the tenacity of the few wealthy landowners who have successfully fought changes to keep land value returns high. The public sector owns 23.3 percent of Korea’s land, and corporations own 4.1 percent. By the mid-1990s, 66 percent of Korea’s land was owned by some 10.1 million private individuals. Of that land, 77 percent is shared among a million or so wealthy landowners for whom there is little incentive to let go of holdings and instead invest in securities. Living off their farmlands, they maintain well-established insider connections from which they can access crucial funding for more land as well as information about governmental development

4. APN (2000, 2004); see discussions in Blas (2008), JAI (2008), BBC (2009), and FDII (2009).

plans. Such scheming has resulted in large fortunes for a few and in the impossibility of access to land for others (Lee J. 1996).

Off-farm employment, highly desired by a government intent on streamlining and branding the country on a global scale, can largely be created through small and medium-sized factory investment in the countryside. Land thus secured for large buildings and parking lots is no longer available to willing young farmers such as the *gwinong* returnees. Ancestral graves have been moved as well to provide land for rural light industry. A complicated system of land-use rules, land-price categories, and land-ownership laws, on top of traditional land grids and the natural topography, makes it difficult for farmers to expand their land operations, despite government attempts to reduce its own entanglement with red tape and landlords (Ro 1996; Kim S. 1999; KNSO 2007, 40-42).

Of Hub Zones, Swine Herds, and Global Elites: Space for Farmers to Breathe in Between?

The Korean government is driving a hard bargain to become a North-east Asian “business hub” by inviting foreign companies with tax-free havens called “Free Economic Zones” (FEZ), a “freedom” bought at the expense of local farming, the public land sector, and high food transportation costs for consumers. According to activists, these hub zones are a further liability to land constraints and food autonomy. FEZs are huge tracts of land severed from the Korean territory to be developed into “creative enclaves.” According to the government, FEZs will provide “optimal environments” with “cutting-edge facilities” to foreign corporate communities, thriving as independent social, linguistic, and institutional entities.

Current FEZ construction can be found in Incheon (completion expected in 2020, offering an area of 209 km²), Busan/Jinhae (2020, 104 km²), Gwangyang Bay (2020, 90 km²), Yellow Sea (2025, 55 km²), Daegu (2025, 39 km²), and Saemangeum/Gunsan (2030, 66 km²). Local multiyear protests have been documented in unofficial

makeshift museums, private and public archives, award-winning documentaries, and in recorded narratives of affected local farmers and fishermen. These reveal a government establishment consisting of both conservative and progressive administrations tightly entangled in the structures of global economics, commerce, and free-market capitalist ideology.⁵ During the KORUS negotiation period, younger farmers challenged the “globalized elite” (Berger 2001). Farmers re-interpreted economists’ calls for “international competitiveness” through their own filter of the requirements of working farms. References to daily farm needs and practices are ubiquitous. Through what they see as a proven failure of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), farmers refocus on village and countryside integration, adopting a common sense approach to local sustainability. Key issues that were “scandalously” not explained by politicians and the media include “the meaning of agrichemical overapplication in one of the most oil-import dependent and small land-base economies of the world”; “market distortions through heavy state subsidies for agriculture in Europe and America”; “deregulated flows of global finance”; “chaotic fluctuations of international investment capital”; and “monopolization of agro-commodity industries.”

To the dismay of the Ministry of Agriculture’s Rural Development Agency (RDA), it has been difficult to wean older farmers off excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides. According to officials, however, younger farmers are more aware of what is at stake if use of heavy agrichemicals continues unchecked. Increasing organic market prospects have encouraged gradual change toward a more responsible use of chemicals. Also, there have been successful tests of the possibility to export organic produce to Europe and America, despite those governments’ infusions of huge sums of market-distorting farm subsidies. This is a contentious issue among Korean farmers because

5. From a government webpage titled “Land of Opportunities—Free Economic Zones” at http://www.fez.go.kr/_html/fez_eng/whats_fez.jsp#go1. See also http://www.krei.re.kr/eng/statistics/basic_farming.php.

they have no control over the manipulated market, which they feel they could enter as international equals if other nations ceased subsidizing their own agriculture. Much of this anger is directed at the WTO, which farmers view as scolding the Korean government for its farm subsidization efforts, while proving powerless to enforce its rules in Europe and America.

Agricultural produce price fluctuations are a constant head-ache for farmers. They associate them with the erratic flow of global investments, which rushes funds from one location to another without any consideration for local concerns. The uncurbed havoc they can stir was likened, by one discussant, to driving a “herd of swine into the abyss.” Distressed by the food price crisis in 2007-2008, Korean farmers once again looked for leadership from government and farm cooperatives.

Since its inception in 1961, the National Agricultural Cooperation Federation (NACF) or Nonghyeop, has grown into Korea’s largest and the world’s second largest agro-commodity cooperative, an entity so large that many member farmers have lost confidence in its ability to adequately represent their interests. Unable to curb its ongoing corruption cases, Nonghyeop has become widely unpopular even among farmers. At one end of Nonghyeop’s operational spectrum, it must cater to local farm needs, while at its global end, huge financial assets (US\$200 billion in 2005 with over 4,000 local branches) could easily spill into investments that might be counterproductive to the interests of farmers (Reinschmidt 2007, 103).

Nonghyeop’s self-prescribed restructuring process (to be completed in 2017) seems to relieve the organization of its moral obligation to farmers, which is why Nonghyeop and the government encourage the formation of new cooperatives conceptualized as “pooling groups” (*jangmok ban*, literally “crop group”) that will allow farmers to take a detailed approach to their own productivity under new scenarios of local market reality and virtuality, global opportunity monitoring, transnational farm worker migration, and the modification of financial and IT products for specific agricultural purposes.

Noticing situations of decay in the countryside, concerned Koreans, as well as citizens in other countries, have asked why the government is not pursuing genuine rural interests. It's the wrong question to ask once a country has joined globalization organizations such as the IMF, WTO, and OECD. According to Berger (2001, 152-159), cultural globalization is mainly carried by business culture, the internationalization of higher education, the spread of popular culture, and the culture of evangelicalism. All four areas are dependent on the use of the English language, which is now readily spoken by elites and aspiring elites around the world. Berger notes:

While cultural globalization [CG] facilitates interaction between elites, it creates difficulties between these elites and the non-elite populations with whom they must deal. Many moral and ideological conflicts in contemporary societies pit an elite culture against a resentful mass of culturally accredited and economically underprivileged people. . . . If this [elite] culture internationalizes the Western intelligentsia, it also internationalizes the conflicts in which this intelligentsia has been engaged on its home territories. . . . [CG] is centered as much in Tokyo and Singapore as it is in New York and London. One could more plausibly speak of an imperialism of the global capitalist system . . . an immensely powerful global reality (Berger 2001, 152-159).

