2 Slavery in Shilla

Compared to both Koguryŏ and Päkce, the ancient kingdom of Shilla was a "developmental latecomer" whose state formation began in the late fourth century.[1] Initially allied with Koguryŏ, Shilla increasingly became its nemesis from the sixth century onward, eventually conquering the entire Korean peninsula in 698 and ending the Three Kingdoms period. Much of later Korean culture is rooted in the traditions of Shilla.[2] This is also true of slavery. Shilla is, based on all that we know today, the first society in Korean history that had fully institutionalized hereditary slavery.[3]

Throughout its history, Shilla maintained "a poorly differentiated system in which political roles were closely linked to social status," whose agents were "embedded in ascriptive collectivities."[4] As Yi Sugwang noted in his early seventeenth-century encyclopedic collection *Cibong Yusŏl*, "the institutionalization of slavery began in the Shilla period."[5] Similarly, Cŏng Yagyong concluded in the early nineteenth century that slavery was "a custom probably invented by the prominent families of Shilla and Koryŏ."[6] In the eighteenth century, An Cŏngbok pointed in the same direction:

> Although there is no historical record, upon examining the origins of this flawed practice, it may have begun during the period of the Three Kingdoms. At that time, the noble families and high officials maintained their power across generations, especially in Shilla.[7]

These statements should not be misunderstood as historical evidence. There are political reasons why, in the discourse of the late Cosŏn period, the beginnings of slavery were shifted to the time of Shilla: This served to deprive slavery of the status of a sacred institution, instituted by the cultural hero Kija and therefore inviolable, and thus to make it open for reform or even abolition. In order to gain a full understanding of slavery in Shilla, it is therefore necessary to look at both the historiographical tradition and the rather limited number of contemporary sources available.

1 Barnes 2004: 15.

2 W.-J. Lee, Woo, C. Oh, et al. 2016: 1–2.

3 One of the misconceptions that still dominate much of Western scholarship on the subject is Palais' apodictic assertion that "hereditary slavery began early in the Koryŏ dynasty": Palais 1995: 415; (South) Korean scholars are convinced it was established in the Shilla period: Yim Haksŏng 2013: 77.

4 Duncan 2000: 15.

5 Yi Sugwang 1915a: 87.

6 Quoted in Hiraki 1982: 220.

7 *Tongsa Kangmok*, B. 6, Ch. 1, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/東史綱目/第六 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Cf. Palais 1996: 262.

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2.1 Slavery in the Samguk Sagi

We must bear in mind that ancient Korean history is only recorded in some contemporary Chinese chronicles, in Japanese chronicles from the eighth century, and in Korean chronicles from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Thus, these records are filtered through the selective lenses of foreigners or Koreans of a later age. Overall, these records show that slaves

> functioned primarily as domestic servants and attendants, participated in some agricultural and manufacturing activities, and served in auxiliary roles in the military.[8]

In the *Samguk Sagi*, the fifty-volume official *History of the Three Kingdoms*, compiled by the scholar-politician Kim Pushik in 1145, it is reported that in 378, a general of the Shilla Kingdom, Sŏk Uno, "jokingly" insulted an ambassador from Japan during a reception by saying: "Sooner or later your king will be our salt slave and your queen our kitchen maid." This did not sit well with the Japanese, who launched an invasion to take revenge and burned Sŏk Uno to death when he came to apologize for his "joke."[9] However, since archaeological evidence suggests that the rise of Shilla in the fourth century was indeed linked to increased trade, especially in iron, with Japan, and that foreigners involved in that trade may even have been integrated into Shilla society itself, with "ethnic differentiation" being used to increase the status and power of the Shilla kings,[10] this strange story is not necessarily absurd, both chronologically and substantively.

Nevertheless, to call a foreign king a slave was clearly an unforgivable insult and outrage. Slaves were despised and considered a disgrace;[11] they were regarded "as the most degraded level of existence."[12]

The *Samguk Sagi* contains other episodes that emphasize the role of slaves in warfare. In the winter of 605, Päkce launched a major invasion against Shilla. A Shilla officer named Nulchö led the defense of one of the six targeted fortresses, but their situation was hopeless. Nulchö inspired his soldiers to fight on, even in the face of almost certain defeat.

> Nulchö had a slave who was strong and skilled in archery. Someone once said, "A small person with exceptional talent often brings trouble. You should distance yourself from this slave." Nulchö did not listen. When the fortress fell and the enemy entered, the slave drew his bow and arrow in front of Nulchö, hitting his mark without fail, and the enemy dared not approach. One enemy came

8 Co Pŏpcong 2003: 181.

9 *Samguk Sagi* 45, Biographies 6, Sŏk Uno: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 434–35; Co Pŏpcong 2003: 166; Zöllner 2017: 69–70.

10 Barnes 2004: 35.

11 Co Pŏpcong 2003: 168.

12 Ibid.: 177.

> from behind and struck Nulchö with an axe, causing him to fall. The slave turned and fought, dying alongside him.[13]

Calling this nameless slave "a small person with exceptional talent" implied that he was "a person with undesirable qualities, a potential adversary."[14] So when slaves proved their loyalty on the battlefield, this served as a counterproof against such prejudices. About forty years later, in 647, Päkce attacked Shilla again with a mighty force, with General Kim Yushin (595–673) leading the defense, but their situation was desperate. Yushin then asked a brave soldier named Pinyŏngja to lead a suicide attack on the enemy. Pinyŏngja accepted:

> He went out and told his slave Hapcŏl, "Today, I will die for the country and my confidant [Yushin]. My son Kŏjin, though young, has great ambition and wishes to die with me. If both father and son die, who will our family rely on? You must take good care of Kŏjin and bring back my body to comfort his mother." After speaking, he mounted his horse, brandished his spear, and charged into the enemy formation, killing several before dying. Kŏjin, seeing this, wanted to follow, but Hapcŏl pleaded, "Your father instructed me to take the young master home and comfort your mother. Now you abandon your father's command and your mother's care; is this filial?" He held the reins and would not let go. Kŏjin said, "Seeing my father die and seeking to live, how can I be called a filial son?" He then struck Hapcŏl's arm with his sword and rushed into the enemy to fight to the death. Hapcŏl said, "With the heaven falling, how can I not die?" and also attacked and died. The soldiers, seeing the three die, were inspired and advanced fiercely, breaking through the enemy lines and inflicting a great defeat on the Päkce army, beheading over three thousand. Yushin collected the three bodies, covered them with his clothes, and wept bitterly. When the king heard of this, he wept as well and ordered that they be buried with honors at Mount Panji. He generously rewarded their families and their nine generations.[15]

However, the motive for Hapcŏl's sacrifice is ultimately unclear. Did he seek death out of courage or despair? Or because he could not carry out his old master's order to return the young master to his mother? Or because he realized that the family of his two masters had no future after their deaths and that his own existence was therefore at risk? Does his desperate exclamation that the heaven was falling indicate a strong emotional bond with his masters?

Or maybe Hapcŏl thought that dying an honorable death was better than losing the battle and being enslaved by the enemy once again. People of the time knew all too well that defeat in war often meant a march into slavery for the survivors. As wars raged throughout these centuries, prisoners of war were the primary source of slaves. In addition, the populations of conquered territories were summarily treated as second-

13 SS 47, Biographies 7, Nulchö. Chŏng Kubok 1996: 449–50.

14 Co Pŏpcong 2003: 178; in the Cosŏn period, the same term, "small person," was the expected self-reference for members for the *päkcŏng* outcastes: K.-J. Kwon 2014: 176–77.

15 SS. 47, Biographies 7, Pinyŏngja: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 453; cf. SS 41, Biographies 1: Kim Yushin. Chŏng Kubok 1996: 408.

class people whose loyalty was questionable and who had to be subjugated by force and strict control; just like slaves.

