5 Reaffirming Slavery in Late Koryŏ

The hundred or so years between the beginning and the end of Koryŏ's surrender to Mongol rule are often called the "period of Yüan interference." After their first major invasion in 1231, the Mongols stationed their own colonial administrators in Sŏgyŏng, Kägyŏng, and other occupied places. They were called *darughachi*, "resident commissioners."[1] They were responsible for the negotiations with the Korean side and for handling the extensive tribute payments to which Koryŏ had committed itself. The catalogue of Mongol demands was comprehensive and "endless."[2] These included gold and silver, otter skins (which had never been hunted in Korea), and handicrafts, but the most difficult to satisfy was the demand for human beings. Some of them were hostages from the royal family and other noble families who were to be raised and married at the Yüan court. Artisans were also requested. Koryŏ tried its best not to fulfill to these demands, citing its own limited resources, but of course it was impossible to avoid everything. In 1232, the Mongols requested noble boys and girls, 500 of each, which the court refused, citing the lack of children among their own families due to monogamy: "Because our country is small and narrow, the officials are few and take only one wife, so they either have few or no children."[3]

While hostilities continued, the Mongols just took by force what they wanted. A contemporary Chinese source, the *Collection of Lingchuan*, written by the neo-Confucian scholar and Yüan diplomat Hao Jing between 1260 and 1275, contains a section entitled *Lament for Koryŏ*, which expresses profound pity for the fate of the abducted Koreans:

> Koryŏ, a nation established for over a thousand years, spanned mountains and seas in the northeastern corner. It admired the culture and institutions of the Han and Tang dynasties [...] Since then, the [Yüan] heavenly armies have shattered the region, forcing them to submit and pay tribute. Yet, despite their submission, the military did not retreat, and for fifty years, destruction and looting persisted. Poverty and suffering abounded with no escape. What sin had they committed to deserve such a fate? [...] Their skin was like jade and snow, their hair like clouds and mist, yet they were lined up in the slave markets for sale—a truly pitiful sight.[4]

Starting in 1273, however, the Koryŏ authorities were required by the Mongols to provide tribute women; a "fetishistic desire"[5] so urgent that it necessitated the creation of two special offices to handle the recruitment.[6] According to the *Koryŏsa*:

1 Henthorn 1963: 70.

2 Ibid.: 70.

3 KS, Kojong 2, Y. 19, M. 4. Cf. ibid.: 70.

4 *Lingchuanji* 10, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/陵川集_(四庫全書本)/卷10 [accessed 29.07.2025]. Cf. Wyatt 2022: 47.

5 Ibid.: 46.

6 Henthorn 1971: 128.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112210079-008

> The Yüan Dynasty sent the envoy Xiao Yu, a matchmaker from the southern tribes, with an official document from the Central Secretariat stating: "Soldiers from Xiangyang County of the Southern Song Dynasty have requested wives. Therefore, we have assigned the envoy Xiao Yu to bring 1,640 bolts of official silk to Koryŏ and ordered local officials to assist in the selection and marriage arrangements." Xiao Yu demanded the selection of 140 unmarried women, pressing the matter urgently. Consequently, a marriage bureau was established, and from that time until fall, they searched extensively through villages, selecting unmarried women, the wives of traitors, and the daughters of monks to meet the required number. This caused widespread resentment and complaints. Each woman was given a dowry of 12 bolts of silk, and once the women were handed over, the envoy led the tribal men back north. The sound of weeping filled the air, and onlookers could not help but feel deep sorrow.[7]

Such demands for women were repeated frequently, and it is estimated that a total of about 2,000 Korean women were handed over to the Yüan Empire.[8] By today's standards, this was nothing less than sexual slavery, in which both the Mongol-Chinese and the Korean states were involved as perpetrators. However, these women were not simply slaves by status. In 1269, the Yüan government had in principle prohibited marriages between slaves and free people, and in 1271, it decreed that the offspring of mixed marriages would be free.[9] Therefore, even if there had been female slaves among them, their children would have become free by law—in the Yüan empire. This means that those women and their children were exempt from the laws of Koryŏ.

The population was dissatisfied with both the exorbitant Mongolian demands and their own government, which was perceived as too accommodating. An insurrection that occurred in Kägyŏng in March 1271 illustrates the tense atmosphere:

> On the day Kyesa [March 10, 1271], the government slaves Sungyŏm and Kongdŏk gathered their followers, plotted to assassinate the resident commissioner and other officials in the country, and planned to flee to Cin Island, but lieutenant Song Sagyun reported the plot, and the king ordered generals Chŏ Munbŏn and Co Cail to investigate. Shortly after, the master of ceremonies for ambassadors Shin Cwa watched seven or eight people talking secretly in an alley and hastily reported to the king, saying, "The matter is urgent!" At this time, as the day was about to end, the chief ministers [...] looked at each other in panic, unable to come up with a plan. The king dispatched Yi Hyŏnwŏn, who knew the affairs of the Privy Council, and general Cŏng Cawŏn to request assistance from [Resident Commissioner] Dorji. Dorji, along with Hong Tagu and others, met with the chief ministers and captured Sungyŏm and over ten others. Upon interrogation, they all confessed.
> On the first day of the second lunar month [March 13, 1271], Ŭlmi, Sungyŏm and three others were executed in the marketplace, while the rest were released. On Kihä day [March 17, 1271], General Cŏng Cawŏn was sent to Mongolia to report the rebellion .... On Shinchuk day [March 19, 1271], the Mongolian troops stationed at Changnyang entered Täbu Island, plundering and seizing the residents' belongings, causing great resentment among the people. Hearing about Sungyŏm's rebellion,

7 KS 27, Wŏnjong, Y. 15

8 Jinyoung Kim, Jaeyeong Lee, and Jongoh Lee 2015: 283.

9 Yi Kanghan 2010: 238.

> the people of Täbu killed six Mongols and rebelled. The vice magistrate of Suju, An Nyŏl, led troops to suppress the rebellion [...] [10]

According to this account, the government slaves Sungyŏm and Kongdŏk planned to assassinate the Mongol resident and then flee to Cin Island, which was then occupied by the rebels of the Three Patrols. Their plan failed, but it inspired the people of Täbu Island on the west coast to rebel.

These instances of civil resistance also indicate that "status changes accelerated further after the period of Yüan intervention."[11] Despite the countless violations of the legal framework that had occurred since the time of the military dictatorship—such as slaves who became civil servants, children of female slaves who served in the army or even held the highest positions in the apparatus of power, free people who were enslaved and remitted at the discretion of their masters—the same legal framework continued unchanged. After regaining power from the military, the civilian aristocracy began to roll back the concessions it had grudgingly made to the upstarts from the lower classes over the previous hundred years. To make status distinctions visible again, sumptuary regulations were reinforced. In 1259, King Wŏnjong the following:

> Officials whose dress does not correspond to their rank, monks whose hats are inappropriate, and slaves who ride horses on the main roads will be prohibited as previously decreed. Those who disobey the order will be arrested and handed over to the authorities.[12]

The previous decree he was referring to was proclaimed in 1130 by King Injong: "Commoners are forbidden to wear silk robes and pants and to ride horses within the capital, and slaves are forbidden to wear leather belts."[13] Similarly, in 1287, under Wŏnjong's successor King Chungnyŏl, the Board of Inspection complained:

> Commoners are now wearing the open-front garments and wide-brimmed hats that were traditionally reserved for the wives of *yangban* when they are in the countryside. The wives of low-ranking officials and of slaves are also wearing them, keeping no distinction of rank. From now on, this is strictly forbidden, and violators will have their items confiscated and face severe punishment. Monks, slaves, and other commoners riding horses on public roads without any fear are also causing problems, as they sometimes ride recklessly and trample people to death. From now on, the relevant authorities are to arrest and detain offenders, prosecute them, and confiscate their horses, which will be sent to the stables. If the masters cannot control their slaves and allow them to violate the prohibitions, both the slaves and the owners will be punished.[14]

10 KS, Wŏnjong 3, Y. 12, M. 1.
11 Kim Nanok 2009: 31.
12 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi.
13 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2.
14 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi.

The distinction between commoners and slaves became more pronounced again, with the latter group increasingly consisting of individuals who had either been forcibly conscripted or had voluntarily submitted to servitude out of economic necessity. This stratification was further reinforced by the state and aristocracy's increasing reliance on slave labor to maintain and expand their agricultural estates (*nongjang*), which grew out of but also transcended the Field and Woodland Rank system. *Yangban*, local clerks, and even ordinary commoners began to own and use slaves for agricultural purposes. This led to the increasing importance of the utilization of both living-in slaves and outresiding slaves[15] in agricultural production. Also, public slaves, traditionally employed in palaces and residences, offices, state-owned enterprises, and public works,[16] saw a shift in their roles during the Late Koryŏ period: They were often given to temples and officials as external slaves along with land. This suggests their role as cultivators; they were now "small independent farmers in all but name."[17] Eventually, more and more of these public slaves became "the prey of the powerful"[18] and were made into their private slaves through the landowners' active accumulation of agricultural estates, ultimately evolving into the new category of agricultural slaves. By employing a large labor force of slaves, these landlords could ensure the cultivation and management of large tracts of land, thereby maximizing their agricultural output and economic power. One example was the family of An Mok, as described by one of their descendants in the late fifteenth century:

> In the western outskirts of Paju, an abandoned and desolate land existed. An Mok [...] was the first to reclaim this land, expanding it into vast farmlands and constructing a grand residence where he settled. [...] His grandson, An Wŏn, achieved great prosperity, possessing tens of thousands *kyŏng* of land, both privately and publicly, with over a hundred households of slaves. There were a thousand ancient trees providing shade for ten *ri*, and the sounds of geese and cranes echoed among them. Lord Wŏn delighted in riding a blue horse and leading a yellow dog, enjoying this life daily. Even now, more than a hundred of his descendants live scattered on the remaining lands, all inheritors of his legacy.[19]

Now the ownership of slaves, rather than their moral deficiencies, became a pressing problem. In 1270, a man named Co Sŏkki petitioned on the issue of mixed-status descent. He did not appeal to the Koryŏ government, but to the Yüan court. But Emperor Kublai Khan decided that this should be handled according to the customs of Koryŏ.[20] It is not known who Co was and whether he petitioned on his own behalf or on behalf of his

15 In another, somewhat ambiguous term, "absentee slaves": Salem 1978: 42.

16 Ibid.: 36.

17 Salem 1980: 634.

18 Salem 1978: 85.

19 Sŏng Hyŏn: *Yongjä Chonghwa* 慵齋叢話卷 j ("Idle Studio Miscellaneous Talks") 3, http://www.davincimap.co.kr/davBase/Source/davSource.jsp?Job=Body&SourID=SOUR001367&Lang=xxx&Page=3. See also Pak Cinhun 2018: 226.

20 KSC 23, Chungsok, Y. 2; Yi Kanghan 2010: 233.

children. However, it is clear that he did not succeed in being promoted to the status of good people. He bore a family name and was therefore either personally free or the son of a free man; thus, his case was probably related to the issue of determining the status of (his own or his father's) offspring from mixed marriages.[21]

At the court of Koryŏ, however, there was a growing fear that slaves, or the fathers or children of slaves, might attempt to challenge local law by invoking the different law of the Mongol overlords. The state had realized that "conflicting perspectives on the immutability and hereditary nature of slave status" coexisted,[22] and it wanted to suppress this unpleasant pluralism that threatened the foundations of its order.