Korea's Strong Commitment to Globalization

After Korea's first democratic elections in 1992, following more than 30 years of dictatorship, its new leader, Kim Young-Sam, committed the country to becoming a strong player in globalization (*seggyehwa*). Conflicting issues of local agricultural versus global commercial interests found their way onto official as well as secret agendas since the late 1980s, when first called for by the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture (URAA 1986-1994). Concluded in 1994, URAA stipulations led to and were reinforced by the 1995 inauguration of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Korean government's signing of

the Agreement on Agriculture (AOA) in 1995. The AOA is a WTO-policy framework that enforces the elimination of trade quotas among “third world” countries. Its initial terms were to stay in effect until 2001 for developed countries and until 2005 for developing countries. Within these agreements, Korea’s agricultural development status is “ambiguous” (Schusky 1984; Burmeister 1990, 1992; Choi and Sumner 2000; Sumner and Lee 2000; Beghin, Bureau, and Park 2001; Diao et al. 2002; Diao, Roe, and Somwaru 2002; Lee and Kim 2003).

Especially since 1995, WTO and OECD member countries have repeatedly disapproved of Korea’s efforts to take advantage of global high-tech export opportunities while sealing its own markets with high tariffs on other countries’ food. By claiming that its agriculture is at the equivalent level of developing countries, despite its high-tech industries, Korea has been able to protect several of its sensitive agro-products. Among these, rice is the most prominent, with tariffs remaining solid and only the minimum market access of four percent provided to foreign imports until 2004. In the 2007 KORUS FTA negotiations, rice was granted another ten-year grace period during which cultivation methods and conditions are to be brought up to par with international competitors. During the same period, Korean farm sector representatives, along with agro-politicians from other “third world” agro-status countries, hoped to successfully apply pressure to help change policies on heavy farm subsidies in Europe and the United States. But the discrepancy between high export volumes for technology and restricted markets for agricultural products has put the Korean nation in a dilemma, poised between the passion for its now-vulnerable agricultural heritage and its ambitions to become a powerful global economic player (Choi and Sumner 2000; Kim and Lee 2003; Minns 2006).

South Korea has often been criticized for and not fully understood in its rural “adjustment problems” of the past few decades. Grave examples of miscommunication piling up before a mountain of historic “transparency problems” reach back into the Joseon dynasty and Japanese colonization periods, but culminated in Korea’s “Era of the Generals” (1961-1992). The needs and current merits of an

export-driven economy were propagandized to garner voluntary national support, but were not explained or communicated. Through the 1970s and 1980s, well-known slogans such as *suchul ipguk* (“exports build the nation”) and *sinto buri* (figuratively meaning “Buy Korean!”) encouraged laborers and farmers to roll up their sleeves for exports, open their wallets only for protected domestically made goods, and eat the foods that the government cheaply sluiced onto family tables and into workers’ lunch boxes (Reinschmidt 2007).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, *sintoburi* was a widely popularized watchword meaning “human bodies spring up from domestic soil, and therefore only buy homegrown foods/products!” By 1997, there were 2,830 *Sintoburi* stores nationwide operated by the powerful Nonghyeop cooperative. But the detrimental effects of an industrializing economy steered by hasty dirigiste policies on a developmentally deemphasized farm sector had to be discovered by farmers themselves. When this realization occurred, their options of dissent against oppressive regimes had already been curtailed (Abelmann 1996, 1997). In the mechanisms of state command, as one researcher notes, “cooperation meant following government economic strategy, and allowing the generals and former generals to keep control” (Minns 2006, 145; see also NACF 1998, 65).

Sometimes, when the Korean government tried to genuinely represent its rice farmers during WTO negotiations by supporting both free trade and agricultural protectionism, it had to walk a public relations tightrope. Otherwise, its actions or intentions can be negatively interpreted by both farmers and/or industrialists. Thus, the government appears in a favorable light among farmers when even its adversaries testify to the hard line it has pursued on behalf of Korean agriculture during trade negotiations. As U.S. chief negotiator Wendy Cutler noted at the end of the 2006-07 KORUS negotiations, “We [the American side] were basically faced with a very tough decision: to walk away from a very good agreement without rice or to go ahead and conclude the agreement recognizing that one product would be excluded. . . . They [the Korean negotiators] made clear they weren’t going to put rice in the agreement, and if that meant we wouldn’t

have an agreement, so be it.”⁶

There are other instances in which Korea has indicated that it will protect its agriculture whenever opportunities to do so open up and the interests of export expansion are not infringed upon. Instead of wholeheartedly embracing WTO measures toward lifting agricultural trade barriers, for example, Korea has taken the helm of a WTO member coalition of developing countries that posit, “Free trade is not a guarantee of reliable access to cheap food under all conditions” (Beghin, Bureau, and Park 2001). WTO countries of the “Group of 33,” including Korea, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Peru, Venezuela, and India, insist on food security based on subsidized food self-sufficiency, although global trade mathematics reveal this stance carries a hefty penalty for customers and taxpayers, including regular American and European consumer-taxpayers (Beghin, Bureau, and Park 2001, 2; Diao et al. 2002; Diao, Roe, and Somwaru 2002).

If this is so, why did millions of Koreans demonstrate in support of import restrictions that counterproductively impacted their own wallets during the early 1990s, and again from 2006-2008? How far does solidarity with rural populations go in Korea? Responding to critiques of the massive anti-U.S.-beef imports that included 100 major rallies alone between May 24 and August 15, 2008, and a four-month candlelight vigil, a high-ranking representative of the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) went so far as to suggest the “impossibility” of comprehending this phenomenon: “Koreans harbor special feelings about beef and rice which cannot be explained by science. I hope Americans can understand this.”⁷ The upheavals surrounding U.S. beef and rice imports go back to the 1990s and have caused several trade stalemates, thus underlining the necessity of serious efforts

6. Cutler, U.S. chief negotiator for the KORUS FTA negotiations, on rice as the last-minute deal breaker/maker of a year’s worth of talks. “Korea Barred Rice from Pact: USTR Cutler,” *Korea Herald*, April 13, 2007.

7. National Assembly Representative and Grand National Party leader Kang Jae-Sup, quoted in Hwang Jang-Jin, “Seoul Tells Envoys to Watch Mouths,” *Korea Herald*, June 6, 2008. Accessed at www.koreaherald.ac.kr.

to understand this “mysterious impossibility.”⁸

Theoretical Considerations

Economic anthropologists with cultural relativist leanings hypothesize that the ability to make a living relies on culture-specific methods of socioeconomic reproduction, which differ from culture to culture. One century after Marx, Karl Polanyi (1944) reiterated that in many non-Western cultures, the economy is embedded in the structures of kinship, religion, or other sociocultural relationships and not only in the institutions of the market, as has been the case in the West, according to Adam Smith (1723-1790) (Polanyi 1944; Galbraith 1952; North 2005).

Cultural relativist approaches, in essence, try to follow “native maps” in economics to find specific value assignments for exchanges of property, labor, favors, money, gifts, food, etc., by letting people guide the researcher into their own mindset of what accounts for a successful livelihood that is socially, culturally, and ecologically contextualized.⁹ Korea, for example, has a large number of interesting practical concepts for value equivalents in traditional agriculture, including mutual aid concepts such as *dure* (reciprocal community labor), *pumasi* (mutual neighborly aid), *gye* (mutual financial aid), and *hyangyak* (social village conduct).¹⁰ As I will show later, these traditions are by no means stagnant or passé, and still powerfully serve the needs of communities today. Traditions serve as a strong cultural basis where the global trade of agricultural goods has been vehemently rejected because current “free” market negotiation ideology, if not corrected, will not solve the problems of national food dependence and loss of rural food-production capacity. The advan-

8. Refer to Bak (1997), Reinschmidt (2003), and Hahm (2005).

9. Refer to Malinowski (1922/1984), Mauss (1923/1990), Rappaport (1984), and Weismantle (1988).

10. Refer to Lee K. (1987, 1997).

tage of cultural anthropology is that it offers a relativist method permitting interpretation on an *emic* as well as *etic* level, providing for objectivity in between. Local perspectives are given “cultural property rights” to represent themselves un-segmented and unfiltered in the constructions, narratives, and imaginations as the “cultural artifacts of a particular kind” of their communities (Geertz 1973; Anderson 1983, 4; Gudeman 1986; Plattner 1994; Wilk 1996; Brown 1998; Leach and Fairhead 2002).

