10. WHEN DID JOSEON’S POPULATION REACH TEN MILLION?

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Korea underwent tremendous population growth during the twentieth century. Despite all the turbulence of the modern period, the population of the peninsula quadrupled. The country began the century with around seventeen million people. In the year 2009, the population of South Korea was about forty-eight million, ranking twenty-fourth in the world – similar in size to Spain and South Africa. North Korea had an estimated population of about twenty-four million in 2009, which ranked fifty-first in the world. Countries of comparable numbers include Yemen and Mozambique. If the two Koreas reunified, the total population of seventy-two million would rank eighteenth in the world. It would have more people than France, Congo, and Turkey, but fewer than Germany, Egypt, and Iran. The city of Seoul has undergone perhaps even more remarkable population growth. Its population was almost 10.5 million in 2009, which made it the eighth largest city in the world. In terms of the entire metropolitan area, it would be the second largest, behind only Tokyo.

Joseon also experienced significant demographic change during the 518 years of its existence. At its founding in 1392, the population was about 5.5 million people, and it was around seventeen million at its end in 1910. As the title indicates, this chapter begins by trying to answer the question of when the population of the country reached ten million. Though this is an arbitrary number, it can serve as a rough indicator of the achievement of a certain level of economic and social development. European countries generally did not exceed the ten million mark until they were well into the modern period, with the exception of large polities such as France and the Holy Roman Empire. The population of Spain reached ten million in the late eighteenth century, and England did not do so until the early nineteenth century. In the case of the United States, it surpassed ten million some time in the 1820s. By contrast, the population of Japan increased to ten million by the year 1500 at the latest. Joseon's population reached ten million probably a little later than Japan but earlier than many European polities. Since population change is one of the main determinants of human life, examining its underlying factors can reveal much about a historical era. This chapter discusses the Joseon government’s
method of collecting population data, its relation to the social status system, and the urbanization of Seoul in the late Joseon period.

Population Statistics and Household Data

Though the Joseon government did collect data on its population, its census counted households rather than individuals. A census was supposed to be conducted every three years to update the household registers (hojeok). Each household submitted a household report to their local government office, which compiled the information and sent it to the central government. The census was not based on data directly collected by the government but on voluntary reports from households. The government compared the new data with that of the previous census and updated their household statistics. For several reasons, household registers were of limited accuracy in measuring the actual changes in population. First, during the Joseon period, people were divided into four main age groups – old (老, no), able-bodied (壯, jang), weak (弱, yak), and child (兒, a), but it was customary not to record children less than ten years of age because of the high infant mortality rate. Second, census data was not seen as essential to formulating government policy as is the case today. Instead, the government saw the size of households and the population as a measure of the virtuous rule of the king. Since the number of households increased in times of peace and prosperity, an increase in households was viewed as a manifestation of kingly virtue. The number of households under his rule was presented to the king in a ceremony called the heon-minsu. The Joseon government had much less interest in measuring the population accurately than modern-day governments do.

Of course, the government used household statistics for more practical purposes as well. First, they were used to calculate the number of taxpayers. The census counted the number of households and of able-bodied men who could fulfill their military obligation or provide statute labor rather than measuring population change. The data were not directly used to set economic policy or to address the problems of its citizens. Second, when local magistrates were evaluated on their performance, one of the criteria was the change in the number of households. The government’s goal was more to firm up state finances than to demonstrate the king’s virtuous rule. Even if the population had decreased because of an epidemic or severe famine, they reported the same number of households to the government in order to receive high marks on their evaluation. On the