Korea, misnamed the Land of the Morning Calm, could much more appropriately be called the Land of the Kye. For even in the past, the number of Koreans who at any time had the opportunity to enjoy calm mornings must have been small, and their numbers must have become even smaller as Korea has become one of the most densely populated areas in the world, a country plagued by noise. There are reasons to believe that at any one time between the mid-1920s and the early 1970s, an average of 10 per cent or 12 per cent of the Korean population were involved in kye affairs, with their numbers perhaps reaching a peak of 20 per cent early in the period. The number of kye members was no smaller than that of Korean Christians during the same period. If we consider Christianity an important part of Korean life during the past decades, the same must be said of the kye, though of course Christianity and kye affect people in quite different ways.

WHAT IS A KYE?

I here talk about kye as collective enterprises that are concerned with the raising and spending of material means – which today means money. By emphasizing the concern with money, I do not take fully into account the Korean usage of the term kye. Koreans tend to apply the term to any association that is not a parish, a modern Western-style club, a labour or a political union, or not primarily based on kinship. The term kye may be, and often is, applied to associations which are not characterized by any particular dealing with money and even to associations which outwardly appear to have purely convivial motives. There are two reasons, however, why I nevertheless emphasize the concern with money. In the first place, it appears to me that associations called kye, which at some points in time are purely social in character, may become instrumental in acquiring and spending money at other times. In my view, kye, at least potentially, have always been to do with money. Korean observers appear to be either unaware of this potential or tend not to talk about it. The reason for their silence may be that involvement in a kye is often accompanied by a loss of money. Since any loss is unpleasant
and not to be readily talked about, Koreans may feel it best to avoid dis-
cussing the material origins of kye. Secondly, it is only by including and even
placing uppermost the financial concerns of kye that a study reveals the clues
to wider aspects of the economy, society and culture of Korea. This, after all,
is the ultimate purpose of such a study.

People who start a kye do so by raising money from among their own ranks
and thereby form a capital stock. The stock, or part of it, is then lent out for a
limited period of time – usually six months. At the end of the term, the money
will be re-collected together with interest. By giving loans and collecting
interest, a kye continually increases its assets. Kye business may thus be basi-
cally said to be an effort to obtain financial gains.

In terms of membership, kye are small associations. Most will comprise not
more than twenty to twenty-five people. Many will only accept household
heads as members, who then act on behalf of their households. This is why
the number of people actually affected by kye is much larger than that of
actual members. A kye membership will meet at regular intervals to draw up
balance-sheets and to take decisions on the future use of assets. Such meet-
ings invariably coincide with the end of a loan term. From among its own
ranks, a kye will elect three or four officers who run the kye business for a cer-
tain period and then step down to be replaced after new elections. Kye are
thus egalitarian and democratic in nature.

I should add here that membership of an individual kye is never composed
entirely of kin. Kye may serve the interests of kin groups, as at least one type
actually does, but only in an indirect way. In recent times it is apparent that
kye have never been instruments of one single kin group. Even the kye that do
serve the requirements and interests of kin groups are unions of several such
groups, each of which is represented by one member. Rather than being kin-
ship associations then, kye are unions of people who share a common social
and economic background or who are age peers.

I have not so far said what kye do with their gains. In short, they use them
for the acquisition and maintenance of anything that can be bought and kept
with money, including money itself. In the light of this, I suggest a subdivision
into three categories. In the first category, kye will give money to anybody
who for whatever reason is in need of it and whom the kye members deem
able to pay back in a prescribed time. Such kye are in fact small-scale loan
banks. They respond to the needs of people who are either unwilling to turn
to the public banking system or who have no chance to obtain money from
that system. Naturally, such kye were essential to the economic life of Korea
when there was no public system, or when public banks were less developed
than today. These kye were more or less urban affairs and were often run by
women.

In the second category, kye spend their gains on ends which are collectively
pursued by members. Such collective ends are chosen from a large variety
which comprise such divergent activities as the organization of picnics, the
arrangement of communal festivities, the purchase and the raising of oxen,
swine or poultry, the purchase and maintenance of tools and agricultural
machinery, and the maintenance and common exploitation of woodland.