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**TOBACCO**  
**AND THE GIFT ECONOMY OF SEOUL MERCHANTS**  
**IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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# Tobacco and the gift economy of Seoul merchants in the late nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

This paper makes a more detailed investigation into an observation I made during my PhD research on Korean guild merchants. While collecting data from the late nineteenth century account books of Seoul's Guild of Domestic Silk Merchants (Myŏnjuhŏn 綿紬塵), one thing that stood out was the frequent appearance of large quantities of tobacco among the everyday administrative expenses of the organisation. It appeared even from this casual observation that the social smoking of tobacco and its use as a gift was extremely important to the internal economic and social life of this merchants' guild. From this initial observation a number of questions arose. First, was it possible to quantify the use of tobacco by the Myŏnjuhŏn members and analyse its social uses in the organisation? Second, how does the distribution of large quantities of tobacco to guild members fit into the broader picture of gift exchanges and commodity exchanges in late Chosŏn society and in other similar societies? Third, what explains the overwhelming importance of this particular commodity in the internal social and economic life of the merchants' guild?

In looking at these questions, this study therefore draws together three elements: the nature and purpose of the guild organisations of late Chosŏn Seoul; the non-market distribution of goods in the form of gifts; and the importance of tobacco in late Chosŏn society, both in terms of its social usage and economic significance as a commodity. In the next section I will look at each of these elements in turn.

## 2. Guilds, gifts and tobacco

### *Guilds*

The guild was *the* typical form of commercial organisation in precapitalist state societies, where merchants were faced with surplus-extracting political authorities such as bureaucratic states or powerful lords. Guilds sought to make profits for their members by minimising competition

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amongst those dealing in the same commodities, by maintaining price differentials and by gaining patronage from powerful figures or procurement agreements with state organs. Chosŏn was no exception in this regard and although various forms of more independent commerce had arisen in the late eighteenth century, the merchant guilds of Seoul still dominated the commercial activities of the capital city until close to the end of the nineteenth century.

There were a great variety of commercial guilds in late Chosŏn Seoul many of which had been in existence since the capital was moved to its new location at the beginning of the dynasty. The guild markets were called *sijŏn*, and at the top of the hierarchy of *sijŏn* were the so-called Six Guilds – including the Myŏnjuhŏn – which dealt largely in textiles (cotton, Chinese and domestic silk, hemp and ramie cloth). They were responsible for supplying goods to the government at fixed prices and providing corvée labourers when necessary for works at royal palaces and shrines in the capital. The Chosŏn government recognised the importance of the guilds and particularly the Six Guilds, and in return for their services they were granted monopoly rights within the jurisdiction of the Capital Administrative Bureau (Hansŏngbu 漢城府), which lasted until the Kabo-Ŭlmi Reforms of 1894-5.<sup>2</sup>

My own work looking at the organisational structure and operations of the Domestic Silk Guild (Myŏnjuhŏn) has shown that the organisation had four primary functions: the protection of the monopoly and general commercial interests of its members; provision for some of the merchants' financial needs through mutual aid syndicates; the institutionalisation of internal social cohesion; and the maintenance of political and economic relations with the government and its many offices and officials. The present study is concerned mainly with the third of these functions, and the role that the distribution of gifts, particularly tobacco, played in the creation of a cohesive but internally differentiated corporate social body.

### *Gifts*

Gift-giving has formed a part of the economic life of human societies all over the planet for thousands of years and, although economically less significant than in the past, continues to be an important part of social life in capitalist societies today. Gift exchange is an extremely complex and diverse aspect of economic activity that has varied hugely in form according to the type of society in which it has existed, but it is generally agreed that one of the main functions of this activity is the strengthening of social bonds “be they cooperative, competitive, or antagonistic”.<sup>3</sup> In the late Chosŏn context, gift exchange formed a crucial element of what was largely a non-market economy<sup>4</sup> based on subsistence, state redistribution and systems of reciprocity centred on clans, *yangban* networks and village communities. In his study of gift exchange based on the nineteenth and twentieth century accounts of the Pak Clan of Matchil Village, Kyŏngsang Province, Pak It'aek has shown how gift giving was associated with two

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the history of the *sijŏn* guilds of Chosŏn Seoul see: Pyŏn Kwang-sŏk, *Chosŏn hugi sijŏn sangin yŏn'gu*; Yu Kyo-sŏng, “Sŏul yugŭijŏn yŏn'gu – Yijo tosi sangŏp ūi ilkoch'al”; Ko Tong-hwan, “Chosŏn hugi sijŏn ūi kujo wa kinŭng”; Ch'oe Pyŏng-mu, “Rijo sigi ūi sijŏn”; Ko Sok-kyu, “19 segi chŏnban sŏul sijŏn sangŏp ūi tonghyang.” For more on the Domestic Silk Guild in particular see Owen Miller, “The Myŏnjuhŏn: A silk merchants' guild in late Chosŏn Korea.”