General Kim Yushin had these three fallen heroes, including the slave, buried with honor, and the king also rewarded the family of the dead. A few years later, it is reported that the king made rich men of Kim Yushin and his fellow Kim Inmun after their victory in their campaign against Koguryŏ:

> In recognition of their merits, the palace's wealth, estates, and slaves were divided equally and awarded to Yushin and Inmun.[16]

Land and slaves were the currency with which kings rewarded their generals. This was the currency that formed the basis of their rule.

2.2 Slavery in the Hwarang Segi

The *hwarang* (lit. "flower boys") were a somewhat mysterious unit composed of attractive young men, allegedly installed during the rule of King Pŏphŭng of Shilla. In 1989, it was claimed that the manuscript of the *Hwarang Segi*, an early eighth-century history of the *hwarang* briefly mentioned in the *Samguk Sagi* but thought to have been lost after the twelfth century, had been rediscovered. Allegedly, a Korean scholar, Pak Changhwa, had obtained a copy of the work while serving at the Imperial Household Library of Japan between 1934 and 1945. But it seems more likely that Pak, who was also known as both a specialist in the history of Shilla and the author of historical novels, forged it himself, since much information given in the text "contradicts evidence from the traditional sources."[17] However, it has also been claimed by some that the very use of the words for slaves in this text, "indicating a master-servant relationship," suggests that it "must be an authentic work from at least the seventh century."[18] Thus, the following notes are provided with reservations on the authenticity of the source and should be read with caution. If it is a forgery, then "discussing the slave system based on this manuscript is meaningless."[19]

The tenth of the *hwarang* leaders was Duke Mi Säng, son of Mi Chinbu, who, according to the *Samguk Sagi*, was one of the military leaders in the campaign against Koguryŏ in the 550s. The *Hwarang Segi* claims that

> once, a slave of the Duke stole his jade cup. When the Duke was about to punish him, the slave fled over a wall, injuring his foot and bleeding. The Duke's mother witnessed this and reprimanded him, saying, "Slaves are like hands and feet while utensils are mere objects. How can you harm a

16 SS 6, Munmu, Y. 2: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 74.
17 McBride 2005: 252.
18 Co Pŏpcong 2003: 165.
19 Yi Inchŏl 2003: 178.

> person over a thing? External relations are already something people dread. You, possessing the favor of your mother and sister, and being wealthy across the land, cannot humble yourself to love your subjects. I am deeply ashamed of this."
> The Duke then descended the steps and released the slave, personally tending to him with generous medical care. After this, he never questioned thieves, saying, "I fear injuring their feet." Consequently, theft ceased on its own.[20]

The phrase "hands and feet" is common in Chinese literature and indicates inseparable relationships. It can refer to equals (such as brothers), but also to top-down relationships, such as that between ruler and minister. But when Yang Sŏngji submitted a memorial on state affairs to King Sejo of Cosŏn in 1468, he famously wrote: "While land is the lifeblood of the (common) people, slaves are the hands and feet of the scholar-officials."[21] Thus, *if* the *Hwarang Segi* is authentic, we must assume that the relationship between masters and slaves in ancient and early modern times was apparently understood in much the same metaphors.

The twenty-second *hwarang* leader was Duke Kim Yangdo, who was one of Shilla's most distinguished generals in the campaigns against Päkce and Koguryŏ. Sent to the Tang empire on a diplomatic mission, he was captured and died in prison. The *Hwarang Segi* claims that he had to deal with a *hwarang* officer named Segi, who had a jealous and abusive wife:

> She was twelve years older than Segi and regarded him as a slave 視世己如奴僕. If he did not comply with her wishes, she would beat him severely without restraint.[22]

The phrase "regarded him as a slave" (or "treated him as a slave") must be understood metaphorically,[23] since her husband was obviously not a slave. But the metaphor implies that unruly slaves were usually beaten "without restraint" by their masters. So, if Segi was beaten by his wife for disobedience, he could reasonably be compared to a slave.

The *Hwarang Segi* describes the relationship between masters and slaves as unequal and characterized by a strong asymmetrical dependency. This conclusion, however, ironically contradicts the arguments of those who defend its authenticity because it is not at all specific for ancient Korea alone.

But there is another relevant claim in the Yangdo chapter. Originally, only the offspring of senior *hwarang* qualified for promotion to the higher ranks. This led to a peculiar custom:

> Therefore, when the wife of a *hwarang* leader became pregnant, she would offer a pheasant as a token to the Celestial Gate, entering as a bathhouse maid for several days or months. If she was

20 *Hwarang Segi* 10, https://zh.wikisource.org/zh/花郎世记 [accessed 29.07.2025].
21 CWS, Sejong, Y. 14:6:8 = May 29, 1468. Cf. Duncan 2000: 149.
22 *Hwarang Segi* 22, https://zh.wikisource.org/zh/花郎世记 [accessed 29.07.2025].
23 Yi Inchŏl 2003: 177.

> favored, she would return. During this time, her husband would spend lavishly on gifts to welcome her back, a custom called "Thanking Ceremony." Three months after giving birth, she would re-enter, offering sheep and pigs as tokens in a ceremony called "Washing Ceremony." If she was favored again, she would return, and her husband would once more perform the "Thanking Ceremony" to welcome her back. [...] Frivolous women who wished to enter the celestial gate would falsely claim to be pregnant, becoming bathhouse maids, but if they were not pregnant, they would secretly consort with celestial gate guards, sometimes resulting in celestial offspring, further exacerbating the problem.[24]

The Celestial Gate refers to the entrance to the Sacred Palace where grand performances to the gods were performed, said to be the cultic origins of the *hwarang*. Obviously, the royal family and high-ranking nobles were involved. The text seems to imply that they temporarily hired bathhouse maidens for these ceremonies and had sexual intercourse with those whom they favored. Therefore, these bathhouse maidens were not actual slaves but free women who voluntarily served "for several days or months." Yangdo is said to have abolished this practice and reformed the appointment of *hwarang* officers "based on talent."[25] If true, however, this practice would confirm, first, that maid servants were considered to be sexually available to their masters and, second, that a slave-like relationship could be entered into temporarily. Both phenomena are also constantly observed in the later stages of Korean history. In particular, "wine-serving bathhouse maid" (*cutang*) was a common Cosŏn-period term for a state courtesan.[26] Therefore, this observation does not necessarily confirm the authenticity of the *Hwarang Segi*. On the other hand, it has long been rumored that the "flower boys" had a homoerotic component. The beating around the bush of later Korean historians on this issue is understandable in the context of their neo-Confucian heteronormative ideas, but in Shilla, homosexuality was "openly and commonly practiced, so there is no need for suspicion."[27]

There is, however, another noteworthy piece of information in the biography of Kim Yangdo concerning his own children:

> The Duke had seven sons and daughters, and over ten illegitimate children. [...] Three sons and two daughters of the Duke all became slaves of Buddhist monks and nuns. This is well known as the family tradition of the Duke.[28]

The claim that several of Kim Yangdo's children became temple slaves is confirmed in (or might even come from) the thirteenth-century *Samguk Yusa*, at least for his daughters. The phenomenon of Shilla's temple slaves is of utmost importance and will be discussed in the next chapter.

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24 *Hwarang Segi* 22, https://zh.wikisource.org/zh/花郎世记 [accessed 29.07.2025].
25 *Hwarang Segi* 22, https://zh.wikisource.org/zh/花郎世记 [accessed 29.07.2025].
26 Yi Kyuri 2005: 79.
27 Ayukai 1973: 71.
28 *Hwarang Segi* 22, https://zh.wikisource.org/zh/花郎世记 [accessed 29.07.2025].

