

Ecological-social relationship in the quest for community and its breakdown

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1. Introduction

This is on the stories of some Korean farmers and consumers engaged in the organic farming and in the circulation of products. From their activities and discourses, stories of ideological quest for ecology and society can be found. Also here conflicts between economy and ideal ecological-social relationships can be found. This presentation deals with these stories as they were. They were and still they are on the ideological ground of eco-community quest with the agenda that is to make human society and life in the context of ecosystem, to make human labor as the praxis of sustain ecological equilibrium beyond the anthropocentric appropriation of nature.¹ Products have been ideologically defined as the outcome of this ecological relationship between man and earth. Also they have defined the circulation of products and consumption in the web of life from the earth to the human body. Even the commercial activities have been endowed with the issues of compensation from the consumers for the sustainability of the agricultural ecosystem. From the social point of view, these commercial activities have been in the alternative market system of direct face to face relationships or of common market under the governance by the members. For these three decades this kind of 'community quest' has been, 'consciously or unconsciously', the ideological index for the farmers who practice organic agriculture and for the NGOs concerning this agriculture. The ideology was quite persuasive in the early days of this farming and alternative market system. Even today when the community quest becomes more and more residual as the organic products are favored in the general, huge market systems, the issues are still remaining. Even the issues contribute to the commercialization of the products.

This presentation deals with a case, in which the ecological-social relationship from the rural sector to the urban consumption has been called as 'community'. Under the capitalist market economy in general, under the commercializing pressure in particular, the social relations and ideologies have been jeopardized or broken in parts. The story is on the processes of this whole story, on the critical points of community issues and their breakdown. 'Hanwool community' in the western province 'Jeollabuk-do' had been the one appraised as most sincere and 'authentic' group in Korea. But social conflicts and significant change had occurred recently. New organization was constructed by some previous members.

¹ This paper is depending upon Kyoung-Mann Cho 1997, ' Ideal and Reality of Socio-natural System Reflected in the Ecological-Economical Processes of Organic Agriculture' , Ph. D. Thesis, Seoul National University, for the explanations of ecological-social relationships in organic agriculture and related social, economic facts in Korea.

2. Man and nature relationships in organic farming

Man is a natural being actively corresponding to natural powers of life. 'Ecological transition', the term used by anthropologist J. W. Bennett, means 'the progressive incorporation of nature into human frames and action'. According to Bennett man is constantly engaged in seizing natural phenomena, converting them into cultural objects, and reinterpreting them with cultural ideas.² Heyer puts the focus on man. Man interacts with nature through labour, making the economic, social and ideological or ideational settings in which man defines himself and his life. Ideational aspects of this process include man's design about the nature, about his being and his life.³

Agriculture is the human activity that transforms or incorporates the natural ecosystem into the agricultural ecosystem in which natural beings and human beings become interdependent. Man depends on the plants cultivated. Plants become the human ends which can not sustain their cultivated features without constant engagement of man. From the commencement of farming man has the consciousness of his ends, in other words, designs of cultivated land and plant. In his consciousness economic, social ends, ideas of himself and his life reside too, though he does not assume them at every moment of farming.

Organic farming is on a quite particular position in the cultural aspects of agriculture. In Korea, *Jeongnonghoe*, a Christian farming organization, began it in 1976 to establish agricultural justice, regarding farming as man's fundamental activity and life, to follow God's work of making all livings flourish.⁴ In 1978, some agricultural scientists and technicians established Korean Organic Farming Association with the activities of research, technical innovation and education. Up to now innumerable organic farmers and organizations have been created all over the country. From the beginning up to now this farming sector in Korea has been filled with technical, social and ideational issues to save agriculture, human body and society from environmental degradation. As for the ideational ones, the ways of seeing toward ecosystem and the conceptualization of *saengmyoung* (life) are conspicuous. People have the consciousness of ecosystem. It can be said that the past farmers who, empowered with organic manures, were mainly adapting to the ecological processes. Their technology was surely based on ecosystem and in turn, it incorporated ecosystem into their technical touch. But it can be said that the dependence and use of ecological processes were operated mainly by farmers' unintentional adaptation to the ecosystem. Comparatively, the farmers, activists of modern organic agriculture have thought, beyond mere adaptation, the 'system' and processes. They have imagined ecosystem and produced the

² Bennett, J. W. 1976, *The Ecological Transition: Cultural Anthropology and Human Adaptation*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.

