

Dividing Property and Sharing Sons: A Socio-economic Family Strategy in the 18-20th Centuries Korea

Sangwoo Han (Sungkyunkwan University)
hognus06@gmail.com

Byunggiu Son (Sungkyunkwan University)
sonbgu@skku.edu

Sungoh Kim (Sungkyunkwan University)
hognus06@gmail.com

Adoption had been very common among elite families in Korea since the 18th century. In the 19th century, one in four families adopted a son as an heir. This figure is very high compared to China and Japan at similar times. However, it is not yet known why the adoption culture developed in Korea. In this study, we will show that adoption was a strategy chosen to maintain the socio-economic status of the family. The population growth and the culture of inheritance by equal distribution had steadily reduced the size of elite family assets. The proportion of those who held official positions had also been reduced. This situation was a serious problem for Korean elite families who were not guaranteed legal and economic status by the state. As a result, we suppose that elite families had tried to solve this problem by sharing their sons among relatives. And this strategy would have strengthened the solidarity among families and created Korea's unique kinship culture. Furthermore, we will observe how these customs changed after the 20th century when Korea became a Japanese colony. To verify this, we will use data from genealogies of several elite lineages and household registers.