This explains the rapid succession of decrees issued under King Chungnyŏl.[23] In 1278, Chungnyŏl decreed:

> 1. In recent years, there have been abuses in the registration of households. Some people with registered households have lost them due to military conflicts, and corrupt officials have taken advantage of this by detaining good citizens and falsely claiming them as the slaves or servants of their ancestors. Those who have been detained have no means to prove their status as free citizens, and the authorities are also unable to make a clear judgment. As a result, cases drag on for years, causing significant injustice and harming social harmony. From now on, if someone claims to be free but lacks proof of free status, and their status as a slave is unclear, they are to be regarded as free. If the original owner has no proof of slave status but has clearly controlled and used the individual for generations, a decision will be made based on this evidence. Cases that were previously undecided should also be treated as if the person is free.
> 2. All public and private slave records should be divided into two copies: One should be given to the owner, and one should be kept by the authorities for examination. This will become a permanent standard practice.
> For cases without clear records before the year of Pyŏngshin [1266], and for matters before the year of Chŏngmi [1267], as well as for those after the year of Mujin [1268] that have already been decided by the Agency for the Rectification of Slave Status, further appeals will not be allowed. If a decision has been made five times, it will be considered valid if approved by three; if three times, then by two. Once a judgment has been issued, it cannot be changed. However, if there have been multiple decisions without checking both sides' evidence and making false decisions, they are not included in this limit. False accusers will be punished.
> 4. All cases involving officials suing over slaves must be brought to the Agency, and disputes should not be handled privately. Those who act in violation of this rule will be punished according to the law.[24]

These measures were introduced to address widespread abuses and corruption exacerbated by recent military conflicts. The government took action to stop officials from illegally detaining free citizens and falsely claiming them as slaves due to unclear documentation. Individuals whose free status could not be definitively disproven had to

21 Yi Kanghan 2010: 242.
22 Yi Sangguk 2009: 86.
23 Yi Kanghan 2010: 248.
24 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Sosong, Chungnyŏl, Y. 4.

be treated as free. All unresolved cases had to be resolved in favor of recognizing their freedom. This aimed to reduce legal disputes and restore social harmony by ensuring fair treatment of individuals within the household registration system.

However, in the same year, "the remission of public and private slaves was prohibited."[25] It is unlikely that there was a widespread practice of freeing slaves that required such a blanket prohibition without a specific reason. Instead, this prohibition probably targeted situations where remission was relatively easy or frequent, particularly involving individuals of mixed status or contentious origins, such as those with both freeborn and lowborn bloodlines. These individuals might include those coerced into slavery, children from maliciously arranged marriages, or offspring from ordinary mixed marriages. While the first two cases would likely have clear ownership and intent, making remission rare, the arbitrary nature of ordinary mixed marriages could lead to disputes and many remission cases. Therefore, the 1278 prohibition on manumission was probably connected to concerns about the status of offspring from mixed marriages.[26]

In a next step, Chungnyŏl declared the royal prerogative over legal disputes between slaves:

> In the seventh month of the fifth year [1279], a decree was issued: "From now on, any disputes between slaves will be submitted to the court, and the directives issued by the Purple Gate[27] shall be rescinded."[28]

This intention is repeated in a royal directive from 1279, which does not mention slaves directly, but the term "without regard for high and low" (無論貴賤尊卑 *muron küchŏn conbi*) includes them:

> We have heard that there are those who, relying on power, obscure reason and arbitrarily seize the lands of others, and there are also those who, taking advantage of their connections, obtain official positions, surpassing others in rank without merit. This is utterly unreasonable. If they do not change their ways, not only will those individuals be punished, but also those who have supported or shielded them will likewise be held accountable. Those who harbor grievances or have suffered injustice, without regard for high and low, should each submit a petition before the royal court. Should any judge delay or fail to resolve these complaints, he will certainly be punished without pardon.[29]

This was apparently intended to prevent lower courts or even the Mongolian court from being called upon.

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25 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi, Chungyŏl 4.

26 Yi Kanghan 2010: 244.

27 Literally, a purple gate within the royal palace that served multiple important functions, including administrative, judicial, military, and ceremonial roles. It was a central place for high-ranking officials to gather, perform duties, and manage state affairs; metonymically, thus, the Court.

28 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi. Cf. Yi Kanghan 2010: 233.

29 KSC 20, Chungnyŏl, Y. 5.

Finally, in October 1283, Chungnyŏl explicitly recognized the matridominial rule of 1039:

> In the ninth month of the ninth year, it was ordered that a servile person follows the mother, regardless of previous judgments.[30]

This reaffirmation indicates that this long-standing tradition was under threat at the time, possibly in terms of ownership or status determination. The threat might have arisen from an increasing number of cases where, in marriages between lowborn individuals, the offspring were being assigned to the father's owner instead of the mother's, contrary to the traditional practice. Or, if we view the rule as a method of determining status, there might have been a trend where the offspring's status was increasingly judged as lowborn based on the father's status rather than the mother's. Conversely, there could have been instances where, despite following the mother's status, the offspring were elevated to freeborn status instead of being classified as lowborn.[31]

Yi Kanghan argues that these measures were more than just general restrictions on social mobility; they were calculated responses to specific challenges posed by the Yüan dynasty's legal reforms. The Yüan government at that time implemented policies to regulate social status and labor practices, focusing on preventing the forced reduction of freeborn individuals to lowborn status through practices such as pawning and illegal labor. They also sought to manage and settle wandering populations while addressing remnants of corruption from the fallen Song dynasty, in order to stabilize social order and protect the rights of tenant farmers and freeborn citizens. In his view, the 1283 reinforcement of the matridominial rule in Koryŏ was likely a strategic response to the Yüan government's broader efforts to regulate social status and labor practices. By reaffirming this principle, Koryŏ sought to maintain its social hierarchy and protect the freeborn population from being improperly classified as lowborn. Yüan's policies served as both a direct and indirect catalyst for Koryŏ's actions.[32]

However, this argument does not fully take into account that in addition to all that was happening in the Yüan Empire, there was a growing number of problematic cases within Koryŏ. The court's default response was to strengthen the rights of slave owners. This becomes clear from the *Royal proclamation and information to Näro, head of Susŏn Society* (see p. 141).

30 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi; KSC 20, Chungnyŏl, Y. 9.

31 Yi Kanghan 2010: 250.

32 Ibid.: 251–53.

5.1 Bear it Patiently: Buddhism and Slavery

It seems miraculous that during the more than forty years of turmoil caused by the Mongol invasions, Koryŏ was able to complete a major project that was superficially unrelated to the war: the reprinting of the complete Buddhist canon, the *Tripitaka Koreana*. The first edition fell victim to the invasion of 1232, and the second was produced between 1237 and 1251. Thousands of craftsmen and monks were involved in the production of more than 80,000 wooden blocks and the subsequent printing. The commission and funding came from the royal court on Kanghwa Island, which hoped that this work would provide spiritual support in the fight against the Mongols.[33] This hope was expressed in lines like this from a poem by Yi Kyubo, praising the *Tripitaka* and Buddha:

> He makes the Three Han [sc. Korea] as everlasting as the sun and the moon.[34]

The Koryŏ kings were ardent patrons of Buddhism, seeking divine favor and stability for their rule; most of them had a close relationship with Buddhism.[35] Their capital, Kägyŏng, teemed with at least 130 Buddhist temples and monasteries.[36] The royal court actively participated in Buddhist practices, organizing state ceremonies and showering monasteries and individual clerics with donations. This royal support significantly empowered Buddhist institutions. Monasteries and temples amassed vast wealth, owning precious metals used in Buddhist artifacts, controlling forests and one-sixth of all fertile rice lands in Koryŏ,[37] which were largely exempt from taxation. "Temples were centers of economic activities";[38] rural monasteries developed into trading hubs, engaging in the production of cloth, tea, salt, garlic, honey, oil, firewood, noodles, and even in alcohol brewing.[39] This economic influence extended to providing loans of money and grain and lodging for the laity.[40] Ambitious clerics acted as businessmen; they raised donations to finance the production and maintenance of temples and their material culture.[41]

The fact that Confucian scholars and politicians throughout the Koryŏ period were jealous of the influence of the Buddhists is a logical result of their rivalry. However, contrary to what they liked to claim in their polemics, Buddhism was in principle just as suitable as their own philosophy in terms of serving as the basis for a conservative state doctrine, as Kyong Rae Lee notes:

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33 Henthorn 1963: 103.
34 Breuker 2010: 55.
35 Jongmyung Kim 2017: 129.
36 Vermeersch 2004: 8.
37 Stiller 2021: 3.
38 Vermeersch 2004: 24.
39 Stiller 2021: 2; Salem 1980: 636.
40 Vermeersch 2004: 25.
41 Stiller 2021: 2.

> Buddhism provided a major rationale for the authority of the state since the Buddhist doctrine of karma supports the status quo and regards any challenge to the existing social order as a challenge to Buddhism. The Buddha advised slaves, for instance, "to bear patiently with their lot," since being born a slave was the result of bad acts in an earlier life. Hence, a slave's salvation lay "in complete submission" to the master.[42]

Sŏn (Zen) Buddhism was particularly influential in Koryŏ,[43] but "there is no evidence that Sŏn monks took any positive action in favor of changing the established order or were more open to include people of nonaristocratic origin."[44] Nevertheless, Buddhism also impacted Korean society at its lower rungs. For commoners, seeking refuge in temple slavery became an alternative to the harsh realities of peasant life and military duty. These temple slaves, along with the monks themselves, were exempt from taxation and military service, adding to the significance of the monastic influence. For local elites, this made land donations to temples and monasteries even more attractive, since the leading clerics were often from their families, allowing them to retain *de facto* control over the donated and now tax-free temple lands.[45]

Moreover, the state established a system of examinations for monks,[46] opening doors to positions within a prestigious clergy with close ties to secular authority. These high-ranking monks, known as Royal Preceptors and State Preceptors, bridged the gap between the religious and political spheres. Unlike in China, where these titles were merely honorary, the Preceptors in Koryŏ became "offices with regular appointees" and formed "the hallmarks of legitimacy"[47] for the monarchy.

Early on, this relationship began to bear economic fruit for the clergy as well. Before 975, King Kwangjong donated 1,000 *kyŏng* (hectares) of land and 50 Buddha slaves to State Preceptor Thanmun, who had lectured and formed "a deep linkage in the Dharma" with the king.[48] Thanmun's Powŏn Temple received land and 50 slaves from King Kyŏngjong. Around 1018, King Hyŏnjong donated land, cattle, and 100 slaves to Hyŏnhwa Temple.[49]

From time to time, these donations were contested from within the administration. For instance, in 1058, at the time of King Munjong:

42 K. Lee 2010: 61–62.

43 Vermeersch 2020: 49.

44 Vermeersch 2002: 220.

45 Ibid.: 220.

46 Vermeersch 2020: 192–93.

47 Vermeersch 2002: 236, 2002: 240.

48 Stele inscription of Pŏbin Thanmun, Powŏnsa, Hämi: Jorgensen and Uhlmann 2012: 22; cf. Jorgensen and Uhlmann 2012: 272.