³ Heyer, P. 1982, *Nature, Human Nature and Society: Marx, Darwin, Biology, and the Human Sciences*, London: Greenwood Press.

⁴ On the history of *Jeongnonghoe* <http://jeongnong.or.kr>; Kyoung-Mann Cho 1997, 'Ideal and Reality of Socio-natural System Reflected in the Ecological-Economical Processes of Organic Agriculture', Ph. D. Thesis, Seoul National University.

discourses of it. They have produced the issues of 'ecosystem justice'⁵ beyond the specific relationship between producers and appropriated resources (products). *Saengmyoung* denotes not only biological phenomenon but also spiritual one. A conception of *saengmyoung* is developed in recent years encompassing worldview on biological, ecological and spiritual web of life, in some cases encompassing oriental or Christian religious interpretation of livings, nature-man-god relationships, etc. The farmers mainly have been activists from outside, religious leaders and villagers learned in organic farming and ecological meanings through the participation in this movement. So the ideational aspects of this farming are initially formed from the intellectual activities. Farmers have pursued the ecologically based farm lands, have imagined 'ecosystem' of their land. These pursuits have become the components of their identities and their ways of life.

3. *Hanwool* farmers in the past

Hanwool Community was an organization with quite tight human relationships and ideals for man-nature relations. *Hanwool* means, in Korean, 'together in a fence'. It was composed of organic farming, product circulation and consumption based on producer-consumer relationship under the community ideals and *Hanwool* Co-op. In 1991, the farmers in *Buan* County, *Jeollabukdo* province and consumers in *Jeonju* City made the organization and began to use the name *Haunwoollhoe* or *Hanwool* Community conventionally. *Hanwool* Co-op is the consumers' organization established in 2001 from the previous gathering *Hanwoollhoe* to co-op. At the beginning of *Hanwoollhoe* (1991) the consumer members were 65 persons. For 9 years, there have been direct transactions from farmers to consumers' door. In 2001 the co-op was established with about 300 registered members. For the two years the members increased up to 1000 members.⁶ By now there have not been critical fluctuations. In the rural areas 8 to 15 farmers have managed producer group. At the beginning 8 farmers joined. 7 farmers were those who were born or moved here quite long ago. One farmer moved here in 1980s to open organic farming. He had been doing the work before the organization began. The group has not shown critical increase of number. Presently some farmers do not belong to previous group and the group itself could not keep on using the name *Hanwool*. The farmers created another name '*Sandeulbaram* Community' five years ago and began to include new members.⁷ Now 15 farmers are members. From the beginning farmers' main products have been rice and vegetables. They have produced individually except in a small common dry field. Formal or informal meetings for various ends have been main common activities. Sharing technical information, talking about the ecological-spiritual meaning of their

⁵ on ecosystem justice see Brunk, C. & Dunham, S. 2000, 'Ecosystem Justice in Canadian Fisheries' in *Just Fish*, Coward, H., Ommer, R. & Pitcher, T. eds., St. Johns: ISER.

⁶ Following Duk-Ja Lee, president of the co-op, in her essay 2003, 'The tricycle *Hanwool*' in *Hanwool Family*: 17.

⁷ *Sandeulbaram* means 'mountains, fields and wind'.

activities, making decisions about adapting new technology, regulating members' product items, the farmers have been indulged in the organic farming world. Beside the meetings, labor exchange, opening urban children's and parents' rural stay for working, education and retreat have been common activities.

Thus farmers' production processes are quite individual. Instead they have realized solidarity by the fact that in so many local actions always they are together in choosing hard ways. To understand these farmers, their common experiences in peasant movements, civil disobedience against governmental projects are crucial. They have fought for values which have been quite various according to the situation. In fact they have been doing the activities together sometimes with the ecological identity of *Hanwool*, sometimes in the peasant movements or in the local villagers' social actions. Some members were pioneers at the peasant movement in 1980s for the democratization of National Agricultural Cooperative Federation in their local society. Almost all members served actively for the oppositional movements, from 1990s up to now, against free trade agreements, for the oppositional movement against the policy to install nuclear waste facilities in early 2000s. Now they are supporting the settlement of new comers to local societies who are from urban works and residence to farming. In the past new comers were accepted to *Hanwool* Community, now to *Sandeulbaram* Community. With these various sharing experiences, a feeling of ontology for their lives exist, that is, 'we are always ourselves' getting along with sharing values and life ways.