2.3 Self-Sacrifice: The (Pseudo) Temple Slaves of Shilla

With the introduction of Buddhism in the Three Kingdoms, a form of slavery emerged that was fundamentally different from the enslavement of prisoners of war or criminals. An entry in the thirteenth-century *Samguk Yusa* reports the first donation of temple slaves in the Shilla dynasty. It reads:

> After King Pŏphŭng established and completed the [Hŭngnyun] temple,[29] he renounced his throne, donned monastic robes, and dedicated palace attendants as temple slaves, who are still referred to as royal descendants to this day. Later, during the reign of King Thäjong, the minister Kim Yangdo, who had faith in Buddhism, had two daughters named Hwabo and Yŏnpo, who sacrificed themselves (捨身 *sashin*) as temple maids to this temple. Additionally, the descendants of the traitor Mo Chŏk[30] were also confiscated and made temple slaves. The descendants of these two families have continued to serve in the temple, personally undertaking the propagation of Buddhism.[31]

As in the case of the *hwarang*, we can take this as confirmation that Shilla underwent important socio-political changes in the first half of the sixth century. Moreover, the donation of male and female temple slaves, and especially the "self-sacrifice" into slavery, raises a crucial question regarding the cultural meaning of slavery. Yi Charang states:

> As is well known, the Buddha strictly prohibited the acceptance of male and female slaves (*dāsa*). The term *dāsa* refers to individuals who are in a state of being owned by someone else, deprived of their freedom, essentially referring to slaves or bondservants in Sanskrit. Male slaves are called *dāsa*, and female slaves are called *dāsī*. According to the *Vinaya*,[32] a *dāsa* or *dāsī* who received permission from their owner could receive full ordination and become a *bhikkhu* (monk) or *bhikkhuni* (nun). The status of an ordained *dāsa* was equal to that of other members. Although arrogant monks sometimes attacked them based on their origins, any action that caused disadvantage based on their pre-ordained status was never tolerated.[33]

29 In fact, the source confuses Pŏphŭng with his successor, his nephew and grandson King Cinhŭng, who in 544 made the Hŭngnyun Temple the first official Buddhist temple in Shilla's capital, Kyŏngju: *Samguk Sagi* B. 4, Cinhŭng-wang, Y. 5: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 51; this was a key event in the history of Buddhism because "Buddhism in Shilla really began with the completion of this Hŭngnyun Temple." Kamata 1987: 35.

30 He was "originally a S[h]illa person who defected to Päkce and conspired [...] to conquer the city" and was therefore executed in 660: SS, B. 5, Thäjong Muyŏl-wang, Y. 7: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 70; this incident also implies the existence of collective punishment: Co Pŏpcong 2003: 169.

31 *Samguk Yusa* 3. The *Samguk Yusa* is an unofficial history of the Three Kingdoms written by a Buddhist priest. It is "based on materials gathered from popular sources" and "takes a freer view" than the official *Samguk Sagi*, with a focus on Buddhism and "valuable records of folkways, myths, legends, ballads, beliefs, and the language of ancient Korea." *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 30–34.

32 Buddhist canonical texts that include rules and precepts for monks and nuns.

33 Yi Charang 2013: 102.

However, the practice of self-sacrifice or the sacrificing of one's family as an expression of deep faith in Buddhism had apparently existed in India and Sri Lanka since ancient times. This form of self-sacrifice gradually became associated with the concept of *dāsa*: Individuals would offer themselves or their families as slaves to a temple.[34] But there was a catch to it.

> That is, people would donate themselves, their families, or relatives as slaves [...] and then repurchase them with money to gain double merit. Kings with wealth and power would compete to donate themselves as pseudo-slaves to the monastic community and later have their ministers or family members pay their ransom to return to their original position. In other words, they gained double merit by donating themselves as pseudo-slaves to the monastic community and then liberating these donated dāsa by paying money to repurchase them.[35]

This idea spread to ancient China, where it was popularized in the *Sutra of Miscellaneous Jewels* (*Samyukta Ratnapitaka Sutra*), translated into Chinese in 472, and quickly gained popularity and lasting influence throughout East Asia. Consisting of ten volumes and 121 stories about the spread of Buddhism as well as folktales, and fables, and rich in literary quality, the Sutra was eventually included in the thirteenth-century *Tripitaka Koreana*, the authoritative East Asian Buddhist canon.[36] The stories focus on offering or giving (Sanskrit: *dāna*, 布施 *phoshi*) and particularly the seven forms of "*dāna* without wealth" (*mujä chilshi*) in order to attain "great karmic fruits." To exemplify the "giving of the body" (*sashin*), the sutra tells the story of a poor couple who "worked diligently day and night to prepare" for a religious gathering "to create good karma." But the king of their country wanted to hold a gathering on the same day and repeatedly ordered the husband to reschedule, which the husband declined. The king then went to the monastery and asked the husband why he insisted on this date. The man explained:

> Reflecting on my past, I realized I did not create good karma, which led to my current poverty. If I do not create good karma now, I fear even greater suffering in the future. Bearing this in mind, *I sold myself to obtain money to create merit and alleviate this suffering. After seven days, if I cannot repay the debt, I will become a slave.* Today is the sixth day; tomorrow the time will be up. For this reason, I am determined to hold the gathering on this day.[37]

The king was so deeply moved that he allowed the couple to hold the gathering as planned and gave his own clothes, jewelry, and those of his queen, as well as ten settlements, to the couple.

The idea of self-sacrifice soon made a lasting impact on spiritual life in East Asia. According to Funayama Tōru,

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34 Yi Charang 2013: 107.

35 Ibid.: 104.

36 Yi Kwanbok 2011: 151.

37 Emphasis added by R.Z, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/雜寶藏經/卷四 [accessed 29.07.2025].

> the term "self-sacrifice" refers to different practices depending on whether the person is a monastic or a layperson. For monastics, it involves actions such as setting part of their own body on fire or offering parts of their flesh to birds, animals, or others, thus discarding their physical health without concern. On the other hand, for laypeople, it often means giving away items such as money or clothing. A well-known example of the latter is Emperor Wu of Liang, who, as is widely known, offered himself as a slave three or four times.[38]

In the context of the imperial court, "self-sacrifice" became a highly symbolic act:

> The so-called "self-sacrifice" refers to these various acts of offering. However, if we were to specifically highlight the most notable instances, it would be the scenes where the emperor renounces his throne and offers himself as a slave (the disappearance of the emperor), and the scenes where the emperor's body is redeemed by his subjects with gold (the resurrection and rebirth of the emperor).[39]

Selling oneself (自賣身 *camäshin*) as a Buddha slave (佛奴 *pullo*) was therefore considered the highest *dāna* a Buddhist faithful could make. Of course, the intent was to be immediately freed by the payments of one's vassals or kinsmen, so this kind of Buddha slave was indeed "simply a fake slave."[40]

What is particularly relevant for this study, however, is that relations between China and Shilla began precisely at this time. It was King Pŏphŭng who sent envoys to the court of Liang for the first time in 521.[41] Seven years later, in 528, Buddhism was officially introduced in Shilla—by the Liang empire.[42] These Buddhist-inspired relations continued under Pŏphŭng's successor, Cinhŭng. During the whole period, Wu—who had self-sacrificed himself several times as a temple slave—was the emperor of Liang.

