

Centralized Power, Decentralized Ambitions: The Reconfiguration of Local Power during the transition from Goryeo to Joseon Korea

Hyunju Lee^{a*}, Won-tak Joo^{b*}, Joseph Dennis^{c+}, and Sangkuk Lee^{a+}

^a Department of History, Ajou University, Suwon, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea.

^b Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA.

^c Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA.

* Equally contributed to this work.

⁺ To whom correspondence may be addressed. E-mail: dennis3@wisc.edu, okllsskh@ajou.ac.kr

Introduction

Political transformation causes upheavals in elite society. Pareto (1935), in his theory of elite circulation, posits that elite governance propagates by superseding less innovative groups on the decline with more gifted social groups. However, circulation theory has been criticized due to its overemphasis on an open society and limited attention to the diverse contexts of transformation (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Tilly, 1978). Empirical studies on Western and Eastern societies find that the level of circulation is largely dependent on the political and organizational backgrounds of the transformation, and many old elites succeed in maintaining their status throughout the transition (Matsumoto & Okazaki, 2023; Sekulic, 2002; Szelényi & Szelényi, 1995; Walder & Hu, 2009).

The debate on the replacement and reproduction of elites also exists in the context of premodern East Asia. For example, scholars of premodern China initially paid attention to the replacement of royal family members from Mongols to Han Chinese during the transition from the Yuan to Ming dynasties (Hucker, 1958). However, recent studies have focused more on the preservation of worldviews and moral systems during transition. Although the establishment of the Ming dynasty is considered the beginning of China's modern era, the cosmopolitanism of the Yuan was essential for the politics and cultures of the Ming and Qing dynasties, as it provided opportunities for old elites to confer their knowledge and practices (Clunas, 2013; Makoto, 2005; Robinson, 2008, 2013; Watt & Leidy, 2005).

This continuity poses questions about how elites maintain their status during political turmoil. Previous research has primarily focused on institutional mechanisms. According to these studies, despite losing the traditional apparatus with which they maintain and reproduce their social status, elites could leverage new institutional arrangements, such as the educational system or the new government's hiring process (Matsumoto & Okazaki, 2023; Walder & Hu, 2009). However, these strategies are not limited to the use of resources in the central government but also extend to the use of formal or informal connections to other elite groups (Benz et al., 2024; Padgett, 2010; Padgett & Ansell, 1993).

This study focuses on *locality* as one of the mechanisms for the change and continuity of elite groups. Locality denotes the political and social power of elites based on local institutions and kinship-based communities, distinct from the political institutions of the central government. The locality of ruling elites has often been discussed in relation to the development of kinship groups in Korea. Previously, elites and their families resided in their ancestral seats where they had accumulated local power over generations. Along with an increase in internal migration and subsequent geographic dispersion of their residential areas, elite families began to develop independent group identities. During the transitional period between *Goryeo* and *Joseon* they started using their surnames and geographic origins—their so-called *bongwan* (本貫) (An, 2013; Chai, 2000; Lee, 1984, 2003; Song, 1987). The emergence of *bongwan* can be captured by the

compilation of private *jokbo* (族譜, genealogy books) from the early *Joseon* period. In these *jokbo*, members of elite families—including founding members, their spouses, and offspring, regardless of their sex—are followed up on even when they leave their hometowns because of marriages or new positions in the central government (Lee & Lee, 2017; Lee & Park, 2008). The separation of *bongwan* and residential areas is not only significant from a historical perspective, as evidence for the reconfiguration of locality in early *Joseon*, but it's also important from a methodological perspective, since we can examine the locality of elites by linking families in different regions via their *bongwan*. Throughout this study, *surname-bongwans* are used as unique identifiers for elite families and placed in square brackets (e.g., [*Andong Kwon*]) to distinguish these identifiers from *surname-regions*, which refer to surnames of families residing in specific regions (e.g., surname *Kwon* in *Andong*).

Methods

Data are pulled from the sections for *prominent figures* and *surnames* found in two Korean gazetteers: *Sejong Silok Jiriji* (世宗實錄地理志, 1452) and *Sinjeung Dongguk Yeojiseungram* (新增東國輿地勝覽, 1530) (hereafter, G1 and G2 for simplicity). G1 and G2 are organized by chapters covering approximately 300 administrative units which are further grouped into administrative divisions by rank—*Bu* (府), *Daedohobu* (大都護府), *Mok* (牧), *Dohobu* (都護府), *Gun* (郡), and *Hyeon* (縣). Furthermore, these units are nested within eight *Dos* (道), the largest geographic divisions in *Joseon*. Since compilation of *Sejong Silok Jiri* was initiated only a few decades after the foundation of *Joseon* (1392), it is expected to reflect the sociopolitical vestiges of the *Goryeo* dynasty. By comparing *Sejong Silok Jiri* and *Sinjeungdongguk Yeoji Seungram*, we aim to reveal the temporal patterns of social status and locality of elite families during the transitional period from *Goryeo* to *Joseon*.