The motives to adopt organic farming were quite ideological. Practical reasons such as caring for their health, establishment of 'new' technology existed. Creation of stable marketing lines became pivotal function to sustain their farming. But as a whole they were to enter new world of ecological farming values and life ways. As relatively young peers who were from late 20 to late 30 years old in the early 1990s, who had experiences pioneering works of local movement, they decided another venture, organic farming, to realize meaningful work. Two persons were influential. Deceased Kun Oh, who moved to *Docheongri, Byunsanmyon, Buan* County in 1970s, was an activist of peasant movements, honored by the young farmers for he made successful movements such as democratization of *Byunsan* Agricultural Cooperative Federation. He is known to show deep interest about the significance of organic farming when he was alive. For he was a representative figure influential to the farmers and even to the consumers in *Jeonju* City, justifications of people's activities have been frequently depended on the memories of his activities and words.⁸ The other person, JS⁹ was the farmer who pioneered organic farming at *Buan*. He learned technique, ecology and philosophy of organic farming, philosophy when he was trained at *Jeongnonghoe*. In the organic farming sector in Korea there is a genealogical thinking regardless it exists or not. Though neither being official, nor publicly known fact, some people say that in

⁸ Introduction of *Hanwool* farmers' history in the web of *Hanwool* Co-op is an example. The introduction reflects farmers' memories on their history. The first column begins with the sentences about Kun Oh's understanding about organic farming.
See <http://www.han-wool.co.kr/menu02.htm>.

⁹ The informant and local society have some conflicting memories. For the protection of this informant, a pseudonym (with initial letters) is used in this paper.

Jeongnonghoe there are generation grades like the elder, senior, junior and so on according to the participating years. Also teaching-learning relationships are considered as genealogy. He was considered as being at transient stage from junior to senior generation of *Jeongnonghoe*. The colleagues in his generation were at the stage to take charge of pioneering movement in the local societies or to take charge of actual affairs at the central *Jeongnonghoe*. He moved to *Buan* in 1980s and with his family, he opened organic farm at the small rice field and dry field for vegetables. *Hanwool* farmers' group began to be formed after his settlement. For JS was doing the role as an ideologue among the Korean organic farmers as well as among *Hanwool* members, he and other members' houses, farms and out yard were the stay place for the visitors, open schools and places of gathering for the visitors from all over the country.

When the farmers began organic farming, they agreed with JS's discourse on it. They were to venture this unstable, hard work as they had ventured in other movement activities. The farmers' farming, circulation of products and ecological-social justification of these activities were mainly managed in the discourses between JS and others. He, in 1990s, had ideals to make co-existing, mutual interacting biodiversity in his field. Small scale farming is appropriate to support human labor for this cultivation, he considered. Economy has to be basically subsistent one. Although he himself could not fully realize, at that time the ideal kept his discourses of organic farming as making mutually cooperative field community where man learn this biological cooperation to extend to social sphere. Other farmers, though they did not form this ecological field, they agreed in principle even they felt inappropriateness regarding their household or field situations. As direct interaction between farmers and *Hanwool* consumers settled, farmers' products have been planned according to the interaction. JS's products were following the interaction too but besides the items he made all surrounding small fields with variety of crops. *Hanwool* farmers and consumers kept on this interaction by 2001 when new system of co-op began.

4. Breakdown of *Hanwool* Community, emergence of new organization

Extending Brodel's explanation on circulation of products as blood circulation ¹⁰ to the realm of ecological-ideological meaning, it can be said that the concept of circulation in organic farm products contains the similar biological metaphor. In this case the concept of *saengmyoung*, spiritually empowered biological metaphor, is working. Unlike Brodel's explanation which denotes the circulation in the human community, this metaphor, in many present Korean rural-urban organizations, is endowed with really biological and symbolic efficacy in the human-nature relationships from 'the land ecosystem

¹⁰ Braudel, F 1996, *Civilization and Capitalism*, Vol. II, trans. by Kyoung-Chul Chu, Seoul: Kacchi.

and laboring men to consumer's body'. *Hanwool Community* had put emphasis on locality in this regard. From local land, by circulation locally rooted, to the consumer partners in *Hanwool* community, *saengmyoung* circulates. From an economic point of view this is to stabilize marketing for both sides. One is to stabilize marketing lines; the other is to purchase credible food. But these practical reasons could not be separated from ideological discourses to make community relationships from the land in *Buan* to the consumers' bodies in *Jeonju* City.. Culture of circulation was operating including the two dimensional reasons One is practically rooted in economics and health. The other is ecological-spiritual ideology. By the early 2000s consumers' purchase of organic products was limited to *Hanwool* farmers' ones at least in the direct interaction or co-op display, except for the products that were not produced by *Hanwool* farmers.