Therefore, there can be little doubt that the idea of self-sacrifice as practiced by Emperor Wu inspired the behavior of the Shilla kings and their vassals, as recorded in the *Samguk Yusa*.[43] However, the kings and nobles of Shilla apparently preferred not to sell themselves into temple slavery, but instead chose to send their relatives, including their own children. It also appears that they did not bother to buy their freedom back; rather, they and their descendants seem to have served the temples in hereditary functions. However, they were probably treated differently from ordinary slaves, or even from ordinary monks who lived in strict celibacy.[44] That the originally individual "self-sacrifice" became hereditary and these descendants continued to be temple slaves "to this day," as the *Samguk Yusa* claims, is consistent with what we know about the general

38 Funayama 2002: 350.
39 Ibid.: 321.
40 Yi Charang 2013: 117.
41 Samguk Sagi B. 4, Pŏphŭng, Year 8.
42 SS 4, Pŏphŭng, Y. 15.
43 Kamata 1987: 50; Yi Charang 2013: 116.
44 Yi Charang 2013: 117.

ideas of social order in Shilla, for "in S[h]illa, one's place in society was determined by birth."[45]

The bone-rank system ("bone" being a metaphor for "blood relationship" and "charisma"[46]) "kept everyone in the same social position into which they were born."[47] According to Sŏl Kyedu, a descendant of a noble family from Shilla, who emigrated to Tang China in 621 to escape this impasse,

> in Shilla, people are judged by their bone rank, and if you are not of the right bloodline, no matter how great your talent or achievements, you cannot advance.[48]

As "virtually all S[h]illan institutions [...] revolved around the establishment and breakdown of this institution,"[49] it was apparently also applied to slavery.

In any case, the commendation of slaves to temples, which later became a ubiquitous feature of Korean slavery, reflected a strain of the *dāna* tradition that was already well established in the Buddhist world and began immediately after the introduction of Buddhism to the Korean peninsula.

The thirteenth-century *Samguk Yusa* contains a story about a "filial daughter," Ciŭn (知恩, literally, "Knowing Gratitude"), in 886 or 887,[50] which shows how much the idea of self-sacrifice had been integrated into wordly ethics by then:

> The filial daughter Ciŭn was the child of Yŏn Kwŏn, a commoner from the Hangi region. Known for her extraordinary filial piety, she lost her father at a young age and solely cared for her mother. At the age of thirty-two, she remained unmarried, always attending to her mother without leaving her side. With no means to support them, she either worked as a laborer or begged for food to feed her mother.
>
> As time passed, her exhaustion became overwhelming. She approached a wealthy family and offered to sell herself as a slave, receiving over ten bushels of rice in return. She toiled at the household during the day and returned home at night to prepare meals for her mother. After three or four days, her mother remarked, "In the past, although the food was coarse, it tasted sweet. Now, although the food is good, it lacks the old flavor, and it feels like a blade is piercing my heart. What does this mean?" The daughter confessed the truth. Her mother said, "I would rather die than see you become a slave because of me." She then burst into tears, and her daughter wept as well, their sorrow moving the passersby.
>
> At that time, a young official named Hyojong happened to be out for a stroll. Witnessing the scene, he returned to plead with his parents, who then donated a hundred bushels of grain and some cloth-

45 Salem 2004: 188.

46 C. Kim 1971: 46.

47 S. Nelson 1993: 301; Japanese researchers have suggested that the ancient Japanese *kabane* ranking system has the same etymological roots: C. Kim 1971: 44–45.

48 SS 47, Yŏljŏn 6, Sŏl Kyedu. Cf. C. Kim 1971: 51–52.

49 Ibid.: 44.

50 The date is not given in the chronicle, but since King Hŏngang is named as the elder brother of the reigning king at the time, it must have taken place during the reign of King Cŏnggang, which only lasted from 886 to 887.

> ing to the family and compensated the maid's owner to set her free. Several thousand followers of Hyojong each contributed a bushel of grain as a gift.
> When the king heard of this, he granted five hundred bushels of grain, a house, and exempted the family from taxes and labor duties. Fearing theft due to the large amount of grain, he ordered soldiers to guard it. The village was named "Filial Piety Alley" in her honor, and a report was sent to the Tang court to celebrate her virtue.[51]

It should be noted that filial piety was a concept inherent and central to Buddhist as well as Confucian teachings, both of which dominated the moral and ethical value systems of traditional Korea. Thus, it was possible to extend the idea of self-sacrifice from its original religious environment to the world of commoners and use it to legitimize secular slavery.

A tenth-century Chinese source reports that the seventh-century monk Ŭisang, after returning from his studies in Tang China, was offered fields and slaves by the king of Shilla. However, he refused and replied:

> My Dharma is equal; it makes no distinction between high and low, noble and humble. The *Nirvana Sutra* speaks of the eight impure things—how can I accept fields and slaves? As a poor monk, my home is the Dharma realm, and I rely on the [beggar's] bowl to sustain my Dharma body and wisdom life.[52]

The forbidden "eight impure things" included owning slaves,[53] but Ŭisang's firm stance was apparently a minority view.

The overall importance of Buddhism increased greatly in the late Shilla period, and with it the willingness of the faithful to make rich offerings to temples and monasteries. The official history of the Koryŏ dynasty that followed Shilla, *Koryŏsa*, reports that this was seen as a fatal development "leading to excessive extravagance, which ultimately led to the kingdom's downfall."[54]

2.4 The Stele of Pongphyŏng

The oldest indigenous written records of the social and political structures of the time are the stone steles erected by the kings of the Three Kingdoms. Although few in number, these steles, dating from the fifth to the seventh century, provide us with first-hand information from the perspective of the political agents of their time, at a time when their political, legal, and social structures had not yet been thoroughly shaped according to the Chinese model. All of them use Chinese characters, and the language of their

51 SS 48, Yŏljŏn 8, Hyonyŏ Ciŭn: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 459.
52 *Song Gaosengzhuan* 宋高僧傳 4, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/宋高僧傳/卷04 [accessed 29.07.2025].
53 S.-E. Kim 2016: 8.
54 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Sŏngjong, Y. 1

inscriptions is superficially Chinese, but they show grammatical and semantic peculiarities that prove that they were actually written by local, non-Chinese authors.

In 1988, such a stele was discovered in Pongphyŏng village. It was erected by King Pŏphŭng—the same king who introduced Buddhism to Shilla, as shown above—on February 3, 0524 (Kapcin 1:15). It is the oldest surviving stele in Shilla.[55]

This stele deals with subjects of Shilla, whom the inscription calls *noin*, literally "(male) slave people." The most relevant passage for our context appears in lines 4 and 5 of the inscription:

> The people of Kŏbŏlmora Nammiji are originally *noin*. Although they are *noin*, the previous king gave them a great teaching of the law. The castle was divided, fire broke out, and a large army was raised from the distant village. When such things happen, those who commit such acts will be punished. Various laws concerning *noin* are to be applied.[56]

The Pongphyŏng stele reveals a hierarchical village structure in the Shilla Kingdom. It appears that Kŏbŏlmora was a central village that oversaw several surrounding villages, including the *noin* village of Nammiji.[57] Officials from surrounding villages seem to have been punished together for an incident involving a large fire, suggesting that they were subordinate to Kŏbŏlmora. Apparently, this village system included both *noin* and ordinary villages. The incident involved the mobilization of people from both *noin* and ordinary villages to a royal fortress. *Noin* villages functioned similarly to ordinary villages within the administrative system, with their residents mobilized for state work through village officials.[58]

This suggests that *noin* villages were organized as administrative units around that time, allowing for governance by village officials. Moreover, the *noin* are described as having received a "great teaching of the law." Since the *Samguk Sagi* claims that in 520 Pŏphŭng "promulgated laws and decrees, and for the first time established official dress for the various ranks,"[59] these regulations may have affected the *noin* in some way, and their status may have changed during that time.[60]

Very little is known about the local government and settlement policies of early Shilla from extant written sources. Recently discovered archaeological sites, however, reveal a remarkable standardization of village form and spatial organization. These sites, dating to around 400–500, although geographically distant, show similar structures, including dwellings and storehouses and built environments, suggesting significant interaction. The dwellings at these sites are square surface dwellings. Ini-

55 Lee Sungsi 1989: 1043.

56 Based on the transcription provided by ibid.: 1045.

57 Other interpretations, however, claim that Kŏbŏlmora and Nammiji were two separate villages of equal status.

58 Sungjoo Lee 2016: 45.

59 SS 4, Pŏphŭng, Year 7: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 49.

60 Chŏ Kyŏngsŏn 2018: 173–74.

tially, in the Proto-Three Kingdoms period, dwellings in the Cinhan and Pyŏnhan areas were circular pits, but square surface dwellings later appeared in Shilla's capital area of Saro (later Kyŏngju). In the Pyŏnhan region (later Kaya), circular pit dwellings persisted, while in Cinhan (Shilla's core region) they gradually gave way to square surface dwellings.[61] It is likely that this development "was the outcome of population resettlement coordinated through high-ranking political decision-making."[62] The *noin* villages must be understood in this context.