49 Salem 1978: 45, 1980: 635.

> The Royal Secretariat presented a proposal: "Now, the fields and firewood lands belonging to Kyŏngchang Retreat[50] are to be transferred to Hŭngwang Temple, and all its fishing grounds, boats, and slaves are to be returned to the state. The palaces and retreats were originally granted by the former kings to ensure the welfare of their descendants for generations, so that they would never be lacking. Today, the royal family has many branches, and if each branch were to be granted a palace or retreat, there might still be insufficient resources. How much more so if we take the fields and firewood lands of one palace and give them to a Buddhist temple? We request that the fields, fishing grounds, and boats remain with the original grants." The royal decree stated: "The fields and firewood lands have already been dedicated to the Three Jewels [i.e., Buddhism], and it is difficult to reclaim them. Appropriate public lands should be allocated according to the original amount, and the rest shall follow the proposal."[51]

One year later, the king decreed that only one of three sons in a family could be ordained, and that the ordination of slaves and paupers was forbidden. Children of monks were not allowed to take civil service examinations.[52] The first ban was intended to prevent the number of monks from increasing too much and thus reducing the number of taxpayers and corvée laborers. The second ban was intended to draw a clear line between the lower classes and the monks. By denying the monks access to the civil service, however, they were effectively placed on a par with the lower class, as this was precisely one of the most important features of their discrimination.

Donations of public and private slaves continued throughout the Koryŏ period and made the temples and monasteries "one of the major slaveholders on the peninsula."[53] At the end of the fourteenth century, perhaps up to 80,000 temple slaves were registered.[54]

The most important Korean Buddhist thinker of the Koryŏ period—and arguably of all time—was Cinul (1158–1210). Cinul succeeded in establishing his own brand of Buddhist doctrine, combining the meditation-based philosophy of the Zen school with sutra-based recitation approaches, which would eventually become the largest and most powerful Korean Buddhist order, now known as the Cogye Order. But in Cinul's time, his community was named Susŏn Society ("Cultivating Zen Society") by King Hŭijong, who supported Cinul and awarded him the title of State Preceptor after his death.[55] However, reflecting the anti-Buddhist attitude of later times, neither the *Koryŏsa* nor the *Koryŏsa Cŏlyo* even bother to mention Cinul.

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50 During the Koryŏ Dynasty, the residences of the royal family were hierarchally divided into the royal palace 殿 *cŏn*, palaces, retreats 院 *wŏn*, and manors 宅 *täk*. *Retreats* was originally the designation given to the homes of noble families, but later in the thirteenth century also the official residences of the queens, https://en.namu.wiki/w/고려의%20궁원 [accessed 06.07.2024].

51 KSC 5, Munjong 2, Year 12.

52 Buswell 2012: 7–9.

53 Salem 1980: 636.

54 Ibid.: 636.

55 Buswell 2012: 28.

Cinul's most important disciple was Cingak (1178–1234), who became his successor as state preceptor. He became a trusted advisor to King Kojong and counselled him to use Zen Buddhism as a political tool.[56]

But the Buddhist alignment with royal power came at a price, as Jongmyung Kim has noted:

> In many ways, Koryŏ kings' understanding of Buddhism appears to be different from Buddhism's early meaning, in which the Buddha was regarded as a great teacher of humanity, Buddhist doctrine aimed at liberation from suffering, and the Buddhist community enjoyed independence from political power.[57]

Given that Koryŏ Buddhism "was an integral part of the ruling system,"[58] it is not surprising that Buddhist doctrine affirmed the ruling political principles. State Preceptor Cingak was also known for his poetry. In one of his poems, he pitied a little bird that was hastily eating its food while looking back anxiously in fear; this fear, Cingak explained, resulted from its not being free:[59]

> Like a famished bird that suddenly finds food
> But between need and fear finds it hard to take.
> A hundred backward looks for every peck,
> Such pity 'tis not to be free.

This very early reference to the concept of freedom (自由 *cayu*)[60] shows that Buddhist thinkers did ponder it; however, it apparently did not occur to Cingak and his associates to apply this concern to politics: They did not advocate for the abolition of slavery in the least. Perhaps, in marked contrast to animals such birds, they did not even consider slaves to be unfree. For James Bernard Palais, this realization was so disturbing that he asked in a tone of moral accusation:

> Why did Buddhism, praised for its effect in ameliorating the harsh terms of punishment in Koryŏ, play no role whatsoever in condemning slavery, and in fact participated in it by owning monastery slaves in abundance?[61]

Although I am not aware of any serious attempt to show that Buddhism had a humanizing influence on the thoroughly draconian criminal justice system of the Koryŏ period, that question deserves an answer. Perhaps it can be found by comparing the Korean

56 Jongmyung Kim 2017: 146.
57 Ibid.: 147.
58 Vermeersch 2004: 23.
59 Whitfield and Y.-E. Park 2012: 90.
60 This example is therefore a refutation of the common claim, also found in Salem: "Freedom, and parallel concepts, did not appear in Chinese or Korean texts until the nineteenth century when the ancient term *chayu* was adapted to translate the word 'freedom' in Western works." Salem 1978: 80.
61 Palais 1995: 417.

Buddhist situation with that of the Christian Church in Europe, which, at least in the Middle Ages, did not take a fundamentally different position. As Gregory Schopen puts it, religious doctrine "cannot, apparently, challenge conceptions of property and ownership, even when the thing owned might otherwise be considered human."[62] He concludes that

> monastic groups, because they cannot biologically reproduce a work force, and because their ideals, at least, often require full-time religious activity, would be particularly dependent on institutionalized forms of unfree labor like slavery or serfdom, even if that accords badly—or not at all—with their formal doctrine or anthropology.[63]

Monks and priests, but also Confucian scholars, are, unless they have immigrated from abroad or at least lived abroad for a long time, children of their local society. They have parents, siblings, friends, and business partners with whom they interact. For most of them, breaking away from the rules and values that apply in these contexts is too much to ask.

However, the complete absence of any (self-)critical Buddhist debate on slavery throughout the Koryŏ period is so amazing that Sung-Eun Thomas Kim asks: "Could it be that slavery was so commonly accepted that it was not even recognized as a transgression?"[64] The only theological context ever mentioned was self-sacrifice and the giving of slaves and other treasures as alms,[65] which we have already encountered in the Shilla period. S.-E. Kim concludes that this "nonchalant acceptance of monastic slavery"[66] reveals that the moral framework of Koryŏ Buddhism "may have been no different from the society of that period, which plainly accepted slaves as personal possessions."[67]

The fifth State Preceptor of the Susŏn Society, Wŏno, had slaves himself.[68] From the *Royal proclamation and information to Näro, head of Susŏn Society*, an ownership confirmation for a group of privately inherited slaves, we learn that Buddhist priests had a share in the inheritance left by their parents and that they could inherit slaves as personal property. Obviously, then, Buddhist communities saw themselves as the rightful masters of hereditary slaves.

62 Schopen 2014: 629.
63 Ibid.: 627.
64 S.-E. Kim 2016: 20.
65 Ibid.: 21.
66 Ibid.: 23.
67 Ibid.: 21.
68 Jongmyung Kim 2017: 146.

5.2 Saving Slaves for the Priest

The *Royal proclamation and information to Näro, head of Susŏn Society* is actually "the oldest surviving slave document" in Korea.[69] It was discovered at the Songgwang Temple in the province of South Cŏlla in the late 1920s and has been extensively studied since the 1970s. This single-page document is well preserved except for a few missing sections, and its six royal seals indicate that it is a royal document.[70] Following the careful reconstruction by Co Namgon, the text—written in a mixture of real Chinese and phonetic characters called *yidu* and "very difficult to decipher"[71]—can be translated as follows:

> Eighteenth year of Zhiyuan, intercalary 8th month, day [August 1281]
> The head of Susŏn Society, Näro [i.e., Wŏno], submits a petition:
> Around the time of the Year of Kabin [1254], the country's court divided and assigned the slaves of the executed and exiled officials and generals to government offices and private households. Around February of the same year, the Director of Slave Affairs overseeing slave documents and adjudications, based on the Supreme Council's[72] documentation, granted a document to my biological father, Yang Täkchun, the sub-director of the Hospitality Office, for the female slave Kochajwa (age 48) and her children, who were the offspring of the deceased official Cŏng An's female slave Sedun.
> The eldest son of the slave Kochajwa, Ilsam, was passed on to and used by my younger brother, General Yang Pil,[73] and after being entrusted to my biological father, Kŏnsam, who was left to be raised,[74] was made to depend on me, and I employed him.
> Because I made a vow and carried out repairs and received the *Khitan Tripitaka*[75] fund into the main temple, I affiliated Kŏnsam along with his children [with the Susŏn Society].
> If there is any dispute or resentment, forbid it and permanently subordinate them to the temple.

69 Co Namgon 2021: 3.

70 Ibid.: 5.

71 Salem 1978: 115.

72 The Supreme Council was established by Chŏ Chunghŏn in 1209 as a temporary body to eliminate those who had conspired against him. It gradually gained more authority. Each military ruler who followed Chŏ Chunghŏn ruled as the head of this council. In 1254 it was headed by Chŏ Hang. Co Namgon 2021: 24.

73 Yang Täkchun's first wife, the daughter of Kim Su of Näsa, bore him two sons: the elder, Wŏno, known as Näro, who held the title of State Preceptor, and the younger, Chŏngyu. After her death, Yang Täkchun remarried, taking as his second wife the daughter of General Pä, with whom he had three more sons: Hŏngyŏn, who became head of the temple; Yang Cŏng, who headed the Tojang Treasury; and Yang Pil, who attained the rank of general. ibid.: 26.

74 "Kŏnsam is not someone who 'grew up' or 'was born and raised' after being received as a slave. Kŏnsam was already born at the time Yang Täkchun received the slaves, was still very young, and was passed on (寄) to be raised (長), then inherited by Näro as a household servant." ibid.: 17.

75 Since the printing blocks of the first *Tripitaka Koreana* were destroyed by the Mongols in 1232, Koryŏ produced a new edition in the 1250s, for which the *Khitan Tripitaka* published in the middle of the twelfth century by the Liao Dynasty was also consulted; it was "imposed" on Koryŏ in 1063: Vermeersch 2013: 131; P. Yun 2012: 79–80.

> Left State Councilor, General of the Guard of Rising Authority, Director of the Bureau of Marine Products, Co Ingyu 署[76]

In summary, this was a royal document issued by King Chungnyŏl, who approved a petition from State Preceptor Näro (Wŏno), the head of Susŏn Society. The petition requested that any disputes over the ownership of the hereditary slave Kŏnsam and his children be forbidden and their affiliation with Susŏn Society made permanent. Left State Councilor Co Ingyu accepted this petition, drafted a brief document, signed it, and stamped it with the royal seal before issuing it to Näro.[77]

According to the document, the children of both female slaves (Sedun and her daughter Kochajwa) and male slaves (the descendants of Kŏnsam) were born and inherited as slaves. It is also evidence that the matridominial rule was applied in practice. The pivotal question in this document was who owned the descendants of the female slave Sedun and her daughter Kochajwa. Their husbands were never mentioned. Konsam was still a small child when he came into the possession of the Yang family in 1254. (It should be noted that there was no official minimum age for slave labor. Konsam came into the possession of the priest as a child, but it is quite possible that he was put to work in the household very soon. In contrast, state slaves were subject to a minimum age of ten years.[78]) Twenty-seven years later, he would therefore have been in his late 20s. Although we are not told to whom Kŏnsam was married, the status of their mother does not seem to have played a role in deciding the status of Kŏnsam's children. The fact that Wŏno had a royal document issued at the end of his life, confirming that he had donated the slaves he owned and their children to his temple, was certainly done to ward off claims to this property by his biological family, or by the owner of Konsam's wife, if she had been a slave and claims to her children could have been made according to the matridominial rule.

This document is also important for another reason: it proves that the Chö regime distributed the slaves of its opponents to authorities and private individuals.[79] In this case, the slaves had been owned by Cŏng An, who was executed in 1251 for criticizing the brutality of Chö Hang. Cŏng An was known as a "devoted Buddhist." He founded and supported monasteries, actively taking part in Buddhist ceremonies at temples. Importantly, historical records indicate that he played a major role in the publication of the *Tripitaka Koreana*.[80] This Buddhist connection may explain the assignment of his slaves to the Yang family, who, in the person of Wŏno, were also involved in the implementation of this monumental edition project.