In the Korean consciousness, rice as a symbol of extreme importance among eminent cultural symbols has repeatedly been pitted against the influx of what farmers interpret as “fleeting” capitalist interests. While global free trade theory has had its “modern” victories since 1947, Korea has become an interesting reality check for what some Korean farmers deem a “WTO utopia.” Thus, with ongoing uncertainty, confusion, and attempts at top-down pressure since the 1990s, “organic” social dynamics have brought to the fore some interesting rural strains of “organic intellectualism” (Gramsci).

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) describes an “organic intellectual” as an organically grown leader and organizer with a “local consciousness” (Forgacs 2000, 201-204, 425-429). He or she is able to use the language of rural people, subcultures, and lower classes eloquently (Entwistle 1979, 71) to express the feelings of wide social groupings that usually cannot express themselves against traditional intelligentsia of the existing “hegemonic structure” (i.e., scientists, journalists, politicians, lawyers, priests, etc.). Both organic and establishment intellectuals enter the struggle over political and economic production. While Gramsci never demanded a dismissal of traditions, he rejects school systems as “prematurely life-foreclosing venues” that indoctrinate state order (Entwistle 1979, 19). Instead he envisions deliberate autodidacticism for the conscious adult to intervene in bureaucratic domination on behalf of the young and guide them toward the “maximum possible enlargement of cultural horizons” (Entwistle 1979, 70). His adult-educational ideal in which “bicultural” organic intellectuals play informed roles as catalysts between sub- and mainstream cultures came to the test in Turin after WWI, when

so-called Factory Councils composed of organic intellectuals educated workers on the individual and formal group level in philosophy, politics, and journalism, as well as fostering capacity in their chosen vocational fields. Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual thus underscores his view that "counterhegemonic activity must be educational and not simply an attempt at forcible replacement of the capitalist class" (Entwistle 1979, 148).

Although capitalist classes never have been seriously undermined by organic intellectualism, Gramsci's ideas have found similar-minded counterhegemonic appropriations of self-empowerment in various societies. Other complementary examples from around the world include a social-democracy-inspired cohesive adult educational and vocational system in Germany, the GI Bill in the United States that enables adults to return to school after military or civilian service, and African ethnophilosophical adult schooling that facilitates retention of traditional knowledge and progression toward individual and community empowerment. Gramsci's "organic intellectual" thus provided an important model for leadership development and creative "self-finding" in many democracies of the twentieth century.

The decisive role that 1980s Korean intellectuals played in kindling organic intellectualism for the causes of democracy has been an interesting and widely studied case¹¹ The counterhegemonic *minjung undong* (people's movement) infiltrated vast segments of society in education, religion, arts, and labor. Artists, students, and members of diverse religious groups penetrated society through schools, factories, parishes, and homes at the risk of being persecuted in order to instill historic self-reflection and reconnection with the struggle of earlier generations of Koreans against exploitation. *Minjung hakchul* ("students-turned-workers") guided farmers and workers to take up self-determined education, expressive creativity, and possibly civil disobedience.¹² With the achievement of democracy between 1987 and 1992, Koreans left the *minjung* movement behind as they enjoyed

11. Refer to Wells (1995), Abelmann (1996), and Koo (2001).

12. See Wells (1995) and Koo (2001).

their newly gained “modern” lives. *Minjung*’s counterhegemonic legacy, however, remains a local influence alongside parallel global experiences, such as global trade, eco-environmentalism, mass transportation, and cyber culture, that Koreans now share with international fellow citizens. The successful struggle for democracy and progress, however, is now bringing unanticipated challenges to the Korean consciousness, such as under- and unemployment in an overcrowded yet highly educated society, domestic energy and food deficits, global warming, or as in the case of rural Korea, a significant loss of farming communities. This leads to the question of Korea’s cherished modernity vis-à-vis its persistent traditions.

Korea has been described as a country where the gap between tradition and modernity remains narrow due to rapid industrialization and latecomer status in “high modernity” (e.g., membership in the WTO, OECD, etc.). The empiricism of organic intellectualism later described in my fieldwork section suggests that the narrowness of this gap might constitute a blessing in disguise. The ability to bridge the gap could mean avoiding the problems of absolute “high modernization” (Giddens 1990) and that reshaping traditional practices can be achieved more easily than in the West where the gap has grown to a seemingly unbridgeable abyss. Progress forward from modernity, according to Beck, is tenacious, which is why the iniquities of perfection-seeking Western modernity have been haunting the West in a troublesome “second” or “reflexive modernity” since the 1970s (Beck 1992).

Second modernity describes the paralysis of capitalism, the infarct of the nation-state, confusion of the political will, congestion of high modern infrastructure and institutions, and the expectation that nature can provide and protect forever. The flow of “primary modern energy” is now returning and acting upon us as a powerful “reflex” on an “unaware” society through outgrowths of “unintended consequences” (Beck et al. 1994, viii). “Reflexive modernization” means the possibility of a “creative” (self-)destruction of the entire industrial society epoch. The “subject” of this creative destruction is not the revolution nor the crisis, but the victory of Western modern-

ization (Beck et al. 1994, 2). The more modern a society becomes, the more unintended consequences it produces, and as these become known and acknowledged, they call the foundations of industrial modernization into question (Beck 1992, 117). The curriculum of traditional learning has not been entirely forgotten by Koreans who are divided into two groups: communities of reflexive modernization (urbanites struck by the reflexes of primary modernity) and communities of countermodernity (e.g., those still farming, keeping horticulture gardens, maintaining *gye*, and practicing the already mentioned *dure*, *pumasi*, and *hyangyak*). Traditions in Korea can still be recalled, revived, and inspired, most likely by energetic middle-aged persons, ideally Gramsci's organic intellectuals, who are standing in the middle of the bridge across the mentioned gap.

Perhaps Gramsci's "organic intellectual" has become Giddens' "reflexive citizen" (Beck 1992, 114), i.e., a person imbued with ideas of equality, reciprocity, and substantiation, but no longer the self-centered individual of the modern West. In my fieldwork narrative, individual and community strategies are shown to correspond with "countermodern" actions (Beck 1992, 132): pursuing autonomous, decentralized, and horizontal-communicative communities based on coexisting traditional *and* contemporary premises. Members are encouraged and expect to be treated as equals both intracommunally and between their localities and the centers of power. If primary modernity's unintended consequences for life in second modernity are to be avoided, the solution must come not only from counter-hegemonic but also from *countermodern* approaches that tackle our time's uncertainties, inflexibilities, and infarctions by which we draw upon ourselves the wraths of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and globalization.