There are two main theories regarding the social status of these *noin*. The first is that they were collectively subordinated outsiders, i.e., *noin* were conquered people forced into servitude. This is based on the fact that the region of Kŏbŏlmora is listed in later sources as "originally Koguryŏ," probably conquered by Shilla in the early sixth century (the name Kŏbŏlmora itself seems to come from the language of Koguryŏ). At that time, Uljin was on Shilla's northern border with Koguryŏ, and it was important for the king to keep it under firm control. Its inhabitants were seen as newly conquered subjects, fundamentally different from ordinary Shilla people, and were therefore called *noin*, or "enslaved people."[63] This implies that *noin* were only integrated into society later on, when the Shilla legal code became universal.

The second theory is that *noin* villages existed as part of the newly introduced Shilla administration, while the expansion of the kingdom was still unfolding. There may also have been efforts to both maintain these villages and integrate *noin* into the general population. Some scholars believe that the status of *noin* was formalized under Pŏphŭng's predecessor, King Cijŭng, who was, also according to the *Samguk Sagi*, responsible for groundbreaking administrative reforms "to encourage agriculture," personally organizing the provinces and counties within the kingdom.[64] This view suggests a more complex social position for *noin*, possibly somewhere between free people and slaves, or as a distinct lower class, rather than being ethnic outsiders.[65] In any case, *noin* had to live in places and follow rules specially designed for them.

The further fate of these *noin* communities is unclear. But in a letter to the Tang court in 671, King Munmu complained that the rival kingdom of Päkce had tried to "entice" Shilla's slaves:

> By 668, Päkce changed the seals and labels [marking the border between Päkce and Shilla] at the location of the meeting point, invaded and seized lands, enticed our slaves, lured our commoners, and hid them within their territory. Despite repeated demands for their return, they ultimately did not return them.[66]

61 Sungjoo Lee 2016: 45.

62 Ibid.: 47.

63 Lee Sungsi 1989: 1062–63; Co Pŏpcong 2003: 166; Yi Inchŏl 2003: 179.

64 SS 4, Cijŭng, Y. 3 and Y. 6: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 48–49.

65 Chŏ Kyŏngsŏn 2018: 164–65; Kang Nari 2023: 86.

66 SS, B. 7, Munmu, Y. 11: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 88.

For Co Pŏpcong, this shows that "slaves, once considered external to the community, had become a pillar of the state community and were officially established within the social hierarchy":

> Noteworthy here is that the king's main concerns were land, slaves, and commoners, with a particular emphasis on the slave status group distinct from the commoners. This recognition distinguishes commoners and slaves as the king's subjects but highlights slaves as a crucial part of the state's productive base.[67]

But that is only one way to read this letter. Another interpretation would point out that it was precisely the people on the borders of the realm who were called slaves because they were subjugated foreigners, different from the king's "own" people. Such marginalized people would then supposedly be more susceptible to "enticement" from their original homeland. It may also be that even though slaves were "officially established in the social hierarchy," the cultural stigma of originally being foreign never completely disappeared, but continued to form one layer of prejudice against slaves.

Fig. 2: The character 奴 (K: *no*, C and J: *nu*, "male slave") on the stele of Pongphyŏng (Shilla, 524 AD). Courtesy of Fukatsu Yukinori (Fukatsu 2000).

67 Co Pŏpcong 2003: 180.

2.5 The Mokkan of the Sŏngsan Mountain Fortress

The stele of Pongphyŏng also reflects the findings of the 245 wooden tablets (*mokkan*) from the Sŏngsan Mountain Fortress that were excavated from 1991 to 2016. *Mokkan* were widely used in ancient East Asian states for administrative purposes such as record keeping, or for more basic functions, as in the case of most of the *mokkan* discovered so far on the Korean peninsula, which served as labels attached to storage containers to help identify their contents and purpose. The Sŏngsan Mountain Fortress is located in the south of the Korean peninsula and is believed to have originally been a military base of the Kaya Federation. In the second half of the sixth century, this region was occupied by Shilla. It is generally believed that the *mokkan* found there were tags produced between 561 and the early seventh century.[68] Typically, they contained information about the payment of taxes in the format of "region, name of a person, name of the product, and amount."[69]

However, fourteen of these *mokkan* contain the Chinese characters 奴 (*no*, "slave") or 奴人 (*noin*, "slave people"), inserted after the person's name, and most of them end with the character 負 *pu*, which can be translated as "goods," but also as a verbal expression meaning "carried on the back."[70] These entries were therefore interpreted as "place name, person A, *no(in)*, person B, *pu*."[71] The only actual place name given in ten of these *mokkan* is Kuriböl 仇利伐, obviously a village in the region in question, which would allow an interpretation such as "person B, slave of person A from Kuriböl, carried [this for A]." Although "this recording format suggests that the *no(in)* might belong to or be managed by the preceding individual,"[72] this is grammatically open. Furthermore, it is unknown whether person A was a leader of Kuriböl and whether Kuriböl as a whole was a *noin* village like Nammiji in the Pongphyŏng stele. Finally, if person B was indeed a slave of person A, it is not clear whether he paid his master's taxes or his own taxes (implying that private slaves had to pay taxes). If the latter was the case, then according to Yi Kyŏngsŏp this would imply that during the rapid territorial and administrative expansion of Shilla in the sixth and seventh centuries, the status of *noin* had changed from being collectively controlled, subjugated, slave-like people (as evidenced in the Pongphyŏng stele) to individuals who lived and paid taxes alongside other ordinary people, making it difficult to consider them as slaves[73] because they, as Kim Suhan concludes, "unlike slaves, were not entirely deprived of their personality by their owners and retained some rights while also bearing part of the state's labor obligations."[74]

68 N. Kang 2017: 119–20.
69 Ibid.: 144.
70 N. Kang 2017: 129; Kang Nari 2023: 77.
71 Chö Kyŏngsŏn 2018: 128.
72 Pak Hyŏnjŏng 2018: 73; cf. Co Pŏpcong 2003: 78.
73 Yi Kyŏngsŏp 2012.
74 Kim Suhan 2010: 135.

However, based on more recent analysis, Cu Podon casts serious doubt on such conclusions:

> In the case of *no* or *noin*, their names are never written alone. The name of the owner is always given first, followed immediately by the name of the *noin*. It is noteworthy that most owners of *no(in)* had external titles (*öwi*). Although there are cases without external titles, [...] it is possible that they were intentionally omitted or accidentally left out. Another very notable aspect is that the name of the *no(in)* is often followed by the term *pu* 負 in the place where goods would normally be listed. Whether this *pu* is understood as a "bundle of burdens" or as the verb "to carry burdens," it indicates that the *no(in)* was not directly responsible for the goods, but had a separate role of transporting them. This suggests that in other wooden tablets, the person in charge of delivering the goods was also responsible for transporting them.[75]

It is worth noting that at the same time in Japan, criminals were assigned to free people either as slaves or, "with a more lenient form of servitude," as "burden bearers" (負嚢者 *funōsha*) after their conviction, whereby "carrying a sack for others symbolizes a form of personal subjugation."[76] If this also applied to Shilla, then the *noin* listed here would have been personally dependent, but possibly not completely enslaved.