76 I use 署 to indicate the place of a *signum* or paraph (*sŏap*), the handwritten ornamental signature used in formal documents. Translated from the Korean translation in Co Namgon 2021: 28.

77 Ibid.

78 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 82.

79 Salem 1978: 116.

80 Baba 2018: 68.

Finally, besides being a valuable specimen of how slave transactions would have been recorded in the Koryŏ period, "its near conformity to the slave registration format" of the Cosŏn period[81] shows us that the similarities and continuities between the Koryŏ period and the Cosŏn period were significantly greater than is often portrayed in research.

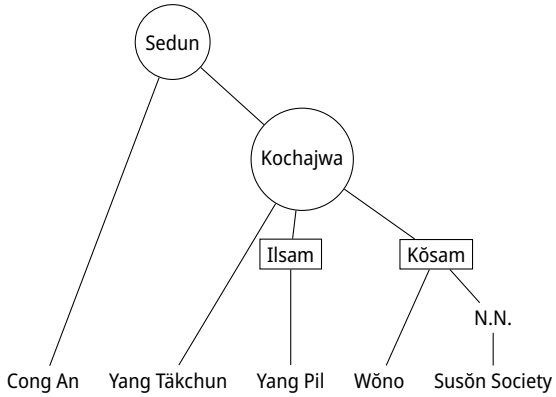

Fig. 4: Sedun's family and their owners.

5.3 "The Most Unjust Laws in the World"

Another case of slave confirmation occurred in 1284, when Lady Cŏnghwa, the favorite concubine of King Chungnyŏl, claimed that certain free people were actually slaves. The aggrieved free people appealed to the Board of Statutes, which resulted in a royal decree pressuring the office to rule in favor of Lady Cŏnghwa. Judge Kim Sŏ and his colleagues tried to comply with the decree, although they sympathized with the people. However, Judge Yi Hänggŏm strongly opposed the decree and defended the rights of the free people. When Yi Hänggŏm was on sick leave, Kim Sŏ and his colleagues seized the opportunity to rule in favor of Lady Cŏnghwa.

Afterwards, someone reportedly dreamt that a sharp sword descended from the sky and struck down the officials of the Board of Statutes. The next day, Kim Sŏ developed a fatal boil on his back and died. Within a month, all of his colleagues involved in the

81 Salem 1978: 116.

case also died. Only Yi Hänggŏm survived because he had not participated in the unjust decision.[82]

In the eighteenth century, An Cŏngbok introduced his essay against slavery by citing this case as an example of sheer arbitrariness and concluded:

> Our country’s laws concerning slaves are the most unjust in the world. How can it be that people are made lowly and bound as slaves for generations without end?[83]

Since the details are unknown, it is difficult to understand what, if anything, was legally wrong with this decision. Lady Cŏnghwa’s intervention wounld only make sense if she had the right to own these people. On what basis did they claim to be free? Had they been coerced, abducted, or sold into slavery as freeborn people? Or were they claiming that one of their parents, especially their mother, was a free person? Unfortunately, we will never know the answer.

But we can recognize a pattern behind this case that also worried the royal administration. A directive of King Chungsŏn’s government in the year 1298 stated:

> Recently, the practice of *coercion into servitude* has become prevalent. Officials are ordered to prosecute those without written contracts and those who engage in fraud and deceit. Secondly, those who disregard public order and wrongfully claim government slaves and fraudulently receive a token of privilege[84] must be completely prohibited. Thirdly, since the beginning, slaves of the *yangban* class have had distinct duties from their masters, and public duties were never demanded. Now, commoners have all entered influential households, not fulfilling official duties, and instead, *yangban* slaves perform the duties of commoners. This must be prohibited. Furthermore, the wife of a slave or the husband of a household slave is left to the discretion of their masters.[85]

This directive addresses four different issues. First, coercion into servitude: There was an increasing prevalence of individuals being forced into servitude without formal contracts, which indicates a rise in exploitation and illegal labor practices. Second, fraudulent claims of government slaves: There were instances where people were wrongfully claiming government slaves as their own and fraudulently obtaining tokens of privilege. Third, misallocation of public duties: Commoners were avoiding their official duties by aligning themselves with influential households, causing private slaves to take on the responsibilities that should have been handled by commoners. Fourth, control over mar-

82 KS 106, Yŏlcŏn 18, Yi Hänggŏm; KSC 20, Chungnyŏl 10; Yi Cehyŏn: *Yŏgong Phäsŏl*, Cŏnship 前集, Ch. 2.
83 *Sunamcip* 順菴集 13, Nobibŏp 奴婢法, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/順菴集_(安鼎福)/卷十三 [accessed 29.07.2025].
84 賜牌 *sapä* was a certificate issued by the royal administration, serving as a formal recognition of merit, service, or status granted by the state or the king. It carried significant weight, often associated with privileges such as land ownership, tax exemptions, or other official benefits. However, the historical records also highlight its misuse, where individuals would fraudulently claim plaques to illegitimately acquire land and other benefits.
85 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2.

riages of slaves: Marriages of slaves (both male and female) were entirely controlled by their owners; including free husband of female slaves (*pibu*).

This last point shows that this privilege of owners over the marital choices of their slaves was being challenged. Apparently, the issue was slaves marrying without the permission of their owners. It had already been made an offense for male slaves to marry free women. So male slaves were only allowed to marry female slaves. There was no question of status for them, nor was there any question that the children of such marriages belonged to the owner of the wife. The real problem was the marriage of a slave woman to a free man. It was not a punishable offense, but it was considered a threat to the consistency of the matridominial rule. However, with this 1298 decree, the free husbands of female slaves were effectively equated with slaves themselves. According to the matridominial rule, their children would then belong to their owner. This means that any harm to their owner was ruled out. This rule would be undermined once the children were considered free by virtue of their free father. This is exactly what Co Sŏkki tried to achieve in 1270 by referring to Mongol law. It was therefore essential for the court of Koryŏ to strengthen the matridominial rule in order to protect the property rights of slave owners. If this rule had been abolished, it would have meant that the owners of male slaves could have claimed the children of their female partners, and the children of free fathers would have become free. The consequences would have been incalculable.

The reaffirmation of the matridominial rule by Chŭngnyŏl in 1283 was therefore just that; it did not change its original meaning. But there was soon more to come.

5.4 A "One Drop Rule" for a "Different Species"

In 1290 and 1291, Haptan, a Mongol general turned rebel, took advantage of Koryŏ's weakened defenses due to Yüan's disarmament policy and invaded the country. King Chungnyŏl's indifferent response to this raid, allegedly marked by lavish banquets and neglect, drew criticism from both Koryŏ and Yüan officials. Nevertheless, Koryŏ forces, later joined by Yüan troops, successfully repelled Haptan's forces.[86] However, Chungnyŏl's actions during these events temporarily cost him the throne. He was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, King Chungsŏn, in 1298, but was reinstated after eight months due to political strife.

The Mongols were concerned about the situation. In 1299, the Yüan emperor tasked Körgis with overseeing and reforming Koryŏ's internal affairs because the Mongols wanted "to manage the unstable political situation."[87] Körgis went to Koryŏ and proposed a reform agenda. While also criticizing the harshness of Koryŏ's penal policies,

86 KS 30, Chungnŏl 3, Y. 16–17.

87 Kim Kanghan 2007: 13.

the excessive number of government officials relative to the population, and the mismanagement of census and household registration, it prominently included changes to the slavery system. This met with considerable resistance from the Koryŏ side. The aristocracy, whose economic power was largely built on slave labor, viewed these plans as a direct threat to their interests, and the king and his officials argued that altering the established system would disrupt the societal order and threaten the stability of the kingdom.[88]

The issue of slavery was discussed at a meeting with high-ranking officials. As the *Koryŏsa Cŏlyo* reports:

> When Yüan official Körgis was the resident commissioner, he proposed that if one parent of a slave was of good standing (a commoner), the child should be considered a commoner. None of the ministers opposed the proposal. However, Kim Cisuk said, “When Kublai Khan once sent an envoy named Tete’ü to oversee the nation, a man named Co Sŏkki petitioned on this very issue of mixed-status parentage. Tete’ü wished to apply the law of the Yüan Empire, but Kublai Khan decreed that the matter should be handled according to the customs of this country. This precedent is well-documented and should not be changed.” As a result, Körgis did not pursue the matter further.[89]

After some fruitless discussions with King Chungnyŏl in December 1299, Körgis returned to Yüan, but Chungnyŏl, fearing that the emperor might impose Körgis’s agenda on Koryŏ, followed up with a memorial to the emperor in early 1300. This is such a central text that the *Koryŏsa* quotes it in full:

> Your wisdom is comprehensive and your words descend like a silk thread. Once the great edict is proclaimed, it cannot be retracted. Even though I seek further instructions, I cannot help but express my concerns again.
> I humbly consider that all those who belong to our territory are distinct from others in customs. Whether free or servile, there should be no bias in love or hate. This matter is delicate and difficult, as it concerns the stability of the nation. Our ancestor [Thäjo] admonished his descendants, saying, ”All in all, this servile class is of a different species.[90] Be cautious not to allow these classes to become free. If they are allowed to become free, they will eventually hold office, seek important positions, and plot to overthrow the state. If this admonition is violated, the nation will be in peril.”
> Therefore, the law of our small country is that only those registered in the household registers for eight generations without stemming from the servile class can serve in official positions. As for those classified as the servile class, if either the father or the mother is of the servile class, then the child is considered servile as well. Moreover, if the original owner has no heirs, they belong to the same lineage group. The reason for this is that we do not want to allow them to ever become free.

88 It is a complete misunderstanding and reversal of the situation for Kye to claim that “Mongol dominance had already ensured that the heritability of slave status was already incorporated into common law by 1300.” Kye 2021: 302.

89 KSC 23, Chungsok, Y. 2.

90 凡此賤類、其種有別 *pŏm cha chŏn yu, ki cong yu pyŏl*. Salem translates this to “those of a base category are of a different kind,” which is acceptable if taken in its original narrow sense of “family, race,” as in “mankind.” Salem 1978: 77; Kim and Kim translate it as “All these low-born people, their origins are distinct”: Kim Pyŏngin and Kim Toyŏng 2018: 46.

> There are fears that some may abscond and gain freedom. Although measures are taken to prevent such occurrences, many take advantage of gaps to commit treachery. Some might leverage their influence and power, instigating chaos and leading to the downfall of the state. This underscores the difficulty of deviating from ancestral teachings and the challenge of preventing treachery.
> If the law is changed, it will be like untangling a chaotic thread, resulting in the loss of established principles, and barely maintaining any remnants. Thus, in the 7th year of Zhiyuan [1270], when our small country moved from water to land,[91] the former emperor sent a resident commissioner to govern us. At that time, someone[92] proposed changing the law, and upon careful consideration and reporting, the court decided to follow our national customs. The intention of treachery among the masses was thereby thwarted, and stability was maintained up to now.
> Recently, a provincial official[93] arrived in our country, unaware of the intentions behind our laws, and sought to change them. Therefore, when I made my formal visit in the summer, I presented a memorial detailing these concerns, and it was graciously approved. Now, having received the imperial order, a special envoy will further deliberate on the matter of good and servile people. While I have agreed to their words, receiving such instructions again causes me deep anxiety.
> Upon further reflection, it is necessary to maintain ancestral customs without questioning right or wrong, keeping the existing laws for the servile class. Given the conflicting opinions, I present my humble thoughts despite the risk of offending, hoping for your understanding and gracious consideration. I earnestly hope that your enlightened guidance will shine like the sun, bringing abundant grace like the clouds, allowing us to follow the initial orders and avoid future difficulties. Thus, things will be categorized appropriately, preventing changes in local customs, and the country will be safeguarded, enjoying the enduring grace of heaven and earth.[94]

In this memorial, Chungnyŏl argues for maintaining strict social hierarchies and existing laws regarding the servile class to ensure the stability of the country. He emphasizes that people in the servile class should not be allowed to gain freedom or hold positions of power, as this could lead to social chaos and threats to state security. He reflects on the "ancestral directive" (the *Ten Injunctions*) of Thäjo[95] and historical precedents to justify the need to preserve these customs, warning against altering established laws. Recent challenges to these laws by outsiders are mentioned, but the king calls for adherence to traditional practices to maintain order and prevent societal upheaval.