Because the latter three "worldviews" enjoy high currency in the world at large and especially in Korea, it is hard to imagine that traditions, of all things, could be perceived as a shield against second modernity's unintended consequences. In some parts of the world, traditions are often derided and their carriers seen as "backward." As reflexive modernization, according to my interpretation of Beck, has

no targets to attack in traditional society, I am using this concept to guard the tradition-prone community that I will introduce in the field-work documentation. They know nothing about my theoretical outline and have never heard of the thinkers behind it. All they know is they are a community strongly interested in rekindling “traditions next to modernity.” Thus to prevent careless criticism directed at the community (e.g., statements such as “a return to the old days would be naïve and regressive”), I needed a solid theory that introduces a reasonable understanding why a “forward thrust” to traditional concepts can be one of many potential alternatives by which to pass by and beyond the intricacies of first and second modernity.

A Whirlwind of Policies and New Policy Strategies

There have been many shifts in policy direction for rural development and structural adjustment in agriculture in South Korea (Ban et al. 1980; Kim and Lee 2003; Boyer and Ahn 1991, 29-32; Chung and Veeck 1999, 276). While some policies might work, according to informants, most policies since the 1990s are suspected to go against small-scale producers (Kim 1999). Since the 1990s, government policies have left no doubt that small-scale farming should be deemphasized while priority should be given to large-scale operations. Lack of transparency in rural policymaking, experienced during the totalitarian decades, has resulted in lingering suspicion among elder informants. They saw their hopes destroyed after the 1945 liberation in the failure to organize peasants into politically effective farmers in 1946, through the Korean War (1950–1953), a post-war land reform—geared toward the needs of small-holders—that did not produce hoped-for improvements, and the 1970s Saemaeul Undong (New Village Movement), which was mired in corruption and disillusionment due to tight top-down industrialization-style orders (Minns 2006, 141-147).

Erratic ministerial planning causes thousands of small-scale farmers to wonder what kinds of production directives, tax breaks, price fixing, and newfound land reforms the government will decide

for the next growing season. These seemingly arbitrary changes only exacerbate farmers' confusion. Instead of fully embracing modern but uncertain agricultural practices, small-scale farmers feel compelled to keep old skills and knowledge of manual cultivation methods alive as insurance against the uncertainties of the new systems. In many cases, elderly farmers stubbornly continue to grow rice on tiny plots, only to distribute it entirely among immediate and extended family members. By not counting the rice consumption of these families, statistics that say Korean rice is four times more expensive than foreign-grown rice are thus artificially inflated. For the government, however, this behavior is considered a headache because they see it as inefficiency caused by the "power of tradition."

Despite predictions of comparative advantages through the adoption of market-oriented agricultural production and trading methods that have been widely accepted by most farmers, WTO numbers have not yet been able to assuage even large-scale farmers' suspicions about the claimed "assured collective benefits" the global agro-trade is supposed to bring (Lee and Kim 2003). Hitherto unfulfilled promises of collective happiness have caused farming families to resort to what are, in their view, more tangible and sustainable alternative solutions. With price hikes in 2008 for oil, fertilizers, and food, as well as the beginning of the Wall Street crisis, Korean farmers conclude that someday soon, small paddies and horticulture gardens may function as proactive measures more effective than the aloof WTO planning in Geneva.

Learned farming behavior and traditional practices in Korean agricultural life have been repeatedly challenged over the past six decades, beginning with reconstruction after the Korean War (1950–1953), followed by mass migration from rural areas to urban centers (1960s). Dictatorial approaches (1960s–1980s) imposed radical policies on farmers, among which the New Village Movement in the 1970s was especially problematic. It ushered in Korea's state-coerced Green Revolution (1970s), which promoted the use of an unwanted rice variety called *tongilbyeo* ("unification rice") and caused an agriculture dependency on oil-based fertilizers and pesticides.

Korea's transition to democracy affected farmers through policy shifts away from an unsustainable Green Revolution to globalization and adjustment to new democratic realities, which required more creativity and entrepreneurial self-initiative from farmers (1990s). The government's final steps embracing globalization (*segyehwa*) in 1992 confronted unprepared farmers with the initial agricultural market openings stipulated by the URAA, then with the Asian financial crisis, and finally with a series of FTA agreements, in part emanating from the IMF-mandated bailout plan as a result of the Korean battle with the Asian Financial Crisis (1997). Until the global recession of 2008, this was the government's desired status quo and whether these plans will ultimately materialize remains unclear. From a farmer's perspective, it seems as if at each step of the way, before and after the beginning of the Uruguay Round (concluded in 1994), the government half-blindly accepted all foreign/global conditional strings attached to free trade in order to protect its *jaebeol's* access to export markets—a form of protectionism blindly ignoring farm needs. At each trade meeting, the government had to promise more and faster structural adjustment of the agriculture sector to retain its export quotas. Each time, these promises were stymied by macroeconomic growth priorities and agronomic top-down channels of one-way communication (Burmeister 1988, 98-132; Clifford 1998, 236-252). With regard to the “active roles” allegedly granted to farmers during the New Village Movement, Burmeister concluded that coaxing farmer consent for a project adverse to the environment and traditional cultivation methods (i.e., heavy use of agrichemicals and systematic destruction of heirloom rice varieties by the government's “rural guidance” workers) “is apparently a time-honored modus operandi in the Korean bureaucratic setting” (1988, 55-60). Twenty-five years of accusations that domestic farmers had been “unproductive” and “lazy” compared to their international colleagues did not contribute much to policy progress toward preparing them for full market liberalization.¹³

13. On the severity of farming-governmental communication impasses throughout and

Onward to New Cooperative Interests

The founding of small and “e-smart” cooperatives reflects new trends and local needs in relation to decisive global inroads. Imagining new cooperative structures with considerable “organic” resource input from rural communities during the 1990s, farmers have become more optimistic that there will be improvements from the current state of economic uncertainty, administrative arrogance, and rural decline. The first signs of this optimism appeared in 2005, when “farmer” Park Hong-Su joined Roh Moo-Hyun’s “participatory government” (*chamyeo jeongbu*) experiment as agricultural minister. Under Park, the ministry reiterated measures for rural communities to take up development initiatives on their own (*baljeon gyehoek*). Although *baljeon gyehoek* went further back than the Roh era, this time one could observe the changed policy attitudes of two consecutive liberal administrations take root as they refined entrepreneurial procedures and made them structurally irreversible. While farm realists never expected any wavering stances by Park against the government’s small-farm closure strategies, determined and promising midsize farmers were not excluded from what some agrarian observers call the “Kim D.J.-Roh M.H. agricultural revolution.”

In his town hall speeches in 2007, Park told farmers that measures of “synergy pooling” (*sineoji yeonhap* or *gongdong jageop*) could lift production and living conditions in the largest areas and population segments of the countryside. More government funding was set aside for cutting-edge cooperative proposals that would encourage competition in the agricultural community. His speeches were not characterized by a propagandistic tone that would have caused a return to old-guard political unity among farmers. Although he emphasized the new participatory spirit, there was leeway for

beyond the Saemaul Undong, see also Turner et al. (1993, 169-211); Jager (2003, ch. 5); and Abelmann (1996). For a wider perspective on the inferiorization of farmers and workers by way of systematic government ignorance, see the work of anthropologist Jane Schneider (2002, 64-85).

those still unconvinced or who had better ideas. The agricultural ministry's incentives (critics still see them as building blocks of free trade ideology) included measures to tap social capital, "organic talent," and local wisdom directly and "unfiltered" without any social control by Nonghyeop or regional political cadres. Park repeatedly used the phrase "put your heads together" during these town hall meetings, dubbed "Innovation Teaching Sessions" that filled auditoriums (Park, pers. comm.).

