

East Asia Section

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Trip to Henry County

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One generation ago, one male adult farmer could cut and husk 100 bushels of corn per day. Nowadays, with help of combine harvesters, a man can harvest 3,000 bushels of corns an hour, working 10 to 12 hours a day for a whole month to harvest all the corn he planted at his some 600 acre "family farm" in Henry County, IL. Yet, his farm is considered "small" by today's standards, when a family farm corporation with two male workers can cultivate 2,000-3,000 acres. This difference in scale is astounding when compared to East Asian countries like Japan and Korea, where an average family holding is about two and a half acres.

It is not only the scale that divides Japanese or Korean family farms and their counterparts in the US. The level of mechanization, as well as that of participation in the global market, also seems to distinguish American farmers. Despite frequent references to the excessive mechanization of Japanese farming, in fact only paddy cultivation is highly mechanized, while other crops are produced and harvested largely by human labor. In Japan or Korea, therefore, one often sees women or men actually working in the field, cutting vegetables and spraying herbicides. What I saw in the farms of Henry County are instead huge monstrous machines put into use to produce cattle grains to be sold in China or elsewhere in the world. Here, land does not seem to be something to be tilled by hand, plot by plot, and handed down from generation to generation within the family. Land is instead something to be exploited



Ok-pyo Moon boarding a combine-harvester,
Marion Calmer family farm, Henry County, IL.

Photo by J L Watson

to its maximum to meet the ever-growing demand for profits. In fact, the continuous drive to expand farm size, as well as the use of machinery in their struggle to increase productivity and competition, has driven more and more people out of farming in the US.

Certain social and cultural features of farm villages and farmers' life, however, appear to be strikingly similar. Population drain and the consequent aging of the remaining population are evidently something Korean, Japanese and American farm villages all share in common. Farmers in America, like those in Japan or in Korea, are constantly complaining about the difficulties of continuing family farming. Despite the incomparable scale, they also seem to think that there is no future for "family farms" in the face of increasing penetration of agribusinesses in the industry. It is also interesting to note that kinship is very much at work in knitting the community together. In the village in Henry County that I visited in the summer of 2001, for instance, most residents reckon themselves related as descendants of the original settlers who came from Sweden some 150 years ago. Their ancestry is not traced through unilineal lineages as in a Korean village, but rather by what an anthropologist might term "bilateral kindred." Yet, people reproduce their kinship ties with the same eagerness and expertise as a Korean villager tracing their patrilineal ancestry three or four hundred years back. Also, just as Shinto shrines in rural Japan are struggling to attract people's attention with seasonal festivals, churches seem to be struggling to revive and maintain their crumbling community with ever-frequent wedding showers, baby showers, ice-cream socials, community suppers and other events in rural America.

It has mostly been the Asians, Africans or the Pacific Islanders that have been "created" as the other by anthropologists. "Village America," with its close-knit, face-to-face interactions and empty streets where the few drivers wave their hands to every passerby, has indeed presented an impressive otherness to a Korean anthropologist from a metropolis with more than 10 million people.

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