Relying on this analysis, it seems safe to conclude that the people called *noin* in these *mokkan* were "in a privately subjugated relationship with common people"[77] and were responsible for transporting their goods and/or performing labor tasks on their behalf. It does not automatically follow that these *noin* were unfree, but they would definitely have been less privileged and probably also dependent on their superiors. We do not know for certain whether these *noin* were identical with the (almost contemporary) *noin* of the Pongphyŏng stele and whether they also lived in special settlements, but it seems plausible to assume that they were attached to individual superiors rather than to a village collective.

To downplay the role of slavery in Shilla, it has been claimed that the term *no* ("slave") "was a common self-deprecatory expression at that time"[78] (similar to the English expression "your servant") and did not indicate a slave-like relationship. The *mokkan* are clear evidence of the contrary.[79]

75 Cu 2018: 17.

76 Jinno 1993: 17–18.

77 Kang Nari 2023: 80.

78 Kye 2021: 295.

79 Which is not to say that *no* was not also used as a self-deprecatory expression *in writing*, later replaced by 僕 *pok*, which has the same meaning and is still in common use in Japanese (pronounced as *boku*) in the first person "I" (mostly used by men).

2.6 The Shilla Village Registers

An important source of knowledge about demography in the states that eventually adopted classical Chinese law is the household registers, which had to be kept and updated periodically by local authorities. In theory, they should cover every single household in their respective regions, with a complete list of its members, including slaves. However, the surviving registers are generally fragmentary, both because many of them have been lost and because in many regions and periods, they were incomplete, outdated, neglected, or inaccurate; and in any case, they were very limited in scope because "the government recorded only the number of people and households it needed for tax levies."[80] Nevertheless, these registers can be an important source for our knowledge of the historical demography of East Asia.[81] Unfortunately, such registers have never been discovered for Shilla, so it is likely that they were never implemented.[82]

As of today, there is only one known document that seems to come close to such registers. It is usually called the *Shilla Village Registers*, and it was accidentally discovered in 1933 during the repair of a damaged Avatamsaka Sutra case at the Shōsōin treasure house of the Tōdai Temple in Nara, Japan. The document contains fragmentary data from official village surveys.[83] It contains records of the conditions of four villages, including their names (usually anonymized with the letters A through D in research), boundaries, number of households, number of cattle and horses, cultivated area, and number of trees. These details include the current figures and changes over the preceding three years, except for the cultivated land area. Tax collection in Shilla was based on these natural villages, and the purpose of creating this document seems to have been for that reason.[84]

The document is believed to date from an Ŭlmi year, which is the thirty-second year in the recurring sexagenary cycle of the traditional East Asian calendar. Although it has been extensively researched in both Japan and Korea since 1953, the exact date of its creation is still disputed and "has given rise to a number of dramatically different interpretations."[85] Hatada Takashi proposed the year 755,[86] while Pak Namsu and many others believe that the document was based on a household register compilation from 815.[87] Kim Chong Sun wants to date it even later, to 875, because that would be closer to

80 Sun Joo Kim 2020b: 136.

81 M. Peterson 1985: 31–32.

82 Hatada Takashi 1972: 420; in some academic accounts, contrary to the sources and presumably for patriotic motives, it is counterfactually assumed that household registers were kept in Korea "for more than two thousand years": Paek, J. Park, and Sangkuk Lee 2022: 374.

83 For the full text, see: Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 85–87; Hatada Takashi 1972: 416–19.

84 Pak Namsu 2021: 178; Hatada Takashi 1972: 421.

85 Y.-S. Kim 1986: 536; for an overview of the research history, see Song Wanbŏm 2003.

86 Hatada Takashi 1972: 423.

87 Pak Namsu 2021: 178.

his interpretation of the economic decline in the 870s–890s, which led to social upheaval and rebellion.[88] But more recently, Yun Sŏntä sees 695 as the correct date because it uses expressions and character variants that point to the late seventh century.[89] Song Wanbŏm concedes that this reasoning "can be considered sufficiently valid."[90] However, if this early date is correct, then the traditional understanding of Shilla social history (including slavery) "will have to be reexamined"[91]—because of the picture of rural society that can be derived from the village registers.

On the one hand, village life appears to have been well organized and controlled in a "cold, rigid, and precise manner."[92] All four villages recorded in the document were small natural villages with about 100 people in about ten households each. Households were divided into large extended families and single nuclear families centered around adult males, including slaves. For tax and labor duty purposes, six of these households were combined to form a "summary household."[93] The men and women were divided into adults (*chŏng*), adolescents (*coja*), big children (*chuja*), and small children (*soja*); however, the exact age limits are unclear. Presumably, according to the Chinese model, one was considered an adult from the age of fifteen or sixteen. Children were probably only recorded from the age of three due to the high infant mortality rate.[94] The cattle, horses, and economically viable trees of these households were also meticulously counted.

These data are the oldest surviving statistics about the slave societies in Korea. Assuming that the slaves were privately owned,[95] the data show that "the distribution of slave ownership was roughly proportional to the distribution of wealth."[96] This means that slave ownership was concentrated in the hands of wealthy villagers. Hatada suggests that in Shilla society, there was a general tendency for villagers to lose the economic means to acquire slaves.[97]

The slave population of village A consisted of nine slaves: one adult male slave, five adult female slaves, one adolescent male slave, one adolescent female slave, and one female child slave.[98] This gender imbalance has been interpreted as suggesting that some of these female slaves were concubines of the village chief.[99] Most likely, some of the adult females had children, which means:

88 Kim Chong Sun 1989a: 40–42.
89 Yun Sŏntä 2022: 347.
90 Song Wanbŏm 2003: 88.
91 Ibid.: 89.
92 C. Kim 2004: 85.
93 Pak Namsu 2021: 177.
94 Hatada Takashi 1972: 435.
95 Hatada Takashi 1972: 445; Yi Inchŏl 2003: 182–83.
96 Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 81.
97 Hatada Takashi 1972: 446.
98 Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 62.
99 Ibid.: 81.

> There is no evidence to suggest that all the slaves in the four villages were unable to maintain family lives. [...] If the one adult male servant in the village was the biological father and the husband of one or more of the adult female servants, they would have formed a family. Even if the father was absent, the mother and children would have been together, so family life was not completely disrupted. It is hard to imagine that slave owners would completely destroy the family life of slaves by separating their children, as this would result in the complete cessation of slave reproduction.[100]

Village B had four adult male slaves and three adult female slaves, but no younger slaves.