Chungnyŏl defines the servile class as individuals whose servile *status* is determined by their ancestry. This classification is hereditary, meaning that if one parent is considered servile, their children are automatically deemed servile as well. Additionally, he suggests that the servile class is a "different species," fundamentally different from the free population, and thus should be prevented from gaining freedom to maintain social order. The servile class is also subject to strict regulations, such as being tied to their original owner's lineage, to ensure they do not ascend to positions of power or disrupt the state's stability.

91 That is, when it "changed its form of government" by ending the military dictatorship.

92 Co Sŏkki.

93 Kŏrgis.

94 KS 31, Chungnyŏl 4, Y. 26, M. 10.

95 Kim Pyŏngin and Kim Toyŏng 2018: 45.

Perhaps the most controversial argument in this royal memorial is Chungnyŏl’s assertion that slaves “are of a different species.” To my knowledge, this phrase is unique in Chinese-language historiography. There are several possible interpretations. Given that the compound 種類 *congnyu*, literally “seed-species,” means “type” or “category,” this could simply be a play on words with the “class” 類 *ryu* and “seed” 種 *cong* of the slaves. This is how it was used in 1158, when officials counted the slaves’ “separation from other classes” (區別種類 *kubyŏl congnyu*) among the “founding principles” of Koryŏ.[96]

However, the term 種 *cong* is undeniably “carrying a racial component”[97] and is often translated into English as “race,”[98] as in the modern Korean term 人種 *injong* (“race”). This is exactly how Herbert Passin interpreted this phrase in 1957: “These servile elements are of a different race,”[99] and even earlier, Inaba Gunsan suggested the same reading, adding: “On the basis of these records, it has been argued that slaves did not arise from certain conditions among free people but were rather considered to be defined by race.”[100] This interpretation may be at the root of Salem’s claim that Koryŏ slaves formed “a race apart.”[101] If true, this statement would be evidence of *racial* discrimination against Korean slaves—albeit at a time when racism in the modern sense is not generally believed to have existed. This seems like a far-fetched assumption. However, it is clear that the king considered slaves to be a different *seed* or *species* of human being. We have already seen that Manjŏk referred to the same concept in his 1198 rebellion.[102]

In the king’s view, the “essence” of servitude is transmitted through both the father and the mother, making it impossible for individuals of servile descent to escape their status within any foreseeable historical period. The king specifies that a prerequisite for freedom is eight generations—that is, $2^8 = 256$ ancestors without any slave ancestry, using the term “stock” (干 *kan*). The expression “of servile stock” (有干賤隸 *yugan chŏlle*) was sometimes used to describe someone of slave descent, and its negation, 不干 (*bugan*), meant “unaffiliated” with, or, more literally, “not stemming from” slaves.

The rule of eight generations was excessive. It was unheard of and had never been stated or mentioned before. Moreover, eight generations is a fantastically long period of time. It would take at least 200 years after remission to become eligible for public office. At a time when the three-generation “class-discriminatory ancestor worship was firmly

96 KSC 11, Ŭijong, Y. 12; see p. 94.

97 Lan 2012: 37.

98 Ibid.: 36.

99 Passin 1957: 199.

100 Inaba 1925: 61.

101 Salem 1978: 35; a claim she explicitly denies in an essay first published in 1976: “The ordinary factors that are generally assumed to set the slave apart from his owner, such as racial differentiation or social pollution, did not apply.” Salem 2004: 185.

102 See p. 110.

established as a legal system,"[103] the requirement of eight generations without a drop of slave blood must be understood as symbolic. In East Asian traditions, the number eight represents infinity. So ,basically the king was telling the slaves: "You will never be admitted to the ranks of the free." And he actually wrote it: "We will never allow them to be free." Hence, there was absolutely no point in releasing them in the first place.

The second important aspect of his statement is that the king did not address the property rights of slaves, but their status as natural persons. This status depended on the status of their parents. Therefore, the matridominial regulation in force since 1039 was not affected by his statements.

But there was another rule that he introduced, which stated that "one slave parent makes a slave." This was not a new rule; it had always formed the backbone of slave inheritance. But this was the first time that it was spelled out. Its explanation is simple. It is known as the "one drop" rule in the early twentieth century in the U.S.A., which posited that a person with even a single drop of African ancestry was considered Black and, consequently, subject to racial segregation laws. In modern anthropology, such rules are known as *hypodescent.* The term

> refers to the idea that in cases where the offspring is the product of parents of two different social aggregates, the offspring is assigned to one that is socioeconomically and politically subordinate.[104]

The "one slave parent makes a slave" rule was thus a hypodescent rule. Its contrary is called *hyperdescent*, implying that the offspring of a mixed marriage inherits the status of the parent with the higher status. This was what the Mongols wanted to introduce in Koryŏ as the rule of "one free parent makes a free child."[105]

However, as the king explained, hereditary slavery was part of Koryŏ's political DNA. Did this reasoning make him a racist? Although the term "racist" had not yet been conceived in the historical context in which this memorial was written, the king's arguments reflect a worldview that categorizes and discriminates against people based on their ancestry or inherited status. This worldview is similar to modern definitions of racism. Therefore, it cannot be denied that the discrimination against slaves in Koryŏ resembled later racism structurally and functionally.

103 G. Jung 2001: 142.
104 Fried 1973: 492.
105 Yi Kanghan 2010: 233.

Tab. 6: Racist arguments in King Chungnyŏl’s 1300 memorandum.

Topic	Assessment
Belief in Innate Differences	The king’s arguments suggest a belief that people of the servile class are inherently different from those of higher social classes, describing them as a different species. This implies a fundamental, unchangeable difference in nature or capability between groups based on their birth status, which aligns with racist ideologies that posit inherent differences between races.
Essentialization of Social Status	The memorial indicates that individuals of the servile class, even after several generations, should not be allowed to change their social status. This rigid classification based on ancestry perpetuates social hierarchies and denies the possibility of personal merit or social mobility, echoing racist notions that people are permanently defined by their birth.
Prevention of Social Mobility	By advocating for laws that prevent individuals of servile descent from becoming free or holding positions of power, the king’s arguments maintain and enforce social stratification based on ancestry. This is similar to racist systems that restrict rights and privileges based on race or ethnic background.
Fear of Social Disruption	The memorial suggests that allowing those of servile descent to ascend in status would lead to societal instability and potential rebellion. This fear-mongering tactic is often used in racist ideologies to justify the oppression and marginalization of certain groups, under the guise of protecting social order.

Recently, the National Institute of Korean History, a committee of the South Korean Ministry of Education in charge of editing historical materials and also translating them into modern Korean, has published a completely different interpretation on its website:

> 무릇 이와 같은 천한 무리 [賤流] 는 그 종자가 따로 있는 것이니 이런 무리는 양인이 되게 하지 말라.
> Generally speaking, such (*kath*) lowly (*chŏn* = 賤) groups (*muri*) [賤流] have their own distinct lineage (*congja* = 種子), so do not allow these groups to become free people.[106]

Here, 類 “class” is translated as *kath-ŭn muri* (“such groups”), separated from 賤 *chŏn* (“lowly”), and the phrase is interpreted as “such groups of lowly people.” Next, the character 種 *cong* (“seed, species”) is interpreted as 種子 (*congja*), meaning “seed” or “lineage.” This gives the interpretation a distinctly neo-Confucian twist that most contemporary Koreans can understand, although it is unlikely to reflect the king’s intent since neo-Confucianism was not yet established in Koryŏ at the time,[107] and so the king was definitely not favoring the neo-Confucian approach to the slave question because it un-

106 National Institute of Korean History, https://db.history.go.kr/id/kr_031r_0070_0110_0030 [accessed 17.06.2025].

107 “We must guard against understanding the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries based on assumptions grounded in the mid- and late Chosŏn periods, when Korea had become deeply neo-Confucian in its outlook.” Robinson 2016: 6.

dermined his royal authority. In any case, it is wrong to imply that slaves had "their own distinct lineage"—they simply had no lineage at all, which is the very basis of their marginality.[108]

Inexplicably, the editors then changed the Chinese characters they inserted after *muri* from 賤類 *chŏnnyu* ("servile class") into 賤流 *chŏnnyu* ("servile lineage").[109] This change comes out of the blue but is clearly not a typo, as it is repeated in the following paragraph where the king argues that if either parent belongs to the 賤類 *chŏnnyu* ("servile class"), then the child does as well. This is again changed to 賤流 *chŏnnyu* ("servile lineage"), a phrase that Chungnyŏl never used.

In an academically serious edition, such changes are unacceptable. How can they be explained? Did the editors seriously believe that the authors of the *Koryŏsa* and the authors of the *Koryŏsa Cŏlyo*—who also quoted Chungnyŏl's phrase with exactly the same characters as the *Koryŏsa*,[110] as did An Cŏngbok in his *Tongsa Kangmok*,[111] completed in 1778—had deliberately or inadvertedly made mistakes in these two places in publishing a royal memorandum? That is unthinkable. It is crystal clear that Chungnyŏl used the term 賤類 *chŏnnyu*, and he used it "referring specifically to slaves."[112]

Therefore, this can only be a deliberate manipulation by the modern South Korean editors to support their preferred reading of this passage. Was their intention to distract from the possible implication of racism in the king's original wording? After all, one of the main tenets of contemporary historical education is that Korean slaves belonged to the same ethnicity as all other Koreans. This is factually correct: "The enslaved were racially indistinguishable from their enslavers."[113] But the fact that this was apparently perceived differently in the Middle Ages and that the slaves represented a "different species," not very far away from a "different ethnic group," is as well correct.

To paraphrase King Chungnyŏl himself, "there should be no bias in love or hate" in editing historical sources. Here, it seems, we have a clear case of either editorial incompetence or cognitive bias. One possible source of this bias was identified by Salem:

> There is a tendency today (which is not limited to Western scholars) to define a culture in terms of the elusive god of "modernization." Thus, eccentrics who ran counter to the norms of their society

108 M. Yoshida 2018: 53; Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 33.

109 Incidentally, the character 流 *yu* is the same as that used in 韓流 (*hallyu*), which refers to the "Korean wave" in popular culture and is recognizable to modern Koreans with limited knowledge of Chinese characters.

110 KSC 21, Chungnyŏl 4.

111 *Tongsa Kangmok*, b. 12.

112 Kim Pyŏngin and Kim Toyŏng 2018: 46; Kim and Kim point out that "Chungnyŏl's avoidance of explicitly mentioning *chŏnnyu* beyond slaves was likely because discussing details about miscellaneous laborers was unnecessary for his argument against Kŏrgis' reforms of the Koryŏ slavery system." Kim Pyŏngin and Kim Toyŏng 2018: 46.