Our goal is to measure the continuity and changes in the status of elite families during the dynastic transition, and examine the association between their status and locality using the data from two gazetteers from *Joseon*. The analysis follows three steps. (1) We propose new scores for the status of *surname-bongwans* through principal component analysis (PCA) (Wold et al., 1987). Through a series of regression models, (2) we test if our family scores are associated with the dispersion of *surname-bongwan*'s prominent figures, and (3) if our family scores are associated with the dispersion of *surname-regions*. In these tests, family scores of *surname-bongwans* are assigned to *surname-regions*, based on the geographic bases of *surname-bongwan*'s prominent figures.

Results

We compute two summary scores for family status: *ruling* and *rising*. The first score, *ruling*, is positively associated with all count variables of governmental officials in *Goryeo* and *Joseon*, yielding higher scores for families that have produced many high-ranking officials on average during these dynastic periods. On the other hand, the second score, *rising*, is negatively associated with the count in *Goryeo* but positively associated with the number of officials in *Joseon*, indicating families who have expanded their social power during the *Goryeo* to *Joseon* transition. **Figure 1** illustrates *surname-bongwans* and their family scores. By differentiating spaces in this graph, we can clarify the temporal dynamics of family status during the dynastic transition.

To test the geographic dispersion of *surname-bongwans*, we count the number of administrative units where prominent figures from each *surname-bongwan* are affiliated. As shown in **Table 1**, the *ruling* score is positively associated with more geographic units, and more strongly with the maintenance than change of units over two dynastic periods. In contrast, the

rising score is only positively correlated with the number of units in *Joseon*, and more strongly with the addition than maintenance or loss of units.

By linking family scores of *surname-bongwans* with *surname-regions*, we examine more micro-mechanisms of geographic trends, focusing on within-*Do* dispersion and changes in administrative ranks. In **Table 2**, we examine regression of *disappearing*, *entering*, and *maintaining surname-bongwans* from those not identified (or identified as *extinct*) in both gazetteers. In Model (2), family scores have no meaningful association with *entering* surnames; families maintain their locality when their region-specific *ruling* is higher (RR=1.23, $p<0.01$) or *Do*-maximum *rising* is higher (RR=1.10, $p<0.05$); in contrast, the *ruling* score has a positive association with the risk of disappearing at both the region (RR=1.30, $p<0.001$) and *Do* (RR=1.15, $p<0.05$) levels.

Figures 2 and 3 show examples of geographic dispersion for [*Andong Kwon*] and [*Haeju Choi*]. [*Andong Kwon*] in **Figure 2**, characterized by its high *rising* score, has successfully maintained its geographic dispersion, and even appeared in a new region (*Yean-hyun* 禮安縣) as an *indigenous* surname. In contrast, [*Haeju Choi*] in **Figure 3**, once powerful but its status declining in *Joseon*, is disappearing from two southern regions (*Gangryeong-hyun* 康翎縣, *Yeonan-dohobu* 延安都護府) of *Hwanghae-do*, where *Choi* was introduced as *new* surnames in G1. Our regression analyses show that these patterns are not unique to these two families but extend to other elite families during the dynastic transition from *Goryeo* to *Joseon*.

Conclusion

In summary, a series of regression models reveal that *ruling* families were more successful initially in establishing local footholds after the foundation of *Joseon* than *rising* families were. However, over the following century, *rising* families were effectively maintaining their dispersion within proximate regions, while *ruling* families were increasingly losing their local footholds. Instead, *ruling* families were strengthening their local influence by increasing the administrative ranks of their remaining local bases. These findings underscore the critical interplay between continuity and change in elite families and their locality, highlighting gazetteers as a valuable resource for studying regional power dynamics during periods of political transition.