<sup>3</sup> Yunxiang Yan. “The gift and gift economy”, p. 246.

<sup>4</sup> Yi Yŏng-hun, “Chosŏn hugi kyŏngjesa yŏn'gu ūi saeroun tonghyang kwa kwaje.” pp. 372-378.

principles of Confucian social thought that dominated the *yangban* view of social relations: ceremonial formality and hospitality. He argues that gift exchange based on these principles served both to create solidarity among kin and social networks among members of the *yangban* class more generally, and at the same time, to differentiate between *yangban* and subordinate classes.<sup>5</sup> However, the culture of gift giving was not limited to *yangban* clan organisations but permeated society more generally and was clearly central to relations among merchants, organised, as we have seen above, into corporate bodies for mutual benefit.

### *Tobacco*

It seems that tobacco and tobacco smoking were first introduced to Chosŏn in the early seventeenth century, almost certainly from Japan, where they had arrived with Portuguese traders in the previous century.<sup>6</sup> Once it arrived in Chosŏn, tobacco smoking spread extremely quickly and it was said to have permeated society from top to bottom in the space of 20 years, far faster than other post-Columbian imports such as chillies, which are now so closely associated with Korean food culture.<sup>7</sup> Although there were discussions of moral problems related to the practice of tobacco smoking and periodic attempts at banning or limiting the cultivation of the plant (largely because of the pressure it put upon traditional food agriculture), its popularity continued throughout the late Chosŏn period. As Dutch castaway Hendrik Hamel observed during his stay in Chosŏn in the mid-seventeenth century, even children of four or five years old would regularly be seen smoking. Yang Chinsŏk has noted as particularly important factors in this rapid adoption of tobacco smoking both the highly addictive nature of nicotine and the great profitability of tobacco as a cash crop in a period when the Chosŏn economy was recovering from the ravages of the Imjin wars (1592-8).<sup>8</sup>

Not only did tobacco smoking become widespread and popular, it also inserted itself firmly into the status system of Chosŏn society. Perhaps one of the most well-known status-related aspects of Chosŏn smoking is the matter of pipe length. Shorter pipes, called *tanjuk* 短竹 were used by commoners while the very long *changjuk* 長竹 were used by *yangban* and other men and women of status and were so long that they required a servant to light them. As in many societies, smoking was a social practice that groups of people of a similar status did together, perhaps while gathering for a specific purpose, as illustrated by Yu Suk's 1853 picture of a group of *chungin* men enjoying a poetry composition party.<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, this sort of smoking during social or business-related gatherings appears to have been one of the important roles of tobacco for the merchants of the Myŏnjuhŏn.

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<sup>5</sup> Pak I-t'aek, "Nongch'on saehoe esŏ ūi sŏnmul kyohwan: 1834-1956", p. 357.

<sup>6</sup> Barnabas Tatsuya Suzuki, "Tobacco Culture in Japan", pp. 76-77.

<sup>7</sup> Yang Chin-sŏk, "Kiho sŏk'um, in'gan ūi ponnŏngjŏk yokku", p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Yang Chin-sŏk, p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Yang Chin-sŏk, p. 186.

### 3. Tobacco in the economy of the Myōnjuhōn

While the majority of the surviving account books that once belonged to the guildhall of the Myōnjuhōn record its trade in silk with the Chosōn government or the income and expenses of its subordinate mutual aid syndicates (*kye* 契), there are two books in particular that record the everyday running costs of the organisation. These are the expenses ledgers for everyday items that were kept by the two administrative organs of the guild: the senior executive body called the Main Office and the junior body called the Assisting Office. In both the accounts of the Main Office (*Iryongch'aek*) and those of the Assisting Office (*Pang hoegyech'aek*), tobacco figures prominently as an item of expense and I have therefore decided to analyse one year from each of these accounts so as to quantify the amount of tobacco that was used and where it stood in proportion to the other types of expenses found in the accounts.