113 Salem 1980: 630.

> —Sin Don [Shin Ton] for example[114]—can easily become modern-day heroes if for no other reason than that certain of the ideas they fought for against societal norms have become the norms of modern, and, in too many cases, Western societies.[115]

It would not be necessary to harp on these editorial flaws if it were not for the fact that young Korean scholars today often have such a poor knowledge of Chinese characters that they are forced to rely on accurate translations into Korean.[116] They deserve better; errors like this can contribute to producing and reproducing a false understanding of one's own history.

5.5 The Four Cases of Slaves

In the early fourteenth century, slaves became a major component of the rural population,[117] and "the establishment of property rights over slaves [...] emerged as a core aspect of the reform of the slave system."[118] This was related to the growing popularity of family-based, patriarchal, neo-Confucian thought among the *yangban*. For the *yangban* class, securing their socioeconomic base as an autonomous landed and slave-owning gentry and establishing ownership over their ancestral property became crucial elements in their struggle against the monarchy. The kings perceived this as a threat to their authority and responded with countermeasures against the alienation of land and people "by infringing on the property rights of slaves under the pretext of restoring public functions."[119]

King Chungsŏn succeeded his father Chungnyŏl in 1298, but had to abdicate after half a year before regaining the throne in 1308. As crown prince, he had already shown interest in the slave issue by taking action against *yangban* who had illegally seized land and people, and when they fought back, he was sent abroad to the Yüan court. As soon as he was enthroned in 1298, Chungsŏn issued his edict quoted above against *coercion*

114 See p. 180. Shin Ton, the highly controversial advisor of King Kongmin in the 1360s who tried to implement slave-friendly legislation, became the hero of a novel written by Pak Conghwa in 1942, televised in 2005–2006. On TV, Shin Ton was presented "as a bright and cheerful character": Kim Täsŏng, "Shin Ton-i ciha-esŏ ttang-ŭl chimyŏ tonggokhal il." *Süphochŭ Hanguk*, October 2, 2005, https://sports.hankooki.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=2725384 [accessed 28.07.2024].

115 Salem 2004: 187.

116 Some other recently written Korean articles that I consulted for this study also show an irritating lack of clarity in the use of Chinese characters. For example, if, in a phrase such as 목조문수보살좌상 [老文殊菩薩像], the preceding Korean expression ("the wooden seated statue of Manjushri Bodhisatva") does not correspond to the Chinese characters in brackets ("statue of Elderly Manjushri Bodhisatva"), the reader can only guess at the relationship between the main text and the parentheses: Is the mismatch intentional or a linguistic or editorial error? Yu Kŭnja 2021: 115.

117 Yi Yŏnghun 2004: 9.

118 Kim Hyŏlla 2024: 43.

119 Ibid.: 43.

into servitude, but after his abdication and exile in Yüan, his policies were reversed. Eventually, Chungsŏn ascended the throne for a second time in 1308.

He took bloody revenge against the supporters of his father without delay. In 1308, he finally ordered the confiscation of the "slaves of the four cases." This was a time of widespread domestic crisis, with breakdowns happening across nearly every area.[120] This context is crucial to understanding his slave policies.

The seizure of the slaves referred to as the "slaves of the four cases" (*sagon nobi*) was a step taken to address the unfair acquisition of slaves obtained through different methods. This action aimed to reduce the power of the former king's close allies and tackle the ongoing problems related to slavery.[121] However, its effects were limited. Five years later, Chungsŏn was forced to cede the throne to his son—Chungsuk, who ruled from 1313 to 1330 and from 1332 to 1339—and then died in exile.

Chungsuk spent the first years of his rule in the Yüan empire, abdicated in favor of his son Chunghye , and was reinstalled in 1332. After his death in 1339, Chunghye became king again. Four years later, in 1343, he unequivocally reissued Chungsŏn's prohibition of the slaves of the four cases.

The goal of reclaiming the slaves of the four cases was to take away the economic benefits of the former king's close associates, especially those officials who were not supportive of King Chunghye. The *Koryŏsa Cŏlyo* reports:

> The king, following the advice of Min Hwan, urgently sought to acquire the slaves of the four cases: those sent as bribes, those who had surrendered, those previously granted by former kings, and those exchanged between people. [...] As a result, the maidservants with attractive appearances from wealthy households were seized and taken to the northern palace, where they were forced to spin and weave like in ordinary households. The families of Kwŏn Cun, Pong Chŏnu, and Kwŏn Cŏk suffered particularly from this, except for those who bribed Hwan to be exempted.
> One day, an official came to the house of Prime Minister Kim Sŏkkyŏn to seize a maidservant. Sŏkkyŏn beat and drove the official away, then immediately went to the northern palace. The king welcomed him and said, "Prime Minister, you came because of the issue of slaves, didn't you?" At that time, Sŏkkyŏn's [illegitimate] son Wanja Chŏmoka was favored in Yüan China. Sŏkkyŏn replied firmly, "My household only has inherited slaves. If Your Majesty insists on taking them, I will have to go to [the Imperial court of] Yüan to retrieve them." This was a clear threat to the king. The king, appeasing him with gifts and reassurances, stated, "I will not take them, Prime Minister. Do not be angry."[122]

In this account, the king's intention was clearly reduced to the fact that his people "snatched attractive slave girls from their owners."[123] All of the owners mentioned by name were close associates of the former king.[124]

120 Kim Nanok 2009: 32.
121 Ibid.: 39.
122 KSC 25, Chunghye, Y. 4
123 Salem 1980: 632.
124 Kim Nanok 2009: 41.

Only five months later, Chunghye was forced to abdicate, and he spent the rest of his life in exile in South China. "Given these circumstances, it is questionable how much success the confiscation of the slaves of the four cases had in resolving the slave issues at that time."[125]

Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand the nature of the slaves of the four cases to reveal the methods and realities of how the slave system was operated at that time.[126]

5.5.1 Slaves Sent to the Court

The first type, slaves sent to the court, were slaves that served as gifts to powerful figures (officials or eunuchs) at the court, either voluntarily or through coercion, with a strong likelihood of being used for personal advancement or for the appeasement of the ruling elite; also known as bribes. It is clear that this practice was considered corruption.

An outstanding case was reported from the time of King Mokcong at the turn of the first millennium:

> Palace lady Kim was favored[127] and was called "Palace lady of Welcome Stone Manor." A man from Kyŏngju, Yungdä, falsely claimed to be a distant descendant of King Wŏnsŏng of Shilla and enslaved more than five hundred commoners, presenting them to Lady Kim and Chancellor of State Affairs Han Yingyŏng, with Vice Minister Kim Nak assisting. When the Censorate investigated and found the truth, they reported the crime, and Mokcong imposed a fine of one hundred catties of copper on Kim and exiled Yingyŏng and Nak. Those who heard the news all rejoiced.[128]

This case illustrates a unique and concerning aspect of coercion into servitude that was employed for the purpose of bribery. It is evident that the number of enslaved individuals, even if distributed among three recipients, far surpassed what would have been required for domestic labor. In fact, receiving 500 household slaves as a bribe would likely have been more of a burden than a benefit for the recipient.[129] Consequently, it is probable that these individuals were converted into agricultural slaves.[130] The central issue then becomes determining who held the rights to the land these individuals had to farm. If Yungdä was the nominal landowner, this arrangement could have been used to resolve potential disputes with the peasants. However, if someone else held the land rights, the enslavement of the farmers by Yungdä could have led to a conflict over land ownership. In such disputes, powerful aristocrats like Yungdä, who claimed royal

125 Ibid.: 43.
126 Ibid.: 44.
127 Apparently, by the king; which was remarkable because he was known for his inclination to grant "Longyang's favor."
128 KS 88, Yŏljŏn 1, Hubi. Cf. Yi Sangguk 2009: 93.
129 Ibid.: 93.
130 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 132.

descent, would likely have an advantage. Thus, for the aristocracy, the practice of enslavement served not only as a means to secure labor but also as a strategy to assert land rights, making it a lucrative and appealing practice despite its associated costs. The state, in turn, was compelled to accommodate the nobility's demand for slave ownership.[131]

5.5.2 Slaves Granted by a Former King

In contrast, the second category involves slaves (most likely government slaves)[132] specifically granted by a former king to his subjects in recognition of meritorious deeds or upon their appointment as meritorious subjects, which were not *per se* illegal. The offense to be punished in these cases was the subject's association with the previous king. For example, Chungnyŏl and Chungsuk had each granted slaves to their associates on various occasions. One notable example is Chŏ Ando, whose mother was a palace maid.[133] As a reward for his services, Chŏ Ando received substantial grants of land and slaves from Chungsuk.[134] Chŏ had a distinguished career, serving in various high-ranking roles in the royal court and the government of the Yüan Dynasty. Throughout his career, he was rewarded with significant land and slave grants as a testament to his service and loyalty. Initially, he received 100 *kyŏl* of land and ten slaves for his dedicated service to the crown prince. Later, for his loyalty during a period of political turmoil, he was awarded an additional 200 *kyŏl* of land and twenty slaves. Furthermore, for his role in successfully opposing the establishment of officials in the Eastern Expedition Department, he was granted another 100 *kyŏl* of land and ten slaves, totaling 400 *kyŏl* of land and 40 slaves.[135] These slaves were designated as "owned people" (産業人 *sanŏbin*). The term is "unprecedented" in Koryŏ and "seems to reflect the increase in public slaves engaged in agriculture to some extent during the late Koryŏ period,"[136] i.e., the appropriation of public slaves by private landowners.

131 Yi Sangguk 2009: 95.

132 Kim Nanok 2009: 49.

133 This became problematic when his ten-year-old son Kyŏng 璟 unexpectedly passed the state exam, prompting some officials to argue that his grandmother's low status disqualified him from taking the exam. As recorded, "Because Kyŏng's grandmother had a lowly background and his success in the exam was questionable, his appointment was delayed for nine years until the king urged the officials to approve it." KS 124, Yŏljŏn 36, Chŏ Ando.

134 Kim Nanok 2009: 48.

135 KS 124, Yŏljŏn 36, Chŏ Ando. Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 160.

136 Ibid.: 161.

5.5.3 Commendation

The practice of commendation, where individuals voluntarily became slaves, significantly contributed to the increase in the agricultural slave population. Commoners struggling with economic difficulties, such as burdensome taxes or insufficient land, frequently turned to commendation as "a desperate matter of survival."[137] By offering themselves to influential figures, these commoners aimed to secure a means of survival, even at the expense of their freedom. Although many of these individuals likely intended to maintain their status as commoners, economic pressures often led them to become permanent agricultural slaves.

Nonetheless, commendation resulted in a decline in the number of taxpayers, negatively impacting the government's interests. While commendation was neither outlawed nor encouraged, "it seems more likely that the state reluctantly tolerated the voluntary enslavement of adults."[138] However, it was illegal for landlords to coerce peasants into commendation.[139]

There was also another clearly illegal form of commendation: when public slaves escaped and concealed themselves as private slaves on agricultural estates.[140] Encouraging government or private slaves to flee and selling them were strictly prohibited by law.[141]

5.5.4 Slaves Acquired by Trade

Among the slaves of the four cases, one case stands out as the most "puzzling."[142] The practice of sale of slaves was initially allowed. For instance, King Sŏngjong set official prices for slaves, likely for private transactions, in 986 (see p. 68). However, according to historical records, this practice was relatively rare. Hong Sŭnggi notes:

> Notably, it is especially significant that gifted and traded slaves were requisitioned. Although this does not necessarily mean that gifting or trading slaves was illegal, it suggests that these practices were heavily restricted. In practice, individuals who did not comply with the requisition of the slaves of the four cases and concealed them were punished. These facts reflect significant limitations imposed on the ownership rights of slave owners, indicating that the social status and rights of private slaves were somewhat improved.[143]

137 Ibid.: 62.
138 Ibid.: 62.
139 Kim Nanok 2009: 50.
140 Salem 1978: 85.
141 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi.
142 Kim Nanok 2009.
143 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 190.