At these "enlightenment gatherings," he tried to disseminate the message that reform can come from within communities and can be backed by government as long as farmers present solid ideas that deserve his ministerial warranty. He remarked it was not enough anymore to work the fields during the day and sleep at night. While he did not criticize the farmers' ongoing anti-KORUS demonstrations, he challenged listeners with the idea that in this day and age, even hard choices can thrive in pursuit of reason in a complex world. One of his slogans was "Farmers need to stay up late to search for solutions by doing their homework, i.e., keep up with new developments, read about what works in foreign countries, get an idea about what projects could be good for the village, learn about computers, and then 'stick heads together' and cooperatively synergize for a successful project proposal." He promised his ministry would review these resultant proposals in consideration for possible funding.

During 2006 and 2007 Park repeatedly toured the countryside to promote these measures in the language of the people, at a time when the KORUS FTA negotiations and massive rallies against them were in full swing. He showed his and his government's presence and interest in rural issues when media coverage concentrated on the controversy over farmers and their aggressive anti-import rallies being staged across the country. At least during the session that I attended, farmers cherished Park's communication efforts especially because in his case, no hollow reelection promises had to be endured. Outside the town hall, they talked openly about how much he was liked and how they saw him as one of their own. Therefore, no one ever asked him a single question critical about import quotas, favorable *jaebeol* policy, or

the importance of small-scale farming for rural vitality (Park, pers. comm.).¹⁴

Success Envisioned in a Remote Village Community

In a farming community I will dub “*sangol*” (mountain village district), remote and different from the town where I met the minister, I observed a proposal that would be considered good according to the ministry’s guidelines. A group of young agriculturists who felt something was amiss in their area and lives gradually organized a small group of farmers to form an organic farming community. Work started in 1995 and has since been led by a rural community organizer who is also a dedicated organic farmer himself. First meeting him in 2006, I immediately thought he would qualify perfectly as the kind of “organic intellectual” that Gramsci envisioned. Instead of focusing on some abstract “rural development,” as the always absent government has done for decades, his approach has been a personally dedicated

14. For reasons of objectivity, it should be stated that past and present circumstances of regional favoritism, still deeply rooted in Korea, likely played into this meeting. Park comes from Gyeongsangnam-do province, where many of Korea’s presidents have hailed from. As a result, this region has traditionally seen considerable responses to lobbying efforts in Seoul, and in order to keep it that way, only silent banners were agreed upon to display protest. Nevertheless, Park’s critics declare the “liberal agricultural revolution” was a failure and are quick to point out his outspoken support of large-farm corporations such as NACF, and his neglect of small-farm federations such as the National Farmers’ League (NFL, Jeonguk Nongminhoe Chongyeonmaeng). Farm proponents and environmentalists decry the loss of farm land under former presidents Kim and Roh, as well as under the current president, Lee Myeong-Bak, in favor of industrial and recreational lands. They decry that “our land” (*uri nara*), even outside the cities, is increasingly burdened with roads, industrial plants, golf courses, airports, military bases, and racetracks for motor sports, instead of rice paddies, vegetable fields, orchards, and nurseries. These “developments,” in turn, are welcomed by rural development proponents, who point to the necessity of urban decentralization and significantly increased off-farm employment opportunities in the countryside, a measure that would help stop rural out-migration and thus help in balancing urbanization.

focus on rural community organization. He believes that a personally consistent engagement with the community will yield more effective restructuring results than administrative policies promulgated from the far-away capital.

In a complex, contested process lasting several years, he and his growing group brainstormed and refined their thoughts time and again, checked the lengthy government guidelines, became more organized, handpicked fresh consultants, sidelined those they distrusted, and presented a compelling agronomic investment grant proposal. As a result, they were awarded roughly US\$9 million in startup seed funds under a Ministry of Agriculture program called “Wide-Open Space Eco-friendly Agricultural Area Creation.” The government ordered that one-tenth of the amount had to be matched by the cooperative, according to one informant.

Only a few of the outstanding organizational problems can be mentioned here. First, cultural intricacies born of respect for senior experts had requested to devise a careful sidelining process of distrusted or inefficient consultants of the past in favor of innovative thinkers and practitioners who would really advance the project as envisioned. Second, although initially considered an easy task, it was difficult to raise the 10 percent matching funds. Third, it was difficult for the cooperative to find a trusted fund manager who could also function as a capable pooling coordinator for funds to be levied from members as well as for profits to be distributed back to them. None of the members felt qualified to handle such high responsibility. Although they managed to find funds for the first phase of facility construction, they are still looking for a competent cooperative director. Fourth, with new rice production facilities and an increasingly good reputation at stake, marketing has now crept up to first priority on the order of business to successfully release local rice products most profitably into the nation.

After years of organizing, village leaders came to a consensus to pursue organic rice production. Local officials often advertised the environmental cleanliness, beautifully terraced paddies (*gyedansik non*), and natural appeal of their area as a powerful marketing strate-

gy. Uncoordinated individual production efforts in the past had included chestnuts, mushrooms, and strawberries, as well as lots of “chemical rice.” By the early 2000s, they believed they had reached a clear vision of organic rice as the right product from the region. Over 85 percent of local farm activity is already concentrated in rice production, but this is expected to increase following facility construction completion in 2009. New structures include state-of-the-art dry-storage facilities to be added to an existing RPC mill (rice processing complex) in tandem with rice drying, hulling, and polishing. Although there were seventy-three private and 165 cooperative RPC units in Korea already in 1997, most of them processed rice grown with heavy doses of agrichemicals (NACF 1998, 63, 88).

Currently, there are about 350 households participating as core members in the organic rice cooperative, a substantive increase from the thirteen households that pioneered the co-op in 1995. The major economic activity in the *gun* (county) has been agriculture, dominated by rice production that is increasingly organic. The *eup* (administrative seat of a county) is the largest settlement in the county, with 2,917 households and a population of 6,665. The *eup*-township is about 30 to 45 minutes away from the villages, whose residents visit it for basic shopping. In 2008, the total population of the *gun* was 35,355 people living in 16,565 households. This *gun* consists of one *eup*, ten *myeon* (subcounty districts), 119 *ri* (hamlets) or *maeul* (villages), for a total of 285 county villages and/or townships (exact figures for the number of *maeul* remain contradictory according to official and oral sources). The *myeon* in question has 778 households (population 1,613), which form the human resources available to the *sangol* cooperative. A few of the 350 members maintain households in neighboring *myeon*.