Village C was the smallest settlement, with only eight households and seventy-two people but no slaves. At first glance, it appears to be relatively prosperous.[101] However, its population declined by twenty percent between the pre-survey year and the survey year, and by another twelve percent between the survey year and the follow-up year.[102]

Village D was dominated by one or two wealthy households (including the village chief) that owned nine private slaves: Two adult male slaves, four adult female slaves, two adolescent male slaves, and one female child slave. It is unknown whether these slaves formed families, but presumably some of the adult females were the mothers of the younger slaves, thus making it "highly plausible that they lived a semi-family life with their children."[103] The slave-owning households also owned most of the fields, while the others faced "economic death."[104]

The four villages reported a total of 437 peasants plus 25 slaves, making the slave population 5.4 percent. The average life expectancy was 25.8 years.[105] The birth rate for the peasants was 6.9 percent, while it was 4.0 percent for the slaves, but this is actually not a significant difference; "if we assume that one more young slave was born among the 25 slaves, the birth rate would be 8.0 percent, slightly higher than that of the peasants."[106] Much more relevant is that the birth rate for the adult free women was 23 percent, but only 8 percent for the adult female slaves. "This suggests that at least some adult female slaves were purchased and brought into these influential families as household slaves to assist with domestic and agricultural tasks without forming families or

100 Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 62; in his earlier analysis, Hatada denied that slaves had families because they were mostly adults without children: Hatada Takashi 1972: 445; in Marxist orthodox thought based on Friedrich Engels' thinking about the origin of the family, slaves are necessarily part of the *familia* of their owners. Denying the possibility of family life among slaves is therefore crucial for views such as those expressed by Yi who asserts "that these *nobi* were families of criminals who had been confiscated into *nobi* status under the state's penal system": Yi Yŏnghun 2007: 145; whereas Yi Inchŏl agrees that "it is plausible that various configurations of slave families existed": Yi Inchŏl 2003: 183.

101 Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 81.

102 Kim Chong Sun 1989a: 40.

103 Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 63.

104 Kim Chong Sun 1989a: 40.

105 Yi Sangguk 2010: 150; this may indicate that conditions in Shilla may have been somewhat more difficult than in contemporary Japan; Farris calculates a life expectancy of 27.75 years for rural Japan in 702: Farris 2017: 253.

106 Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 65.

being separated from their families."[107] The farmer population was also much younger than the slave population, with minors making up 46 percent of the free population and only 24 percent of the slave population. One can only speculate that "the extremely small number of young slaves before adulthood probably reflects not so much a low birth rate as the economic burden of raising young slaves. Consequently, these young slaves may have been moved or sold to other locations to save on food expenses."[108] There is an indication that there was in fact a slave who was sold in village A.[109]

While the sale of children in times of famine is mentioned in the *Samguk Sagi* for the years 420, 622, 628, and 821,[110] there is no way to verify on the basis of the available sources that this was what had happened in villages A through D. Nevertheless, the village registers prove beyond doubt that "slaves were an integral part of the village landscape"[111] of Shilla, that they were used as a "complementary or secondary" labor force,[112] and that slave status was inherited. Given the high probability that these registers reflect the social realities of the late seventh century, this situation arose at a rather early stage of Shilla's political development. In other words, hereditary slavery was an integral part of Shilla's political and social DNA.

Tab. 2: Population of villages in the Shilla village registers (Hatada Takashi 1972: 444).

Village	Farmers	Adult Male Slaves	Adult Female Slaves	Non-Adult Male Slaves	Non-Adult Female Slaves	∑
A	138	1	5	1	2	147
B	118	4	3			125
C	72	0				72
D	109	2	4	2	1	118
∑	437	7	12	3	3	462

2.7 The Emergence of the Yangchŏn System

The main reason for the emergence of hereditary slavery was Shilla's political success. After all external enemies were defeated and the borders of the empire were consoli-

107 Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 65.

108 Kim Chong Sun 1989b: 66; Chong Sun Kim speculates "that certain wealthy peasants were taking in poor orphans for protection or servitude." C. Kim 2004: 78.

109 Hatada Takashi 1972: 445.

110 Co Pŏpcong 2003: 170.

111 Sun Joo Kim 2023: 320.

112 Hatada Takashi 1972: 445; cf. Yi Inchŏl 2003: 180.

dated, the distinction between the "original" people of the empire and those added by conquest (such as the *noin*) became less meaningful; there was no longer an "original" place to which the conquered people could return. On the other hand, "the end of the wars among the Three Kingdoms after the unification of Shilla meant that the supply of slaves from outside sources was cut off."[113] Only two ways to go into slavery remained—the indentured servitude of impoverished commoners and hereditary slavery. In order to maintain the slave population, which, despite its relatively small proportion of the population, was an important reservoir of cheap labor, especially in the countryside, it was now necessary to reconstruct slavery as a hereditary class. Otherwise, it would have disappeared within a few decades of the unification of the empire. Co Pŏpcong summarizes this process as follows:

> Previously considered the lowest among broadly subjugated people, slaves became clearly distinguished as a separate status, leading to a stronger perception of discrimination against them. [...] In other words, the fact that the communities to which slaves could return and restore their previous status had completely disappeared served as a turning point that solidified their status as the lowest class with no alternatives.[114]

Eventually, after Shilla had defeated all its rival states (from this time on, the kingdom was commonly called Unified Shilla), the monarchy sought to integrate all parts of its original and conquered population into the national system. In this process, *noin*, rather than being considered outsiders, became a source of population for Shilla. While the vast majority lived as agricultural laborers, their leaders were rewarded with local government rights and opportunities so that they could expand their economic resources to include land cultivation and the production of consumables or workshop materials for noble families in the capital. They also contributed to Shilla's military, with some becoming clan soldiers mobilized by the "local gentries."[115] Through these operations, some may even have developed "a bond comparable to kinship" with the aristocracy.[116] Whenever a neighboring territory had been annexed, the king would reward deserving subjects with a piece of land, with the size determined by the number of residents. This type of land grant is known as *shigŭp* ("food producing land"[117]).[118] Resources were allocated based on the number of households rather than land area, and it differed from a feudal system because it did not involve personal allegiance. Tax payments typically went to the state treasury and were then given to the *shigŭp* holder. Services went directly to the holder of the *shigŭp*, although the holder did not have complete control over the land or households. A *shigŭp* was technically heritable, although inheritance

113 Yi Sangguk 2009: 91.
114 Co Pŏpcong 2003: 167–68.
115 K.-B. Yi 1986: 72.
116 Kim Suhan 2010: 170–72.
117 C. Kim 2004: 76.
118 Y.-S. Kim 1986: 529.

was not guaranteed.[119] The accumulation of *shigŭp* by the friends of the kings gradually led to the development of prebendal feudalism in Shilla. As Han Gu Kim states:

> It may be assumed that soldiers and farmers or serfs could not be clearly distinguished, because during a war farmers became soldiers, and after the war they returned to the manorial lord's farmland. In this sense, a farmer actually had dual status. Here it must be emphasized that, at that time, the division of labor in S[h]illa Korea was not yet developed sufficiently to accommodate both professional soldiers and specialized farmers.[120]

At the level of administration, legislation such as that which existed in the Chinese Suei and Tang empires was introduced and implemented.[121] This also included social distinctions. The Tang Code was the first Chinese legal system to explicitly formalize social hierarchies. According to the Tang Code of 624, society was divided into three classes: "dear people" (the ruling elite), "good people" (commoners), and "lowly people" (also translated as "base" or "mean").[122]

As Deuchler points out, the term 賤 *chŏn* was ambiguous; in the dichotomy of "high and low people" (貴賤 *kŭichŏn*), it distinguished the elite from the non-elite; whereas in the dichotomy of good and base people (良賤 *yangchŏn*), it separated the (free) commoners from the (unfree) "lowly" people.[123] However, as Yi Sangguk states, "the most representative class of lowly people in pre-modern times was slaves."[124] In China, slaves were treated as property, akin to animals, and their sale was heavily regulated, with taxes imposed on transactions. Slaves could be official, owned by the state, or private, acquired through various legal and illegal means. Official slaves were often prisoners of war, while private slaves could also include free individuals who voluntarily enslaved themselves or were kidnapped. Marriages between slaves and commoners were largely forbidden, with penalties prescribed for violations. Crimes committed by free people against slaves were punished less severely than the other way around. The Tang Code also permitted the enslavement of frontier peoples, who were not protected by the laws prohibiting the enslavement of free Chinese citizens.[125] Subsequently, the Tang slave regulations became the "template" for its neighboring cultures, including Korea and Japan.[126]