This observation indicates that while the sale of slaves was not outright illegal, it was subject to stringent controls, which limited slave owners' rights. This complexity challenges the claim that "Koreans from the Koryŏ period on, and probably earlier as well, described slaves as chattel property,"[144] a view influenced by the Chinese Tang Code. According to the Tang Code:

> For all cases involving private property, slaves, livestock, and similar items, where other regulations do not specifically mention slaves, they are treated the same as livestock and chattel.[145]

However, this definition may not fully apply to the Koryŏ context. Salem concludes that "the definition of the slave as chattel [...] has only partial validity in terms of Koryŏ."[146] Evidence of systematic human trafficking during the Koryŏ period is limited, with few references indicating such practices.

Economic hardship frequently led commoners to resort to selling themselves or their children into slavery. As early as 918, King Thäjo expressed concern over the conditions driving people to sell themselves into slavery:

> High food prices have led ordinary people to sell themselves and their children into slavery, becoming others' servants and slaves. I am deeply saddened by this.[147]

Despite his sorrow, King Thäjo did not prohibit the practice. Historical records indicate that acquiring slaves through purchase or as war captives was a recognized practice among officials:

> At the beginning of our revered ancestor [Thäjo]'s founding of the dynasty, his officials, apart from those who already owned slaves, acquired slaves either by capturing them in war or by purchasing them.[148]

The economic motivation behind such transactions is further illustrated in literary accounts. For instance, the scholar and poet Yi Illo mentions a case where a slave was traded for a cow:

> Cajin from Hangyang took up a position in the region of Kwandong. His wife, Lady Min, was exceedingly jealous and would not allow the maidservant, who was quite beautiful, to accompany him. Cajin said, "This is very easy to resolve." He then exchanged the maidservant with a villager for a cow to raise it.[149]

144 Palais 1996: 212.

145 Tang Lü 20, 290.

146 Salem 1978: 166–67.

147 KS 1, Thäjo, Y. 1.

148 Memorial of Chö Sŭngno, KS 85: Hyŏngbŏp 2 and KSC 2: Sŏngjong 1.

149 *Phahanjip* ("Collection for Leasurely Reading"), https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/破閑集. Cf. Illo Yi 2024: 74; the *Phahanjip* is "a literary anthology of essays [...] revealing aspects of Koryŏ culture" and is

Though it is suggested that "trading slaves for livestock seems to have been a common practice at the time,"[150] this statement is difficult to verify. When later questioned, Cajin clarified that the trade was "just a moment of jest in the private quarters," implying that it may not have actually occurred.

The involvement of religious institutions in the trade of people is another notable aspect. The Wangnyun Temple in Kägyŏng, founded by King Thäjo in 919, was a significant Buddhist site. A story reported by Yi Kyubo highlights the ethical dimensions of slavery during this period:

> In Panbangni, there was a major. Due to his poverty, he could not donate anything. He had a daughter who was about thirteen years old. Because he wished to offer her as a servant to assist with work, the honorable Kyo[gwang] reluctantly accepted her. At that time, there was a general in the south of the capital whose name is forgotten. He was old and had no children. He wished to redeem the girl to raise as his own child, so he offered five hundred bolts of cloth as compensation.[151]

This event can be interpreted as an act of self-sacrifice, with the father offering his daughter to the temple, upon which she is then redeemed by a third party. This situation—described as a *felix commercium*,[152] or a mutually beneficial exchange—reflects the complex interplay between morality and economic necessity: the payment made for the girl is significantly higher than the standard value.

Later reigns continued to address the practice of selling children and its broader social impacts. For example, in 1296, King Chungnyŏl, on his sixtieth birthday, announced an amnesty, stating:

> For the impoverished who have sold their children because of taxes, the government will redeem and return them.[153]

Notably, this proclamation did not grant freedom to the redeemed children, implying that they had been sold as private slaves and not as public slaves. This distinction required that the government purchase them back.

An undated law recorded in the *Koryŏsa* prohibited wealthy individuals living outside the capital from seizing indebted people and using them as slaves or servants,[154] reflecting an evolving stance against the exploitation of vulnerable populations. Moreover, it appears that slave markets only emerged in the fourteenth century. The scholar-official Yi Kok observed such a market in Kägyŏng:

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among the "representative works of that period." *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 25.

150 Illo Yi 2024: 239 fn. 69.

151 *Record of Miracles of the Sixteen-Foot Golden Statue at Wangnyunsa Temple*. TYSC 25, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/東國李相國全集/卷二十五 [accessed 29.07.2025].

152 Quaas 2020: 48–49.

153 KSC 21, Chungnyŏl 3, Y. 22.

154 KS 85, Hyŏnbŏp 2, Kŭmryŏng.

> Recently, I have also witnessed a "human market" (人肆 *insa*). Since last year's floods and droughts, the people have had no food. The strong have turned to robbery, and the weak are wandering, having nowhere to make a living. Parents sell their children, husbands sell their wives, and masters sell their slaves, all lined up in the market, their prices set as low as possible, worth less than even dogs or pigs. Yet, the authorities do not inquire about this.
> Alas! The first two types of markets are detestable, and it is essential to severely punish them. The last type, the human market, is pitiable and must be promptly eliminated. If these three markets are not abolished, I know that the lack of beauty in customs and justice in governance will not end here.[155]

Apparently, these markets soon went out of existence and into oblivion, giving rise to the claim that "at no time were slaves publicly sold in Korea."[156] By the late fourteenth century, the neo-Confucian rejection of the slave trade was evident. A petition to the king in 1391 articulated this moral stance:

> Although slaves are lowly, they are also people under Heaven. Treating them as chattel and trading them with ease, or exchanging them for livestock such as cattle or horses, is inappropriate. For example, one horse may be given in exchange for two or three people, which is still not enough compensation.[157]

Two years earlier, a petition submitted to King Kongyang noted that the sale of wives and children persisted:

> Borrowers and lenders have gone to the extent of selling wives and children, yet they still cannot repay their debts. Therefore, the state has already issued prohibitions against this.[158]

Here, both debtors and creditors are held responsible for these transactions. It appears that women and children were often used as collateral when loans were made. If the borrower could not repay his debt, his family members were forfeited to the lender. This practice underscores the economic desperation of the time and the measures that people would take to satisfy debt obligations.

The prohibition against the sale of women and children appears to have been formalized in several undated laws recorded in the *Koryŏsa*. These laws are included in the section on punishments, specifically under "Family and In-laws," and provide detailed penalties for the sale of relatives:

> The consensual sale of one's children or grandchildren into slavery results in a punishment of one year of penal servitude. The forced sale [results in a punishment of] one and a half years. If the buyer knowingly participates, their punishment is increased by one grade.
> The consensual sale of a younger brother, nephew, or maternal grandchild into slavery results in

155 *Kajŏngjip* 7, Shisayŏl, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/稼亭集/卷七 [accessed 29.07.2025].
156 Vinton 1895: 372.
157 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp, Nobi, Kongyang, Y. 3.
158 KS 34, Kongyang 1, Y. 1.

> a punishment of two and a half years of penal servitude. If the sale was forced, the punishment is three years. If the sale is not completed, the punishment is reduced by one grade. If the buyer knowingly participates, his punishment is also reduced by one degree.
> The consensual sale of cousins or descendants of cousins results in exile of two thousand *ri*. If the sale was forced, the penalty is exile for three thousand *ri*. If the sale is not completed, the penalty is reduced by one grade. If the buyer knowingly participates, his punishment is also reduced by one grade. Other relatives are treated as commoners.[159]

These laws illustrate a structured approach to penalizing the sale of relatives into slavery, with varying degrees of severity based on the relationship and circumstances. The regulations imposed harsher punishments for coercion and somewhat lesser penalties if the sale was not completed. The inclusion of these laws indicates a growing recognition of the need to regulate and curb the practice of selling family members into servitude.

Under King Sŏngjong, Koryŏ began integrating Chinese legal principles, including a sophisticated penal system grounded in five types of punishment: whipping, caning, forced labor, exile, and capital punishment. These punishments were graded across twenty levels, providing a systematic framework for adjudicating crimes based on their severity. The introduction of the *Punishment Commutation Law* allowed for most punishments, excluding the death penalty, to be converted into caning or fines. This legal innovation helped streamline the application of justice under Koryŏ's legal system. The implications of these legal reforms for slave-related offenses are summarized in the following table.[160]

Tab. 7: Punishment commutation for slave-related crimes. Koryŏsa 38, Hyŏngbŏp 1.

Punishment	Years	Months	Distance (*ri*)	Cane Beatings	Fine (Catties of Copper)
Penal Servitude	1			13	20
	1	6		15	30
	2			17	40
	2	6		18	50
	3			20	60
Exile			2,000	17	80
			2,500	18	90
			3,000	20	100

159 KS 84, Hyŏngbŏp 1, Hohon.
160 O Hŭiŭn 2015: 6–8.

However, there is a fourth prohibition that requires more thought:

> 官私奴婢招誘，良人子賣買者，女人，則初犯，依律斷之，再犯，歸鄉。男人，則初犯，歸鄉，再犯，充常戶。
> Women who entice government or private slaves to buy or sell the children of free people will be punished according to the law for a first offense, and punished with banishment to the place of origin for a repeat offense. Men will be punished with banishment to the place of origin for a first offense and assigned to a commoner household for a repeat offense.[161]

This sentence is highly complex, both syntactically and semantically. This type of structure is typical in formal texts, such as legal documents, where detailed rules and conditions should be formulated clearly and unambiguously. At least in theory. But are they really?

The Korean translation by Yun Cäsu, a legal historian active in the 1960s to 1980s, which is now hosted on the website of the South Korean Ministry of Government Legislation, reads:

> 公家나 私家의 奴婢가 良人의 子를 불러 당기여 賣買한 자가 女人이면 즉 初犯인 경우 律에 의하여 이를 斷하고 再犯이면 歸鄉케 한다. 男子이면 즉 初犯인 경우 歸鄉케 하고 再犯이면 常戶에 充當한다.
> If a government or private slave entices and sells the child of a commoner, and the perpetrator is a woman, then for a first offense, she is judged according to the law, and for a repeat offense, she is sent back to her hometown. If the perpetrator is a man, then for a first offense, he is sent back to his hometown, and for a repeat offense, he is assigned to a common household.[162]

Yun Cäsu then adds:

> This law prohibits the actions of government or private slaves who entice or abduct commoners through schemes and sell them.

However, this interpretation is downright wrong. Let us break down the syntactical structure of the Chinese original.

It is perhaps tempting (syntactically and ideologically) but certainly mistaken to understand the public and private slaves as the subject (i.e., agents, and therefore culprits) of this sentence. They are the object of the first complementing phrase that precedes the actual subject, which is 者 ("people who"). The phrase makes clear that slaves were used as middlemen in the trafficking of the free children.

