

Research report: Agriculture and development in an age of empire: policy, practice, and agricultural change in colonial Korea, 1910-1945

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A generous research grant from the History Project and the Institute of New Economic Thinking (INET) supported the following research at the Harvard Yenching Library, Cambridge, United States. At the Yenching Library, I examined extensive collections of colonial period documents to provide an overview of agricultural policies and the changing patterns of agricultural production and land use during the colonial period.

I began my research with two goals: (1) to gather statistical data on the changes to Korean agriculture and production trends under colonial rule (1910—1945); and (2) to examine individual colonial projects that attempted to influence the production of particular crops. For the first goal, I planned to use specialized journals containing information related to agriculture produced by the Government General of Korea such as *Chōsen no nōgyō* [Korean agriculture] and *Nōgyō tōkeihyō* [Agricultural statistics]. In addition to the specialized statistics gathered from these periodicals, I also used general statistical compilations such as the *Chōsen sōtokufu tōkei nenpō* [Annual statistical yearbook of the Government General of Korea] to compile a database of agricultural production. For the second goal, I planned to study Yenching's holdings of the *Bulletin of the Agricultural Experimentation Station* [*Chōsen sōtokufu kangyō mohanjō ōbun hōkoku*]—a government-operated research farm which conducted experiments on the new species and agricultural methods introduced under the purview of the colonial government as part of its agricultural policies. The farm published a monthly bulletin detailing the results of its experiments. Overall, I hoped that both avenues of research would allow me to uncover the process by which the colonial government promoted new techniques to the general population as “model farming methods,” as well as narrowing down the most active areas of government involvement in agricultural promotion for further field research in a subsequent trip to Korea.

One of my first tasks was to compile a database of agricultural production statistics that I could use to analyse trends in production. The colonial government kept detailed records of agricultural production throughout the colonial period for most major crops. I gathered statistics for the annual acreage and total harvest of rice, barley, beans, cotton, tobacco, mulberry, silkworm cocoons and cows between the years 1910 to 1940 (the last year for which reliable statistics are available). For each year, I also gathered information for the total national statistics for each crop as well as the production and acreage within each province. Thanks to this, I was able to see not only which crops were increasing in productivity and cultivation over time, but also which regions were responsible for increases or decreases in cultivation and harvest. Based on an analysis of the statistical data, I was able to see that cotton not only underwent a significant increase in its production, but also a major shift from one species to another (owing to the substitution of native cotton cultivars for American upland cotton), particularly in the southern provinces. As I continued my subsequent field research in South Korea, I therefore narrowed my research toward cotton production as a potential subject for an in-depth case study of colonial policy and its implementation in rural Korea.

Alongside the above statistical analysis, I also read and compared colonial journal publications to uncover the methods adopted by the colonial government to influence agricultural production in Korea. Initially, I expected the *Bulletin of the Agricultural Experimentation Station* to provide the most information, given that the *Bulletin* was published from the model industrial farm—a branch of the colonial government that provided the origin of most new species and techniques adopted as part of colonial policy. However, upon reading the *Bulletin*, it quickly became apparent that the publication focused on publishing the scientific output of the farm's experiments rather than detailing the transmission of such results to the general population or the practices used to persuade ordinary farmers to adopt new crops and methods. Instead, through my reading of other agricultural periodicals, I found that a series of semi-governmental organizations, generally termed associations (Ko. *chōhap*; Ja. *kumiai*) played a larger role than that model farm in these activities. Located across Korea, and specialized to a variety of individual crops or activities, these semi-governmental organizations played a crucial role in the implementation of colonial policies. Established within local administrative districts, these associations served as a point of contact between government

representatives—such as agricultural technicians or local government officials—and farmers; as a site of knowledge production, in the creation of agricultural statistics, and transfer, through “guidance” from technicians assigned to the associations; as a distribution network for credit, seeds, fertilizers, and other material resources; and in the sale and monitoring of harvested crops, as the associations marketed and processed crops on behalf of their members.

Based on the above two discoveries, I was able to focus the remainder of my field research on case studies of colonial cotton policies and the semi-governmental organizations that implemented them. As a major target of colonial policy, cotton provides a clear example of the dynamics that governed colonial agriculture. While previous studies of colonial agriculture have focused on questions of rice, irrigation, class tensions between landlords and tenants, and debt, by focusing on cotton I was also able to highlight a previously overlooked aspect of the colonial rural economy and the state’s efforts to influence farmers’ production.

The above research, begun at Yenching Library and continued at the Institute of Korean Studies, Yonsei University, South Korea, has since become the foundation for the third chapter of my dissertation, titled “Government by Association: Semi-Governmental Organizations and the Implementation of Colonial Agricultural Policies.” I have also presented aspects of this research at the 8th World Congress of Korean Studies conference, 2016, as part of a panel examining governance and the Korean state. Looking ahead, I intend to develop this paper into an article exploring the use of semi-governmental organizations within the colonial state as a method to influence agricultural production. I will also continue examining the environmental and economic impact of colonial cotton policies and the transfer to American upland cotton.