To begin with, I have analysed the accounts of the guild's senior governing body, the Main Office for 1880. The expenses appearing in this account book are quite varied and I have divided them into the following seven categories:

1) Charcoal and other guildhall consumables

A standard quantity of charcoal for heating the guildhall was bought for each five-day period, while items such as candles, water and earth were paid for on a more infrequent basis.

2) Stationery

Again, the guild bought a standard quantity of paper for every five-day accounting period and regularly bought other items such as writing brushes, ink, glue and string.

3) Ritual expenses

The guild held a monthly sacrificial ritual in its guildhall as well as annual rituals in the guildhall and at the South Kwanu Shrine near Mount Namsan.

4) Food for guild members

Guild members were given food mainly for performing duties as officials or sometimes for taking part in corvée labour in government works.

5) Gifts and bribes for government officials

The Myōnjuhōn paid a great variety of gifts and bribes to government officials and offices at various levels of the administration.

6) Tobacco

The tobacco bought by the guild was almost always of the variety called *namch'o* 南草 (lit. 'southern weed') and the different purposes for which it was bought will be examined in the next section of this study.

7) Miscellaneous

In this category I have placed both unidentifiable items found in the accounts as well as commutation payments made to government offices and the costs of repairing and replacing various items and facilities kept within the guildhall.

TABLE 1 shows how much the Main Office spent on each of these categories of expense and reveals quite clearly just how predominant tobacco was as a proportion of the guild's daily

administrative expenses.

**TABLE 1: Main Office expenses for 1880 by category, in yang**

Category of expense	Cost in yang	Percentage
Charcoal and other guildhall consumables	10.88	1 %
Stationery	17.59	2 %
Ritual expenses	66.00	9 %
Food for guild members	73.02	10 %
Gifts and bribes for government officials	49.31	6 %
Tobacco	512.74	68 %
Miscellaneous	31.17	4 %

Since the Assisting Office was considerably less important in the guild's administrative structure than the Main Office its expenses were also much lower and less complex than those of the more senior body. In TABLE 2 I have therefore divided them into just four categories: stationery and other consumables; food for *corvée* labourers; tobacco; and other miscellaneous items.

**TABLE 2: Assisting Office expenses for 1881 by category, in yang**

Category of expense	Cost in yang	Percentage
Stationery and other office consumables	18.92	28 %
Food for <i>corvée</i> labourers	2.96	4 %
Tobacco	45.45	67 %
Miscellaneous	0.54	1 %

Looking at the two tables, it is striking that despite quite large differences in other areas, tobacco made up almost the same proportion of expenses for both the Main Office and Assisting Office, standing at a little over two thirds of total expenditure. Having established the predominance of tobacco in the expenses of both of the guild's administrative bodies, I will now look at how all this tobacco was used.

To do this we need to look in greater detail at the different types of tobacco that I have grouped together in the previous section under the simple category of 'tobacco'. In the expenses accounts of the Main Office there are actually four different types of tobacco expense recorded:

- 1) Five-day tobacco allowance (*O-il namch'o* 五日南草)

This was a standard amount of tobacco bought in each five-day accounting period to be

distributed to the six executive members of the Main Office as an allowance for the performance of their official duties.<sup>10</sup>

2) Courtesy tobacco (*munan namch'o* 問安南草)

Courtesy tobacco was usually a relatively small amount of tobacco (either one *kŭn* or less) given as a gift to one of the senior members of the guild to pay respects on the occasion of a particular life event such as a family wedding or death anniversary.

3) Special tobacco (*pyŏl namch'o* 別南草)

This was a gift of tobacco that was distributed among the guild members to celebrate annual holidays such as the new year, the Tano festival or the harvest festival of Ch'usŏk.

4) Accounting tobacco (*hoegye namch'o* 會計南草)

This tobacco was presumably consumed or distributed in the course of the auditing of the Main Office accounts which usually took place every two months.