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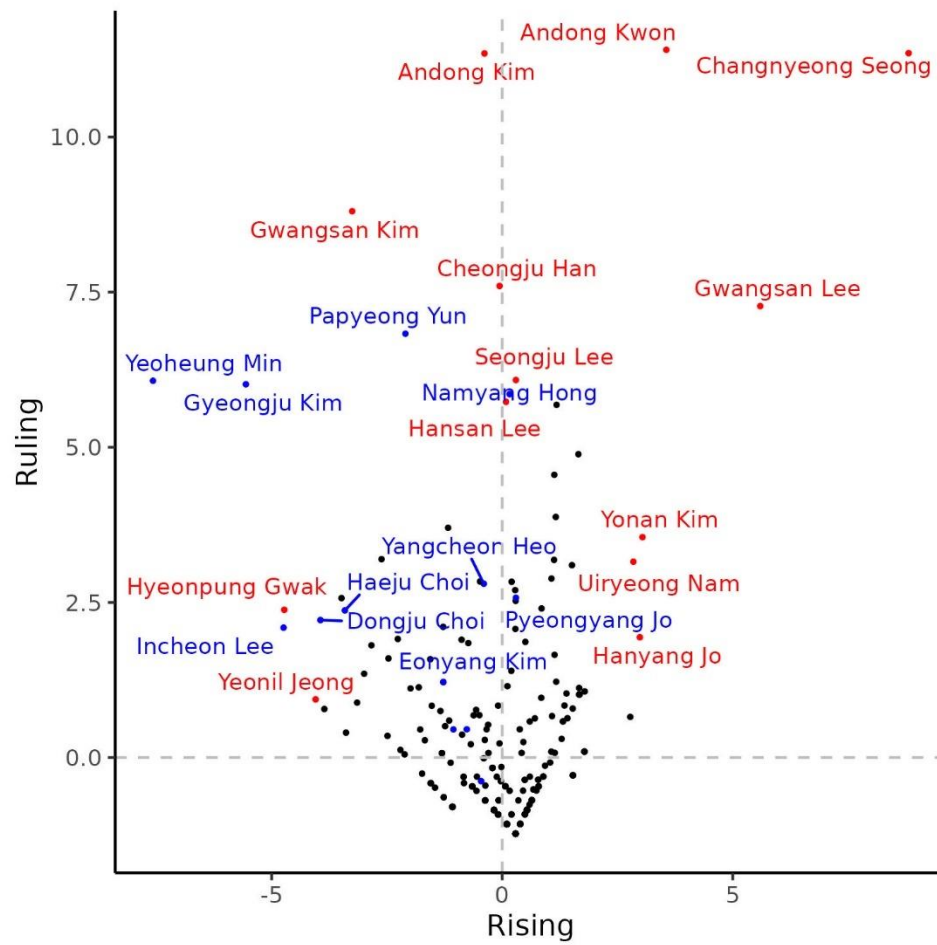


Figure 1. Family Scores for Ruling and Rising

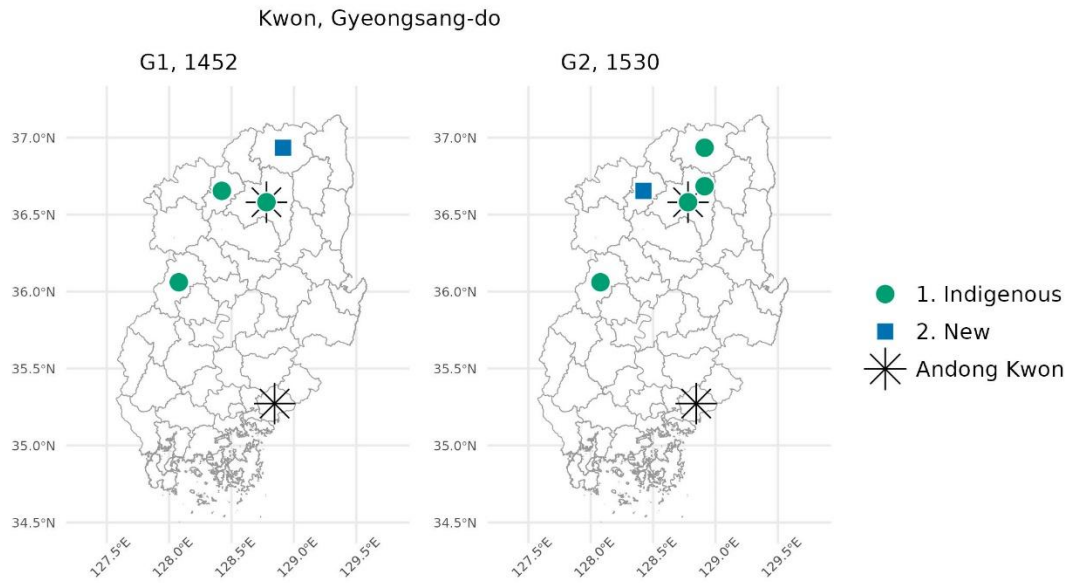


Figure 2. Geographic Dispersion of Surname *Kwon* (權) in *Gyeongsang-do* (慶尙道)