The county economy largely caters to the needs of the surrounding agronomy, with small and medium-sized firms manufacturing or dealing in irrigation supply, light agrichemicals, agro-machinery, and plastic containers for farms and food plants. Additional small-scale productivity and trade is scattered across electronics, food processing, construction, toys, ceramics, flowers, and pharmaceuticals. As the

gateway to a major tourism area, this township also offers tourism activities including hiking, biking, fishing, rafting, kayaking, arts and crafts, farm and temple stays, culinary experiences, festivals, and country fairs, centering on traditional, natural, herbal, acupunctural, and general “well-being” medicine and traditions. A factor accounting for this well-developed infrastructure is the region’s solid educational and medical services. These features, plus the grant award, were the reasons for the “return to the land” by twelve families who relocated from several large cities and applied for cooperative memberships in the *sangol* recently. Villagers hailed the “return” of the newcomers as a major event, interpreting it as a sign for the success of the project and for the actual potential of the *gwinong* movement.

Rice and the New Market

Because of customer preference for organic rice, two favorably ranked strains have been chosen for *sangol*. They consist of the *akibare* variety introduced from Japan in 1969 (called *chucheongbyeo* in Korean) and its offspring, *yeongdeokbyeo*, which has become the focus of the operation. Both varieties adapt well to organic farming, feature decent cold and disease resistance, and have good palatable qualities, although they don’t belong in the luxury categories on shelves in high-end stores. *Yeongdeokbyeo* responds especially well to the climate and environmental stresses of the *sangol* region.¹⁵

Sangol cooperative members are determined not to dilute their condensed organic rice assets into the infamous mixed products of the past where sacks of rice contained varieties of different quality standards, indiscriminately thrown together. Only one local Nonghyeop center will exclusively purchase all of the area’s organically grown harvests before they are processed at the RPC mill in *sangol* village. Transportation costs can be reduced because a large part of the organ-

15. Molecular biologist Yi Gi-Hwan (YARI Rural Development Administration, Miryang City, Gyeongsangnam-do, South Korea), e-mail message to author, August 3, 2008.

ic rice will be absorbed by a new food processing component for alternative rice products and snacks. Also, an adjoining ranch will raise animals on organic feed cut from the huge straw volume expected after each harvest.

A new rice bran application will be used for organic fertilization, and mud snails (*dalpaengi*) will be used for weed destruction. An important economic debate held about ducklings resulted in a decision against their use. Ducklings have been used in several experimental growth seasons, but farmers decided in favor of the snails because they don't trample rice sprouts in the early growth period. New quality standards have been established for the purpose of creating an untarnished brand name for the envisioned organic product. This is a favored strategy because consumers increasingly prefer "brand rice" with a distinctive name or "value-added" production concept, especially organic rice.

The new, clean product has been called "grasshopper rice" (*met-tugi ssal*). Co-op members decided upon the grasshopper as a symbol that should resound recognizably as a "clean rice brand." The grasshopper, normally associated with the destructiveness of locusts in Asia, has now "returned to the land" that used to be uninhabitable for them because of the destruction introduced by the chemical Green Revolution. The product thus readily ties into concepts of *gwinong* by associating this rice region with the unsoiled, fresh nature to which animals and humans can return for new beginnings after the "false promises" of modernity, urbanity, and science have been exposed and proven "fruitless."

The reputation of *sangol* as an eco-friendly farming region has spread since completion of fieldwork in 2008. The province in which *sangol* is located is now disseminating its success story and is making plans to promote the eco-friendly concept among other villages. The province is leading the nation with 12 percent of its arable land reserved for organic production, *sangol* being the leader in organic rice production among all the *myeon* surveyed by the provincial government. It is now hoped that *sangol* can become an agricultural and cultural model for the global village. This, however, is clearly more

the product of wishful thinking among eager local politicians than the end objective of down-to-earth cooperative members.

One way to establish a reputation as a good rice brand is not only to earn a nod from the government but also to get serious about organic product quality control through the introduction of independent rice taste tests and focus groups. In Japan, such market testing has become the accepted litmus test for rice before it is advertised for widespread sale. But taste testing is only one in a series of formal exams that help prepare the rice brand for the domestic and slowly opening international markets in China and Japan. In the short run, China is the preferred market for Korean organic growers because the quality standards for Korean agro-produce are generally higher than those in China, while Japan's quality standards still remain higher than those in place in Korea (Choi S. 2004, 31-33).

Complementing Economy and Culture

The “organic vision” emanating from this initiative focuses not only on maximizing community benefits economically and nutritionally but also culturally. It is difficult to determine whether the cultural or economic value came first. Stress is placed on a “new life quality concept” springing from sparkling clean nature, eco-friendly food growing, and idealized notions of well-being and returning to the land. Information on the project spread by word of mouth, rather than government information. This new socio-agronomic and ecological trial should be viewed from an unofficial, culturally holistic perspective. Most, if not all, of the topics I am writing about in this narrative have never been officially discussed, let alone written about in the village chronicles. I felt that if the project were to receive some written formalization, such as a “charter” or a “chronicled account,” it might destroy the project's character because the written word could be elevated to ideology. Villagers of all ages exuded enthusiasm about the awarded grant and new prospects are expected from this achievement. The sense of community was palpable, something

that many Korean urbanites would envy, and perhaps because of it, some urbanites are now considering the “big return.”

In these times of ongoing global crises, particularly from the perspective of low-income and marginalized people, contemporary humans yearn for real protection from outside impact through intact social networks. Artificially constructed measures have lost their appeal, including retirement accounts and unreliable or expensive health insurance that have permeated society in the aftermath of isolated high-rise suburban living and the lack of substantial practical survival skills among the citizenry. The people of the *sangol* cooperative, most of whom are not utterly poor, are trying to rear a new rural generation capable of using such vital skills as plant cultivation, animal husbandry, and sound ecological assessment while simultaneously functioning well in IT knowledge and advanced vocational skills. Moreover, even relatively reliable off-farm employment has been established through tourism opportunities in this region.

What is the cultural concept of this group? What would it look like if the villagers were to describe it on paper? Because it has not been spelled out, the margins for description have left a wide space for me. One superficial indicator hinting at a focus on “traditions” is that a noticeable number of people in the villages dress in traditional Korean-style clothes (*hanbok*) on a regular basis, not just on weekends and special holidays or events. Traditional ceremonies have been embraced, in accordance with the annual rice cultivation cycle using a lunar calendar consisting of 24 “months” (the subdivisions of the seasons or the 24 *jeolgi*, or solar terms). Community leaders felt that their decision to revitalize rice cultivation, especially untainted organic rice, would lend itself to the revitalization of many aspects of the rural life cycle.

They have also made it a goal to improve the public image of farmers for marketing purposes. They believe their image has suffered under the predominance of free market ideology and the 1997 financial crisis. Both events eroded public support for farmers, because consumers are split between loyalty to domestic soil and the realization that Korean rice is exorbitantly expensive compared to

foreign rice. The current high prices stood as a challenge as well as an opportunity for the community. The villagers know they have only about ten years until the rice market will be fully opened. By that time, it must be clear to all consumers, as well as to those who provide tax subsidies, that Korean rice is in no way inferior to imported rice. These consumers must not run to the imports when market gates swing open. According to the *sangol* villagers, Korean farmers are determined to thrive without taxpayer support and offer quality produce and prices equal to those of importers. Against the negative backdrop of the agrichemical rice of the past five decades, rice must be seen again from an untarnished perspective as it has long been a clean and strong link between Korea's storied past, present, and future.