Now we can look at what proportion of the total tobacco-related expenses was constituted by each of these types of tobacco, as detailed in TABLE 3:

**TABLE 3: Different types of tobacco distributed by the Main Office in 1880**

Type of tobacco expense	Cost in yang	Percentage
<b>Five-day tobacco allowance for officials of the Main Office</b>	436.24	85 %
<b>Courtesy tobacco</b>	16.8	3 %
<b>Special tobacco</b>	29.38	6 %
<b>Accounting tobacco</b>	30.32	6 %

In the case of the Assisting Office accounts, analysed in TABLE 4 below (next page), there were also four different types of tobacco expense recorded. Two of these (the 'daily' tobacco allowances and courtesy tobacco) were very similar to the first two in the above table, while the other two types were somewhat different to any of those found in the Main Office ledgers, consisting of tobacco for meetings and tobacco given to corvée labourers when they were required to perform labour duties.

<sup>10</sup> In the *Record of Regulations* it states the following concerning this tobacco allowance: "It is stipulated that members serving as officials of the Main Office and Guildhall shall be paid [an allowance of] half a *kŭn* of tobacco every day to settle their expenses." (*Record of Regulations*, p. 3: 大房與本廳侍仕之員盡日浮費南草半斤式會減上下定式事).

**TABLE 4: Different types of tobacco distributed by the Assisting Office in 1881**

Type of tobacco expense	Cost in yang	Percentage
<b>'Daily' tobacco allowances</b>	36.08	71 %
<b>Courtesy tobacco</b>	4.44	9 %
<b>Meeting tobacco</b>	8.88	18 %
<b>Corvée tobacco</b>	1.23	2 %

To simplify this picture somewhat further, we can divide the various types of tobacco expense listed above into three broad categories, each with a different function: tobacco for official allowances, formal gift tobacco and socially consumed tobacco. Clearly, for both administrative bodies of the guild, expenditure on tobacco was dominated by the allowances that were given to senior members of the guild carrying out official duties, making up 85 percent of Main Office tobacco expenses and 71 percent of Assisting Office tobacco expenses.

Although this tobacco allowance had something of the character of a gift from the organisation to its senior members, it was also intended to compensate these members for the expenses they incurred in the course of their duties. The tobacco given to members performing *corvée* involved tiny quantities by comparison, but it too had the character of an allowance given for performing a particular duty on behalf of the organisation.

Courtesy tobacco, on the other hand, was very much a formal gift designed mainly to demonstrate respect to the senior members of the guild and their families. This correlates with the category of formal-ceremonial gifts described by Pak It'aek in his study of gift exchange in the Pak Clan accounts.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, special tobacco, accounting tobacco, and the meeting tobacco found in the accounts of the Assisting Office all appear to have fallen into a third category of tobacco bought by the guild: that used socially at special events or meetings of guild members.

One thing that all three of these different forms of tobacco gift or allowance had in common was the hierarchical manner in which they were distributed among members. In the case of the five-day allowances, tobacco appears to have been distributed in equal quantities to those occupying the six most senior positions in the organisation, while for the accounting tobacco given at the audit of the Main Office accounts, there was a descending scale of gift size, from the guildmaster downward through various official positions.<sup>12</sup> This sort of status-conscious redistribution of the guild's wealth served to reinforce the internal hierarchy of the organisation, promoting both cohesion and differentiation among members. The gifts of courtesy tobacco must have likewise served to reinforce the respect of the younger members for their elders and to reproduce in a conspicuous way the social and ritual practices of these elders. Such practices,

<sup>11</sup> Pak I-t'aek, as above, pp. 334-336.

<sup>12</sup> The *Record of Regulations* stipulates in great detail exactly how various gifts, including different types of tobacco gift, should be redistributed among its members, according to a strict hierarchy of age, rank and position. See in particular *Record of Regulations*, pp. 13-20.

and the consumption of tobacco that they presumably involved, must have been part of both the status identity of senior members within the Myōnjuhōn and part of the social identity of the guild members as a whole, helping to mark them as a relatively privileged non-*yangban* strata in Chosŏn's premodern urban society.

Finally, the use of tobacco in guild meetings and at other annual events which may have been celebrated by guild members collectively must have had the function of promoting friendly relations among members through the collective activity of smoking. Such gatherings of guild members may have presented a scene not altogether different to that pictured in the Yu Suk's 1853 painting, although in an urban setting with a somewhat more prosaic atmosphere.