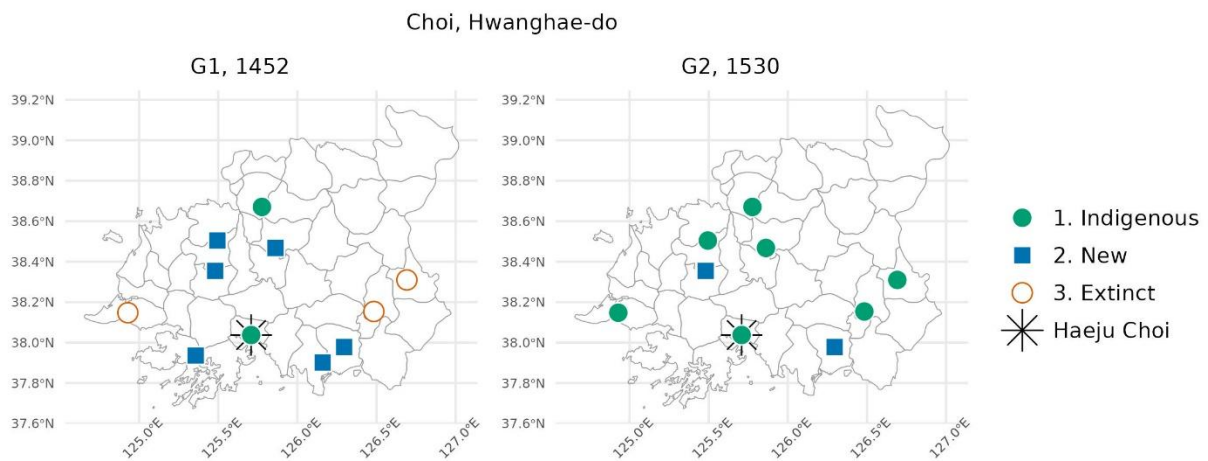


Figure 3. Geographic Dispersion of Surname *Choi* (崔) in *Hwanghae-do* (黃海道)

Table 1. Correlation Between Family Scores and Geographic Dispersion

	(1) Ruling	(2) Rising
# Administrative unit	0.55*	-0.01
# Administrative unit in <i>Goryeo</i>	0.42*	-0.46*
# Administrative unit in <i>Joseon</i>	0.54*	0.33*
# Administrative unit, maintained	0.63*	-0.10
# Administrative unit, lost	-0.01	-0.44*
# Administrative unit, added	0.20*	0.45*
# Do (道)	0.55*	-0.01
# Do (道) in <i>Goryeo</i>	0.40*	-0.42*
# Do (道) in <i>Joseon</i>	0.55*	0.31*
# Do (道), maintained	0.63*	-0.09
# Do (道), lost	-0.08	-0.38*
# Do (道), added	0.16	0.46*
N	380	

Note. * $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Surname Identification Across Two Gazetteers From 1452 to 1530

	(1)			(2)		
	Disappearing	Entering	Maintaining	Disappearing	Entering	Maintaining
Ruling	1.30*** [1.14,1.49]	1.07 [0.93,1.23]	1.24*** [1.09,1.40]	1.27*** [1.12,1.43]	1.07 [0.93,1.22]	1.23** [1.09,1.40]
Rising	0.95 [0.59,1.54]	1.11 [0.91,1.36]	1.10 [0.93,1.31]	0.99 [0.60,1.66]	1.13 [0.92,1.39]	1.09 [0.92,1.29]
Ruling, <i>Do</i> -max				1.15* [1.03,1.29]	1.02 [0.97,1.07]	1.00 [0.95,1.05]
Rising, <i>Do</i> -max				0.77 [0.56,1.05]	0.94 [0.81,1.09]	1.10* [1.01,1.19]
N	87077			87077		
pseudo R^2	0.20			0.20		

Note. Exponentiated coefficients are reports. 95% confidence intervals are in brackets. Standard errors are robust to clustering at the level of surname-*Do*. All models are adjusted for surname fixed effects, *Do* fixed effects, and administrative ranks in G1.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$