Sangol villagers resolved that the cultural structure of life around rice cultivation should be able to provide a sense of order and coherence to their children who lead viable rural lifestyles in relatively isolated areas but are also up-and-coming members of the digital age. Such ideas have gained a broader social meaning and currency with the advent of the *gwinong* movement. Instead of relearning the minutiae of rural life as urban returnees, newcomer kids in *sangol* can now say they will try to make a living as farmers without being ridiculed by their urban peers. It is hoped that by proving the importance of the home region, a basic pool of intelligent young people can be retained to counter a chronic rural brain drain and to gradually re-envision a thriving countryside.

Clean Slate with Rice

During one of several visits in spring, I witnessed the New Year's Full Moon ritual (*jeongwol daeboreum*), which is celebrated by urbanites today as an extended family reunion where people talk, play, and eat. But in this community, a large amount of social capital was pooled for the sole cultural purpose of an important multi-village festival. There was a graceful aura around a middle-aged man whom

people addressed with the honorific title *jeongsinjeok jiju*, “an inspiring master of ceremonies,” or more literally, “spiritual leader.” Mr. Im, mentioned before as a community organizer, was constantly surrounded by people seeking advice, a quick comment, an order to be passed on, and once was approached by an elderly lady who handed him a *bojagi* (wrapping cloth) full of raw eggs. He thanked her warmly and passed the bundle to one of the female chefs in the local community center. This leader is a driven promoter who cannot stop thinking and acting on behalf of *sangol*. He is a leader, indeed, but not a politician. As an “organic intellectual,” he can analyze government policies and dissect them into scheme and value, which are applicable or nothing more than ideological nonsense.

With a college education in agronomics, he brought substantial experience from working in various positions in local cooperatives and at his own family farm. Besides making a living in agriculture, he was a core organizer working with a well-known worldwide charity for human and environmental health during the 1980s and 1990s. Within this organization, he became a strong proponent of the need to wean farmers from agrichemicals and prepare them for eco-friendly, organic farming. Although never directly involved with the political *minjung* movement of the 1980s, Mr. Im thought he could contribute to the needs of Korea at the time by serving the aforementioned organization. With democratization in the early 1990s he became increasingly convinced of the necessity of organizing farming communities into independent units capable of dealing with the intricacies of globalization and its resulting rural development impositions. Im has been extracting the useful parts of government policy for his villages while foregoing the time-wasting of empty schemes and complicated regulatory policies. For years he has been crisscrossing the region in his pickup truck to build alliances, speaking via phone to a wide network of officials and other leaders for hours on end to remove all obstacles to securing the grant. His leadership is swift and understated. He avoids the spotlight but effectively puts others in it. His representation is eagerly sought by delegations of important people, but his reputation for probity is so well estab-

lished, many do not dare to approach him if they feel unqualified. The men elected him to preside over the Lunar New Year's Day (*jeongwol*) ritual, but he passed the honor to four other men whom he sent off with brittle pieces of rice paper with the ritual Chinese liturgy for them to rehearse.

During the huge dinner in the community hall, each person who dropped by my table talked about the grant. An issue of great pride and debate is the shift from chemical to organic rice production. Gone are the attitudes of the "Green Revolution," which brought the detested *tongilbyeo*, when every farmer was coaxed and hoaxed into believing in chemical fertilization. Excellence through chemical fertilization was the myth of the day, while profits for the chemo-conglomerates were the unspoken reality. Some of the farmers speak ruefully about this time, as if to repent the "treason" they committed against rice. This new beginning appears to be a way out of an uncertain relationship with the old, corrupted cooperative attitudes practiced during the era of the dictators. If successful, it also means a way out of economic difficulties for individual farm families in the administrative darkness of global trade and local subsidies. By these farmers' calculations at this time, the advantages seem to outweigh disadvantages. Being bound in cooperative agreements through risk-and-benefit sharing is a life-altering event for some who might have preferred sustained individual entrepreneurial freedom. However, most rejoice in the opportunities of this new model, hoping to become more competitive with rice growers around the world and thus more respected by the citizens at home.

Over at the village shrine, the four liturgical delegates were dressed in pinkish-white robes, wearing traditional Korean top hats made of woven cotton strands.¹⁶ On an altar, dried fish, pears, jujubes,

16. In the practice of *dongje* (village rites), liturgical leaders include *choeongwan*, *ahongwan*, and *jongheongwan*, plus one person who recites good-fortune in vocational Chinese hymns. Originally, *dongje* was a lengthy ritual celebratory social tool to instill community identity and folkloric entertainment, but it was severely damaged by government decree during the 1970s. *Dongje*, along with a host of other traditions, was forbidden by the Park Chung-Hee government (1961-1979)

dried persimmon, pieces of *tteok* (rice cakes), and a kettle with *makgeolli* (rice wine) were placed along a pig's head, the snout of which was stuffed with loose bank notes and cash-filled envelopes. The robed four greeted all attendees and then one among the delegates recited in melodic chant the Chinese texts from the brittle papers. In between readings, three sets of bows and full prostrations were conducted toward the altar. The text reader poured *makgeolli* into three cups, to be drunk by the other three men on behalf of fellow attendants. Another round was poured on the ground outside the shrine on behalf of *jimosin*, an earth goddess, described to me as a "Mother Earth" figure. A set of bows concluded the official part of the ceremonies. Then the robed men made space before the altar and invited people to come forward to conduct their personal rites. The atmosphere was not static, stiff, or serious. Rather, there was a warm openness that embraced all present in a friendly and genuine way. Finally, the village teenagers were asked to show that they had mastered proper bowing. After some banter, they complied, coming forward to the altar to do their own giggling bows.

A large stack of rice paper sheets had been placed on a stand for people to write down their wishes for the New Year, along with evils that needed to be averted. Among general wishes for happiness and longevity, there was a long list of requests for family prosperity, pregnancies under way or to be conceived, job security, educational access and success, and fertility of the soil. After a while, the sheets were collected and carried outside the shrine through a heavy rainstorm to a massive bonfire construction some two stories high. Once the wishes had been ritually offered with prayers and left inside the structure, men started pouring gasoline onto the edifice and ignited it with torches.

According to Mr. Im, the community's ritual and ceremonial

during the New Village Movement to "modernize" and "rationalize" Korean villages, especially in the 1970s (Lim 2003, 6-7; Oh 2003, 166-172). Originally the top hats of these leaders were made of horsehair, but the ones worn on this occasion were made of fine cotton strands. This was pointed out to me by an amused bystander.

activities have nothing to do with religion but were old agricultural traditions. “We couldn’t possibly promote Confucianism because nowadays, people have their own religious preferences. We must remain open-minded toward spiritual ideas and that can only happen by emphasizing tradition over religion.” This part of the celebration was called the *daljip* ritual (moon house), i.e., the New Year’s greeting of moon and sun, heaven and earth, and water and fire. The fire grew, producing huge clouds of heavy black smoke. Munching on foods from the altar, it was difficult for the community to stand by as the storm delivered a deluge of rain to the shrine area, located on the steep slope of a mountain. Many other people cheerfully waited in their cars or in the shrine for the billowing chimney to burn out so they could collect ashes or branches from the ash pile to scatter around their houses and fields to cover the villages with omens for good luck and a bumper crop.

