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

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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 (Myŏnjujŏn), one thing that stood out among the everyday administrative expenses of the organization was the frequent appearance of large quantities of tobacco. 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 the Silk Merchants’ Guild. From this initial observation a number of questions arose. First, was it possible to quantify the use of tobacco by the Myŏnjujŏn members and analyse its social purposes in the organization? Second, how does the distribution of large quantities of tobacco to guild members fit into the broader picture of gift 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 organizations 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.

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Figure 1. Korea in the late Chosŏn period (1895).
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