

Willard D. Keim

**The Korean
Peasant
at the
Crossroads
A Study in Attitudes**

Center for East Asian Studies, Western Washington University

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THE KOREAN PEASANT AT THE CROSSROADS: A STUDY OF ATTITUDES, by Willard D. Keim

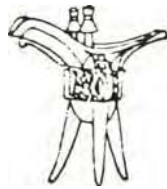
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**Western
Washington**

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To the Korean peasant,
hardy and hospitable.

FOREWORD

Since the advent of written history at least some four millenia ago, the world has been to a large degree a peasant world. There are still nations among those newly independent since World War II with 80 percent of their populations living in the countryside. And it has not been so many decades ago that the major nations of Europe were composed predominantly of a peasantry and its concomitant technology. The United States crossed the rural-urban divide of 50 percent living in rural areas in about 1920, Italy in the 1940s, and Korea in the early 1970s. Were it not for the industrial revolution, which originated in Europe and has extended its impact around the globe, the world would still consist of urban centers surrounded by vast oceans of countryside, villages, and peasant-tillers. It is certainly no news to persons living in the United States, where less than ten percent of the population is at present actively engaged in raising the crops needed to feed its expanded population, and to some of the rest of the world that the age of the peasant, the even pace of life in semi-isolated villages, is gone forever.

There are some urban sophisticates who look back upon the rural past with a feeling of relief that the coarse and provincial rural milieu is over and done with. Karl Marx was certainly among these. In the *Communist Manifesto* he and Engels found reason to praise capitalism for rescuing "a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life." Others, many of whom have had little or no immediate experience in living from the soil, evince a nostalgia for the scenery of the rural landscape which is fast disappearing in the encroaching expansion of highways, cities, and suburbs. They may even be aware of a flicker of reminiscence, as if the sense of the rural ecology existed ineradicably as an inherited trait. But speak to most urban scholars and technicians of an intention to study the attitudes of the nation's peasants, or to survey the conditions of the villages, and one can easily sense an undertone that might be expressed by the phrase, "Why do you want to waste your time doing that?" Indeed, why not study the bureaucracy or the intellectual elite instead? The peasant is not a vanguard of change.

Aside from the utilitarian aim of contributing to the output of agricultural production, which most presently less developed nations desire very much, a goal that is certainly embedded in the reasons for this present study, there are other somewhat less tangible reasons for studying the peasant. The long day of the peasant began in such countries as Korea millenia ago, perhaps with the domestication of such basic crops as millet, and that day has lasted through all of Korea's recorded history to the present time when, to conclude the simile, the late afternoon of his history draws on. Although not so quickly as it may seem, but inevitably, the day of the peasant society is waning. For this reason alone, it is important that studies be conducted to preserve the record of the peasant, his views, his outlook, his values. The opportunity to do this is gradually disappearing as developing nations vie with the already industrialized nations to increase their status, their power and, it is to be hoped, the quality

of life for their citizens by introducing modern technologies.

It is my conviction that the peasant is important in his own right, for himself, and not alone for what he can contribute to the growth of his country's wealth or for the potential turmoil that he may threaten under some extremities through contributing to rural revolutions. While peasant attitudes and opinions have less impact upon the ultimate behavior of nations under the leadership of urban political and social elites than do the attitudes of citizens in an industrialized democracy, these opinions do have some impact, and the contents of the human psyche are by no means contemptible simply because they cannot find outlet in national decision-making. Peasant resistance has toppled many a well-laid plan of an ambitious urban elite. This is the spirit that infuses the research reported in this book: The peasant is worth studying for himself.

Some comment is required concerning the survey method of research used in this study. If this were the only study extant on the Korean peasant it might have been desirable to conduct research by means of anthropological techniques, studying a village or several villages through participant observation. Fortunately, there are a number of such studies, albeit not enough at this crucial time of Korean history, and a few other detailed studies done by Korean sociologists and economists, some of which are listed in the Bibliography. Our study is supplemental to these other works. There is no intention of suggesting that the techniques used to obtain the data reported here are in any way superior to other techniques. The purposes of studies are not always the same, and while a survey might obtain a wider range of attitude and opinion information, studies in depth of individuals through psychological techniques or studies of villages through anthropological methods provide invaluable contributions to the whole of our understanding of the peasant. If this study contributes something to the understanding of the contemporary Korean peasant it will have attained its modest goal.

Any study owes a debt to countless persons, some whose work has been read and pondered--the notes acknowledge only a portion of these innumerable influences--and some whose contributions have been more personal. To Professors Chung-hyun Ro, Jong-hae Yoo, Tae-dong Chung, and Suk-bum Yun, colleagues at Yonsei University in Seoul, I am indebted for much good advice and valuable assistance. Mr. Won-Taek Han prepared the initial translations of the questionnaires into Korean, a most difficult undertaking. Several officials in the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Forestry and Agricultural Resources were most liberal in allowing the use of their facilities. Above all, the ability to conduct this research freely and without harassment is deeply appreciated. The research would have obviously been impossible without the good-natured contributions of the Korean peasants--village hospitality is not easily forgotten. Finally, Dr. Chong-sik Lee has long been an inspiration for high standards of scholarship to anyone interested in the politics of Korea.

My presence in Korea was the result of a Fulbright teaching fellowship without which no research could have been contemplated. The Social Science Research Council, Joint Committee on Korean Studies, provided a grant that was crucial for the preparation and printing of questionnaires, codings and key punching, and all the other miscellaneous expenses of survey research. Yonsei University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Hawaii freely provided computer and other facilities. Carol Carstens typed a draft of the manuscript;

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