## 5. Conclusion

### *Quantifying tobacco use within the Myōnjuhōn*

Although I have only collected data for one year of each of the expenses ledgers, the results are quite clear. The everyday expenses of both Main Office and the Assisting Office were dominated by the tobacco that was mainly distributed among the senior members of the guild. Not only was the spending on tobacco in the accounts very substantial in comparison to the other everyday administrative expenses of the guild, the actual quantity of tobacco bought seems to have been rather large in absolute terms. If we assume that a nineteenth century *kŭn* was approximately equivalent to 600 grams then the five-day tobacco allowance alone would have come to 9 kilograms, while the half a *kŭn* received by each member of the guild executive every day would have been equivalent to 300 grams. This seems like an impossible amount of tobacco for one person to smoke, which tends to lead to the conclusion that the recipients did not in fact smoke all this tobacco – something I will consider further below.

### *What sort of gift economy operated within the Myōnjuhōn?*

The quantitative data obtained above indicates that tobacco was probably the most important medium for distributing the guild's wealth among its members. We have also seen, however, that the internal economy of the Myōnjuhōn was quite different in a number of ways to the 'classical' gift economies that have been studied by anthropologists. The use of gifts in the guild did not involve the exchange of goods between two individuals and did not entail a strict reciprocity. In the case of the guild, gifts of tobacco were given by the organisation as a whole to its members in a hierarchical fashion which served to redistribute wealth upwards toward the more senior members. This would seem to reflect the more general tendency in Chosŏn society for people of greater age and higher status to be supported in this fashion. However, we argue that reciprocity functioned in this form of wealth distribution too, since it is presumed that most guild members could expect to obtain senior positions in the guild once they had reached a certain age and length of membership. Then, just as parents who have provided for their children's upbringing and education expect to reap rewards in the form of support in their old age, the older guild members would be paid back for the share of the guild's collective wealth they had foregone as young members.

However, the bulk of the tobacco given out to members (the five-day tobacco allowance) was actually explicitly given as compensation for the expenses associated with holding certain senior administrative and advisory positions in the organisation. Thus, while many of the types of tobacco gift distributed by the guild certainly fit the standard description of a gift and, above all, served to reproduce and reinforce hierarchies and general social cohesion, this allowance, which made up the majority of tobacco bought by the guild, seems to have been more of a hybrid between a gift and a salary and this probably limits the extent to which we can talk about the existence of a 'gift economy' within the guild.

*What explains the predominance of tobacco?*

The points made by Yang Chinsŏk concerning both the addictiveness of tobacco and its potentially lucrative nature, are also likely causes behind its heavy usage among guild merchants in Seoul. One reason that the monetary value of tobacco may be important in explaining its use within the guild is that, considering the sheer quantities of tobacco involved, it seems likely that not all gifts of tobacco were actually consumed by the recipients. I would speculate that a substantial proportion of the tobacco distributed to members was either passed on once again as gifts to friends, relatives or business associates or sold on the market for cash. The use of tobacco as a form of money by the guild would not be at all surprising considering that a number of commodities such as rice and cotton were commonly used as currency in last Chosŏn society. Like rice, tobacco as currency may have been particularly useful in times when there was serious inflation and metallic currency became devalued.

Another explanation for the peculiar importance of tobacco may be found in the nature of tobacco itself as a commodity that, like alcohol,<sup>13</sup> lends itself to social consumption in meetings or other more informal social occasions. We have already discussed the way in which tobacco gifts and allowances functioned within the guild as a way of creating social solidarity and also differentiation and respect between members of different ages and ranks, but it is clear from the records of the Myŏnjuhŏn that smoking along with eating was also something that the merchants did together on certain occasions, particularly after or during meetings to discuss the business of the organisation.

Finally, we also need to consider the position of tobacco in Chosŏn society more generally, as a luxury commodity marking social status in various ways. Smoking is a very visually demonstrative practice and its status dimension was advertised most overtly in Chosŏn through the length of the pipe that a smoker used. For the merchants of the guilds, whose social status as wealthy commoners was anomalous and perhaps rather precarious at times, the consumption of tobacco, made conspicuous both quantity and style, may have been a useful way to compensate for their formally low position in Chosŏn society. Although they were not officially members of the *chungin* class, it seems likely that they at least positioned themselves as members of this class by their way of dressing and by their habits, manners and life customs. One such important, and clearly visible habit must have been the regular smoking of tobacco.

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<sup>13</sup> The general non-appearance of alcohol in the guild accounts is something of a mystery.

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