The New Year’s celebration represents only the festive aspects of this chosen rural reality. The issues of fieldwork, farmyards, cooperative meetings, get-togethers at the mill, at the Nonghyeop center, or in households, and child-rearing situations are imbued with problems, as in other parts of rural Korea. Community conflicts, struggles, anxieties, petty redistribution haggles, peer pressure, gendered tensions, and other problems exist, as in other corporate settings.

The Korean way of progress in the *sangol* district has been brought about by a set of convolutions of the right things happening at the right time, pushed by the right kind of people. The results were brought about through a positive baseline attitude of “can do,” reaching a clear understanding of alternatives to the past (i.e. organic rice production given supremacy over agrichemical rice; tradition emphasized over religion, etc.), a commitment to changing or perpetuating the rules and structures in service of these goals (i.e. socio-cultural change does not only follow the economic mainstream but also will use human agency to negotiate which cultural traits will be kept and which deemphasized), monetary recognition by the government (i.e. a significant grant earned), weariness over promises of progress, and new faith in *jangmok ban* cooperation. What is interesting about the

sangol villages, however, is that such a new agricultural domain transcends the economic rationale into the cultural domain, and into an “unaware suspicion” about modernity in a now frequent realization that economics cannot live by economics alone (Reinschmidt 2003; Jermolowicz 1999; Gray 2004; Choi Y. 2008).

Conclusions

For conclusive interpretations, close attention needs to be paid to the complexities surrounding a rural development that is polarized by government policies in support of large-scale farming and antagonistic to small-scale farming. There are shades of gray between these realms. *Sangol* villagers show that an organized community initiative carried out by medium-scale farms and with the support of a significant government grant allow coexistence of various-sized farm operations cooperatively tackling the challenges of global agricultural trade. Farmers have repeatedly emphasized the importance of farm-size diversity for the viability of rural life quality. Market demands focus on high quality standards of clean and nutritious farm produce and not whether the producing farm was big or small. Future produce prices can find stability through producer self-enforced quality standards and the global withdrawal of government subsidies.

With ambiguous national interests in export hikes and food autonomy, market-interpretive views of global agriculture need to be refocused on the needs of environments and existing communities in view of a densely urbanized, overpopulated, land-scarce, and geographically, oceanographically, and climatically highly taxed Korean peninsula. As long as general population density remains high, and even if it declines, urban centralization seems increasingly unsustainable in the long run. Counteracted in part by providing off-farm employment incentives, the countryside is now emerging as a settlement for laid-off workers-turned-farmers and willing urban-rural returnees. In some cases, this requires claiming farm land for developing light industries. At the same time, it remains questionable

whether the currently sanctioned land allocations for FEZs, golf resorts, and environmental high-impact sports are justifiable. This is the sobering reality of a playing field where decreasing numbers of farmers are called upon to regain and produce food autonomy at low cost despite international competition, and without getting in the way of the *jaebeol's* export priorities. Ultimately, small-scale farmers and rural citizens are caught between these differing interests with their lives and the futures of their families at stake. When they make up their minds, such as in the case of the *sangol* villagers, and take organized action, organic initiative takes root. The community described in this article represents one such thriving initiative. It should be respected and supported by all interest groups involved, given the benefit of the doubt, and nudged along on the new path of maintaining tradition in a new future.

Korea serves as a microcosm for the shortcomings of global modernity, and an interesting set of global problems seem magnified here. These include overpopulation, environmental fragility, subtropicalization of the peninsula, lack of natural resources, monocultural economic planning with a heavy focus on exports, erosion of real life skills, risk of food shortages, job outsourcing, jitters of global trade and finance, and outdated communication behavior hinging to a large degree on the honorific foci of the Korean language despite a myriad of increased technological and democratic exchange possibilities. Korea's multiple modern confinements thus epitomize those of an eager late-comer to a global village defined by Western concepts of modernity. However, this seemingly hopeless situation is negotiable as shown in the resolute initiative taken by *sangol* villagers—with the support of the government. Such constructive rethinking of agriculture in rural cultural contexts revisits the promises of modernity and democracy, generating new hopes for a highly educated, motivated, and largely optimistic young citizenry.

While the values and hopes for a return to land and traditions never completely left the Korean modern consciousness,¹⁷ a fast-for-

17. See Cho (2003), Kim K. (2003), Lim (2003), Oh (2003), and footnote 2.

ward to the same did not feel right amidst official and learned exhortations that “traditions” would result in nothing but nostalgic disillusion. Korean alternative thinkers and organic intellectuals, as well as many other alert global citizens, seem to realize that the train of modernity has become too fast, too heavy, and too dilapidated. Although most conscientious observers agree on the train’s deficiencies, confusion persists over which direction to take once it has come to a stop, if and when it stops. As the first-class passengers (i.e., industrialized countries) largely take an unethical approach by not admitting the leadership and consumption mistakes of past decades, substantial course corrections will ultimately depend on regulatory measures through self-corrective dictates of nature or a comprehensive bottom-up human revolution. Because the latter seems sufficiently unlikely, avoidance of “second modernity” calamities can only be introduced by course corrections pursued “organically,” no matter how uncoordinated they appear. Reasonable arguments explaining the maze of second modernity show a range of alternatives to protect future generations from the painful reflexes of our highly artificial and perhaps overused concept of modernity.

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GLOSSARY

<i>aheongwan</i>	亞獻官	<i>jeongsinjeok jiju</i>	정신적 지주
<i>akibare</i> (J.)	秋晴れ	<i>jeongwol</i>	정월
<i>baljeon gyehoek</i>	發展計劃	<i>jeongwol daeboreum</i>	정월 대보름
<i>bojagi</i>	보자기	<i>jimosin</i>	地母神
<i>chamyeo jeongbu</i>	參典政府	<i>jongheongwan</i>	定獻官
<i>choheongwan</i>	初獻官	<i>makgeolli</i>	막걸리
<i>chucheongbyeo</i>	추청벼	<i>mettugi ssal</i>	메뚜기 쌀
<i>daljip</i>	달집	<i>minjung</i>	민衆
<i>dalpaengi</i>	달팽이	<i>Minjung hakchul</i>	민衆學出
<i>dongje</i>	洞祭	<i>myeon</i>	面
<i>dure</i>	두레	<i>pumasi</i>	품앗이
<i>eup</i>	읍	<i>ri</i>	리
<i>gongdong jageop</i>	共同作業	<i>Saemaoul Undong</i>	새마을운동
<i>gun</i>	郡	<i>sangol</i>	산골
<i>gwinong</i>	歸農	<i>segzehwa</i>	世界化
<i>gwinong undong</i>	歸農運動	<i>Seopyeonje</i>	西便制
<i>gye</i>	契	<i>sineoji yeonhap</i>	시너지 연합
<i>gyedansik non</i>	계단식 논	<i>tongilbyeo</i>	통일벼
<i>hanbok</i>	韓服	<i>tteok</i>	떡
<i>hyangyak</i>	鄉約	<i>uri nara</i>	우리 나라
<i>jaebeol</i>	財閥	<i>Wonangsori</i>	워낭소리
<i>jangmok ban</i>	作木班	<i>yeongdeokbyeo</i>	영덕벼
<i>jeolgi</i>	節氣		

(J.: Japanese)