In contrast to the rigid bone-rank system, the *yangchŏn* system allowed for some degree of mobility, both within the same status group and between "good" and "lowly" peo-

119 Shultz 2000: 153–54.
120 Han Gu Kim 1970: 54.
121 Watanabe 2014: 9; Co Pŏpcong 2003: 180.
122 These are "inadequate translations at best, but for the present, we are stuck with them": Salem 2004: 190.
123 Deuchler 2015: 5.
124 Yi Sangguk 2009: 80.
125 Wyatt 2022: 10–13.
126 Ibid.: 13.

ple.[127] Legally, it was now forbidden to enslave "good" people, but "good people" were allowed to voluntarily change their status to slavery.[128] As slaves, they were (at least partially) exempt from taxes, labor duties, and military conscription, but they were otherwise completely dependent on their owners. Slaves were legally regarded as their owners' chattel; they had no independent households, and they could be inherited, traded, and given away. This legal framework became a foundation of Korean social thought, and it prevailed until the nineteenth century.[129]

The crucial and defining features here are, first, that the monarchical power could always directly intervene in the lives of the slaves, regardless of who owned them under private law, and second, that the slaves were integrated into the hereditary substructure of society, as Kim Hyŏlla notes:

> In the *yangchŏn* system, slaves were embedded not only within the national order but also within the family order. They were a status influenced directly by the royal authority or the slave owner. In other words, slaves were positioned within both the *yangchŏn* system and the family order, causing conflicts between the king and the slave-owning nobility.[130]

This was not only the root of the long battles between the monarchy and the upper classes over the power to regulate and dispose of slaves. The hereditary nature of slavery at the heart of the Korean *yangchŏn* system also formed a fundamental contrast to developments in China. For while the starting point was initially the same—in both systems the "good" were those who respected the authority of the state and the "base" were those who did not—the paths diverged after the Tang period, when the concept of the "base" was limited to those who were actually criminals,[131] which then ruled out heredity. In Korea, on the other hand, the principles of kin punishment and inheritance of guilt were firmly upheld.[132] In the ninth century, we also learn for the first time that the Korean peninsula was integrated into the networks of the East Asian slave trade; another historical constant throughout the ages. On the coasts of Korea, pirates abducted girls to sell them as servant girls to wealthy Chinese.[133] A central figure here was Cang Pogo, who in his youth had travelled to China.[134] The *Samguk Sagi* reports:

> Later, Pogo returned to the country and met with the Great King[135], saying, "Throughout China, they treat our people as slaves. We wish to secure Chŏnghä to prevent the bandits from abducting people

127 Yi Hongdu 1999: 100.
128 Wyatt 2022: 10.
129 Deuchler 2015: 3–5.
130 Kim Hyŏlla 2019: 3.
131 Miyajima 2003: 296.
132 Yi Sangguk 2009: 89–90.
133 Wilbur 1943: 92.
134 Xu 2016b: 120–21.
135 King Hŭngdŏk of Shilla, r. 826–836.

> to the west." Chŏnghä, a key sea route of Shilla, is now known as Wando. The Great King provided Pogo with ten thousand men, and thereafter, no locals were sold into slavery on the sea.[136]

Thus, with the support of the court, Cang Pogo, himself "a man of humble origin,"[137] first successfully took action against the trafficking of people from Shilla to China and then established a trading empire in the southwest of the Korean peninsula.[138] One of his most important trading partners was the Japanese provincial government of Kyūshū. Despite his merits, the Shilla aristocrats opposed his wish to marry his daughter to King Munsŏng because of his low origin. He later started a rebellion, but was killed in 842. After his death, Japan banned dealings with merchants from Shilla and their immigration to Japan, thus implicitly prohibiting human trafficking.[139]

A little-known aspect of the ancient East and Southeast Asian slave trade is worth noting. Beginning in the seventh century, people with "wavy hair and dark skin" from Southeast Asia or Africa were brought to China by official delegations and slave traders and were treated als commodities or gifts in aristocratic households.[140] Known in China as "Kunlun slaves" (with no reference to any actual geographical location intended[141]), they were often depicted in Chinese Buddhist art as tamers of lions or elephants, and were widely believed to be distinguished by their loyalty and physical strength, but also "as belonging to a minor culture."[142] It has recently been suggested that those images had been reproduced in Buddhist stonework for the royal tombs and temples of Shilla.[143] Thus, ethnic stereotypes associating black-skinned people with slavery predate the arrival of the sixteenth-century Portuguese and their slaves. We will see that they also became a theme in early modern Korean literature (see p. 409).

The conclusion to be drawn from these observations on Korea's ancient history is that slavery mainly arose from three different sources: Firstly, from the conflicts on the peninsula, which, in the form of prisoners of war and subjugated foreign populations, formed the basis for the emergence of a numerically significant slave population; secondly, during and after the pacification of the peninsula, from the integration of this slave population into an administrative and economic system that was increasingly characterized by Chinese ideas of a discriminatory social order; and thirdly, the Buddhist ideas of voluntary self-sacrifice, which quickly combined with the desire to escape from poverty. Finally, the establishment of the *yangchŏn* system meant that the kings

136 SS 44, Biographies 5, Cang Pogo: Chŏng Kubok 1996: 428.

137 C. Kim 1971: 47; in contemporary popular culture in South Korea, particularly in a highly successful 2005 TV drama, Cang Pogo is portrayed counterfactually as being "born into a slave family that had built ships for the S[h]illa government for generations": Xu 2016b: 128.

138 Xu 2016b: 121; H. Choi 2023: 44–45.

139 SS 11, Munsŏng: C. Kim 1971: 47–48; Zöllner 2017: 90; H. Choi 2023: 42–46.

140 Xiong 1990: 79; Heejung Kang 2015: 34; Wyatt 2022: 50–57; Wilensky 2002.

141 Wilensky 2002: 4; Heejung Kang 2015: 28.

142 Xiong 1990: 81.

143 Y. Lim 2018: 43.

could directly intervene in slave affairs as they saw fit. All these factors came together in the Shilla kingdom between the sixth and sixth centuries and led to the emergence of a hereditary class of slaves. As a result, Shilla developed into a truly servile society. The *New Book of Tang*, the official history of the Tang dynasty, contains a passage about Shilla that reflects the new conditions in which the powerful had wealth, weapons, food such as livestock and crops, and used their agricultural surplus to make more and more people dependent on them—a dependency that could ultimately lead to slavery:

> The prime minister's household never lacks in provisions, with three thousand slaves and servants, along with ample armor, weapons, cattle, horses, and pigs. They raise livestock on the islands in the sea, hunting them for food as needed. They lend grain and rice to the people, and if they cannot repay it, they become slaves.[144]

Unfortunately, we will never know exactly how big the slave population of Shilla was. Neither will we know if the extant village registers, with their share of around 5 percent private household slaves and rather poor economical conditions, are representative. If it is possible to conjecture from these figures, it should be safe to assume that, including the state slaves and semi-state slaves granted to officials, slaves comprised at least one-tenth of the population.[145] This means that slaves played only a "minimal"[146] role in the economy of their society; at the same time, they were not a *quantité négligeable* either, but an "integral part" of society,[147] and to conclude that their numbers were not "significant"[148] would be off the mark.

144 *Xin Tang Shu*, B. 220, Shilla, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/新唐書/卷220 [accessed 29.07.2025].

145 This contradicts much lower earlier estimates, e.g., Yi Inchŏl, who put the upper limit at 5.4 percent: Yi Inchŏl 2003: 183; for comparison, Farris estimates that the proportion of slaves in eighth-century Japan was also ten percent: Farris 2017: 260.

146 C. Kim 2004: 86.

147 Sun Joo Kim 2023: 320.

148 Kye 2021: 295.