The breakdown of *Hanwool* farmers began at the circulation. Consumers preferred some farmers' products like JS's ones. His role of ideologue, ecologically well managed and 'meaningful' fields, his fame strengthened the feeling of practical credibility and the feeling of 'eating meanings'. For the others the opportunities to provide products became relatively limited. Farmers had to contract with other circulation organization to supplement losing marketing chances.

In contrast, after *Hanwool* Co-op established marketing pattern had to be changed. In order to sustain the co-op they need more members. This, in turn, needed more various items, more stable supply. The farmers' needs to marketing and consumers' needs to get various and stable supply did not match well.

At that time JS proposed specialized circulation organization called *Jeongnong Mullyu* (dealing products for circulation) with broad range of gathering products and marketing partners in the provincial level. For the stable basis he tried to supply organic products to the provision system of meals at *Jeonju* City schools. Early days of this negotiation for schools it seemed to go well. Ideally the officers agreed with JS's meaningful discourses but in reality they had to consider other locally surrounding organizations. *Hanwool* farmers were proposed to invest to establish *Jeongnong Mullyu*. But most of them felt economic danger and gave up investing. They wanted to keep on partially to *Hanwool* Co-op, partially to other organization. Conflicts occurred among them. *Hanwool* Co-op agreed with JS's proposes. Then conflicts occurred between *Hanwool* farmers and co-op. Farmers were separated from JS and co-op. After this separation farmers had to use other name, so *Sandeulbaram* Community emerged keeping the interaction with the other circulation organization. *Jeongnong Mullyu* experienced tremendous hardships for JS failed in contracting for school provision system. More serious one was the products quality. Gathering products in the wide range resulted in gathering ones with various qualities, sometimes 'low chemical input ones', sometimes irregular qualities though they were organic. Then *Hanwool* Co-op had to stop the supply in order to meet members' satisfaction and the co-op's social reputation. JS and the co-op separated.

5. End-for more consideration

In Korea the farmers of organic agriculture are quite various such as elites from outside, urban citizens who would like to become farmers, local farmers who have worked as peasant movement activists, local agricultural entrepreneurs. Some people dream about community. Some others have shown calculating rational, especially after the WTO agreement 1995, at the time when Korean agriculture has been estimated in danger. *Hanwool* farmers in this paper are somewhat extraordinary members for the pioneers are mainly local peoples. Also they are extraordinary because of their inclination or stewardship to ecological ideology and because of their dependence on comradeship and experience in various activities.

Hanwool farmers had started organic farming not only from the practical reasons. They were to venture to get meaningful lives through the organic farming and related activities. The ventures were realized in a part by the feeling of social intimacy or interdependence among the peers who had common experiences in the local society. Sometimes being suffered from economically unstable conditions, sometimes filled with ecological-spiritual meanings for their reasons to do organic farming, for their reasons to live in *Buan* villages. Members of *Sandeulbaram* Community now remember the breakdown of *Hanwool* community initiated by the inequalities in marketing chances, engagement in other circulation organization. Disagreement with the project of broad circulating corporation was due to the economic burdens and feeling of economic danger. Thus most of all causes for breakdown are from economic reasons. The *Sandeulbaram* Community members know the fact. But they also say that they could sustain past organization if they were not alienated in producer-consumer relationships as mere parts of the events. For they are in some respects leaders or pioneers of peasant movement, they would like to make social relationships with their full cares in this producer-consumer relationship too. Also in the production plans, their world views were important. But as time goes by ideological weight has been inclined to a person. Moreover, for them, the ideology has been alienated from reality. For they were grown as farmer, they would like to start the realization from their level of organic farming. Remembering the proposal of opening broad circulation, they say that it was against the original principle to keep local levels which guarantee ecological-social relationships. In sum, they say that they preferred locality from everyday reality in the ideological dimension as well as in the economic one. As an anthropological work, I would like to interpret these intricate reasoning, conceptualization and reactions regarding locality, community, ecology and economy in the contemporary rural-urban situations.