Villages, the basic units of rural community, were the setting for a complex social life in which people engaged in daily rituals, communal events, and collective labor. Within them, there were organizations that managed these various activities; they developed over a long period of time and had long-standing traditions. Over the ages, they had different names and differed in nature according to the overall social structure. In the Joseon period, a variety of organizations existed at the village level such as the community compact and various kinds of gye. One of the most important was the dure, which organized the labor of the village and provided aid to its members. Many different kinds of organization can be classified as dure, such as the hwangdu in regions where dry-field cultivation was predominant, the sunureum of Jeju Island, and the putgut of Gyeongsang province. It originated as a communal labor organization in a few regions and then spread to the rest of the country as a result of changes in agricultural methods. It consisted of the able-bodied men of the village who managed the community's affairs. Among the various peasant organizations in Korean history, the dure were unique because of the social status of its members. They were created by the peasants themselves and operated at the level of the village. Rather than simply being a labor organization, they were involved in the entire life of the village. Its members worked together to organize the village's cultural activities such as communal rituals, music, and statute labor. This chapter examines their emergence and provides an overview of how they operated, including their involvement in seasonal rituals.

The Predecessors of the Dure

Village organizations have existed throughout Korean history, and they underwent changes as they remained somewhat beyond the reach of the ruling ideology and institutions. They can be seen as forming the deep structure of communal life in traditional society. One of the oldest types of organization was the gye, which is still common today. They were communal organizations that performed a variety of functions and whose
exact origins are unclear. These organizations were so widespread in the mid-Joseon period that Yi Sugwang (1563–1628) observed in his Jibung yuseol that “in every part of the region, everyone is forming gye whose members provide aid to each other.”

The predecessors of the dure included the hyangdo and the various donggye of the Goryeo and Joseon periods. First, the hyangdo was a traditional form of village organization that usually operated at the level of the natural village. Coming from the lower classes, its membership ranged from under ten to as many as 100 people. They organized events central to the life of the village, such as communal labor, weddings, funerals, folk customs, and rituals related to shamanistic beliefs. Rites focusing on natural deities had a long tradition, expressing the beliefs of a society that was primarily engaged in agricultural cultivation. It is entirely possible that such beliefs continued into the Joseon period in latent form since Joseon was an agrarian society. This also seems to be supported by the fact that peasant music and rituals have been passed down to the present.

Seong Hyeon (1439–1548) described hyangdo festivals as follows in Yongjae chonghwa:

In most cases, the lowborn in the neighborhood gather together and hold a meeting. The number of people ranges from seven to nine to as many as about 100. They meet every month to drink, changing the site each time. If someone suffers a death in the family, the hyangdo would prepare the mourning clothes and make the coffin and food. Sometimes, they would help carry the funeral bier and prepare the gravesite. This is a truly good custom.

In the late Joseon period, Heo Mok (1595–1682) wrote in his work Gieon that “on days when rites were performed, [people] prayed and tried to divine the quality of the harvest as well as natural events of the new year such as droughts, floods, and epidemics.” These texts provide a glance into how communities conducted their lives before the adoption of Neo-Confucian ideology and how traditional village organizations performed a variety of roles.

Second, donggye were communal organizations at the level of the village or the lowest units of provincial administrative such as the dong or ri. Also called daedonggye or dongningye, they managed communal property in order to provide aid to their members. They contained traces of earlier forms of peasant organization such as the gye. In Yeongam county, South Jeolla province, the village of Gurim had a donggye that held its meetings in a pavilion called the Hoesajeong. Its members “put on wooden shoes to harvest the rice and used it to help each other.” Its origins show that the communal ties formed through the hyangdo in the early Joseon period