161 KS 84, Hyŏngbŏp 1, Hohon.
162 Yun Cäsu 2009.

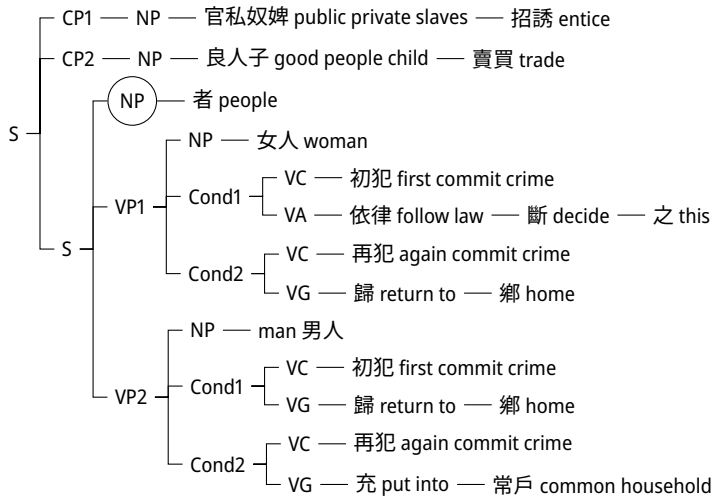

Fig. 5: Sentence analysis: Enticing and selling.

Understanding the slaves as solely responsible agents would also not logically fit the punishments. What would be the point of sending a convicted slave back to his or her place of origin or demoting him (only *him*, not her) to a commoner's household? According to O Hŭiŭn,

> the punishment of banishment to the place of origin (*kŭhyanghyŏng*) was a punishment that could be flexibly applied depending on the case, the status of the criminal, and ultimately the final judgment of the judicial authority. It was typically imposed as an aggravated punishment for crimes that were particularly frowned upon at the time, such as officials or monks engaging in corruption by accepting bribes or stealing assets under their control, or enticing government or private slaves, or selling the children of commoners. [...] The primary characteristic of *kŭhyanghyŏng* was that it mainly targeted the ruling class. In many cases, particularly for officials, it served as a form of enforced and physical separation from the central political arena. Because it was a punishment primarily aimed at the ruling class, it had a privileged aspect compared to other exile punishments, but within the overall penal system, it could be used as a severe punishment that served as a reduction from the death penalty.[163]

In addition, it does not make sense to divide the punishable act in this law into the crimes of "enticement of slaves" or "trafficking in children." They belong together. In its chapter on slaves, the *Koryŏsa* has a sentence that is a close syntactical parallel and leaves no room for interpretation:

163 O Hŭiŭn 2015: 58.

> 凡公私奴婢，引誘逃亡，放賣他人者，一度，歸鄉，再度，充常戶。
> All who entice government or private slaves to run away and sell them to others will be punished with banishment to the place of origin for a first offense and assigned to a commoner household for a repeat offense.[164]

The meaning of this rule is clear: "This prohibition stipulates the punishment for those who entice government and private slaves to escape and sell them to others."[165] Obviously, there is no logic in dividing this crime into two alternative acts. The crime was that high-ranking people (i.e., *yangban*) incited slaves to sell free children into slavery.

In summary, these rules prohibit the trafficking of free people. However, there is no date associated with them. But if we look at the most prominent case of coercion into servitude, when Yungdä enslaved 500 people (whose ages are unknown) and bribed three influential members of the court society at the time of King Mokcong, the woman involved, Lady Kim, was fined 100 catties of copper, the maximum penalty under the Punishment Commutation Law, and the two men involved were sent into exile. So, these punishments were perfectly in accordance with the prohibitions. This case also confirms that they were targeting corrupt elements of the upper class. However, banishment to the place of origin in this form only came into use in the late Koryŏ period.[166]

The only law law that can be dated and concerns the sale of slaves was proclaimed by the Agency for Human Affairs Adjudication, a temporary agency established by King Kongyang, in 1391, at the very end of the Koryŏ period:

> The sale of slaves is subject to strict prohibition and regulation. However, if the sale is driven by hunger and cold, or due to old debts owed to public or private entities, and if there is no other option, the circumstances must be reported to the authorities, and only then is the sale permitted. If the sale is conducted for reasons such as indulgence in alcohol, lust, gambling, dogs, horses, or for wealth, the slaves will be confiscated by the government.[167]

Once again demonstrating how economics dictated the slave trade, this was at best a conditional ban.

5.6 Inherited Slaves

As shown above, when King Chunghye asked Kim Sŏkkyŏn why he resisted the confiscation of his slaves, Kim answered that his house "only has inherited slaves." Kim claimed that he was not guilty of the four offenses described; all of his slaves were legally owned

164 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi.
165 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 71.
166 O Hŭiŭn 2015: 77–78.
167 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi.

by his family.[168] The veracity of this claim is difficult to determine, but it is obvious that inheriting slaves was seen as the (legally and ethically) purest form of property, as we would expect in a servile society. It is crucial to remember that "ownership of large landed estates and large numbers of slaves were not qualitately new developments, but rather outgrowths of a pattern of estate holding by the great central-official descent groups of pre-1170 Koryŏ and an old tradition of slave ownership reflected in early Koryŏ legal provisions for hereditary slavery."[169]

According to an entry in the *Koryŏsa Cŏlyo* from 1388, the antonym of "inherited slaves" would have been "recently acquired slaves."[170] Neither term has been used in other East Asian historiographies. The hereditary nature of slave status is deeply rooted in Koryŏ society, and in its depth, this is a uniquely Korean feature.

Regarding the status and ownership of slaves, there is no evidence of a significant shift or change in the customs of law from the early to the middle Koryŏ period. The emphasis remained on assigning slave status to children of mixed-status unions, ensuring clarity and stability in the social hierarchy. The other codified rule was pronounced by King Chungnyŏl in 1300 in reply to demands from the Yüan dynasty, which adhered to a completely different rule: "one free parent makes a free child." Chungnyŏl, in constrast, stated that according to legal practice in Koryŏ, "one slave parent makes a slave." This was not meant as a new rule but rather reflected existing practices.

This was not just about status inheritance; it also addressed ownership issues, particularly when the parents belonged to different masters. Ownership disputes were likely resolved by one master purchasing the other's slave or by dividing the offspring between them.

In theory, the main instrument to inquire about and update any individual's personal status would have been the household registers. These registers were revised every three years, with duplicates kept by local authorities and individuals. According to the *Koryŏsa*, these registers were developed separately for the aristocracy and commoners. The commoners' registers served taxation, conscription, and labor purposes, requiring local officials to annually report the population to the Ministry of Revenue. But private slaves would not be found in these registers. They would be part of the *yangban* registers, which included a detailed record of the head of the household's lineage, family members, and information about their slaves, both living-in slaves and out-residing slaves. This included information on the genealogy of the slaves, the names and ages of their descendants, and the social status of the male slave's wife and the female slave's husband. This detailed record-keeping was essential for establishing the legitimacy of ownership rights over slaves. Any unregistered slaves would be classified as public slaves if discovered.[171] It is possible that out-residing slaves "were somehow

168 Kim Nanok 2009: 52.
169 Duncan 2000: 94.
170 KSC 33, Shin U 4, Y. 14.
171 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 9–10.

recorded by the state in the region where they were currently residing" with "at least the basic personal details," which were then included in their owners' registers.[172]

These details also included information about the slaves' property. Most importantly, "it was not impossible for slaves at that time to own land."[173] An early Cosŏn code, presumably based on earlier Koryŏ legislation, provided that the land and property of public slaves who died without heirs went to the local administration, while that of private slaves belonged to their owners.[174] However, this is an argument *ex silentio*; neither the if nor the when nor the how of its veracity can be tested, because to date, there is no known documentary evidence of it. We only know that "the privilege of owning land and even other slaves was not denied them."[175]

During the Koryŏ period, women had the same right as men to inherit private family property. The paternal line was not the center of family inheritance.[176] This also applied to the ownership of slaves. However, the testators were free to favor their sons, as the following source shows. It is an epitaph written by Yi Cehyŏn for the military official Na Ikhŭi, who died in 1344.

> When his mother divided the family inheritance, she left him forty servants, but Na Ikhŭi declined, saying, "As the only son among five daughters, how can I, in good conscience, take more than my share, burdening others?" His mother, moved by his integrity, agreed to his request.[177]

It seems that his mother owned forty slaves, which she originally intended to bequeath to her only son. However, he insisted that they be shared among all his siblings, including his five sisters. The mother agreed, but we are not told whether the slaves were ultimately divided equally (which would not be arithmetically possible anyway, given the division of 40 by 6).

The fact that the son renounced his right to preferential treatment in the inheritance spared his mother embarrassment. For the rules of virtue expected mothers and housewives to treat their children fairly—and also their slaves, as can be seen from the following two epitaphs for virtuous women of the twelfth century.

The epitaph for Lady Cong of Tongnä County, written in 1170, praises her because:

> She nurtured her children with kindness and managed her servants with compassion—truly embodying the virtues of a noblewoman.[178]

172 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 11.
173 Yang Sanghyŏn 1991: 29.
174 Yang Sanghyŏn 1991: 30; Salem 2004: 193.
175 Salem 1980: 630.
176 Yi Yunbok 2020: 189.
177 *Ikchä Nango* 7, Pimyŏng, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/益齋亂稿/卷七 [accessed 29.07.2025].
178 Yongsŏn Kim 2003: no. 109.

The other epitaph was written in 1158 for Lady Yi, wife of Yi Poyŏ, Minister of War under King Injong.

> All her children, as well as the few dozen slaves, were cared for and nurtured as if nothing was lacking. In matters of food and drink, she ensured everything was equally divided, truly embodying the virtues of a mother and a woman.[179]

It is noteworthy that both parents were known for their frugality and integrity. "Despite their household being extremely poor, they found joy in living righteously." Owning a "few dozen slaves" was apparently not considered a contradiction to "being extremely poor."

This makes it difficult to decide whether the forty slaves bequeathed by Na Ikhŭi's mother were a considerable amount of property. The mother was the daughter of Co Munju, a military official who participated in the assassination of Chŏ Ŭi, the last dictator of the Chŏ family, in 1258. He was allied with Kim Cun, the leader of the coup against the Chŏ family, who subsequently rose to power until he clashed with King Wŏnjong and the pro-Mongolian faction at the court and was assassinated by Yim Yŏn in 1268. After that, Yim also killed Kim's followers, including Co Munju. One of the reasons why Yim rebelled against Kim was that he held a personal grudge after Kim had ridiculed both his son and his wife. The incident concerning Yim Yŏn's wife is relevant to our topic:

> When Yim Yŏn's wife once killed her male slave with her own hands, Kim Cun said, "This woman is wicked by nature and should be exiled far away." When Yim Yŏn heard this, he became even more resentful.[180]

Although Kim Cun was certainly biased—first because of his conflict with Yim Yŏn, and second, because he himself had been a hereditary household slave—the fact that the slave's death was considered a punishable crime is significant. This suggests that masters could not kill their slaves without consequence, regardless of the circumstances.[181] But it also implies that housewives had every right, within the bounds of fairness, to dispose of and punish their slaves—both matters that could literally change the course of their lives.

Even in Koryŏ it could happen that families died out without heirs. In this case, it would have been logical for their hereditary slaves to be freed. But the state had made provisions for this eventuality. As early as 1131, King Injong had decreed:

> The slaves of people without heirs belong to the government.[182]

179 Ibid.: no. 83.
180 KS 130, Yŏljŏn 42, Kim Cun.
181 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 39.
182 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi.

5.6.1 The Oldest Slave Deed

The Hänam Yun clan, situated in the fertile granary region of Honam and its islands in today's South Cŏlla Province, is renowned for its extensive collection of pre-modern documents. The *Nogudang* clan residence in Hänam

> houses over 4,000 historical documents covering six centuries from the fall of the Koryŏ dynasty in fourteenth century to the last days of the Chosŏn era at the beginning of the twentieth. Foremost are the Haenam clan's detailed genealogies, invaluable resources for any historian of Korea. One can also find extensive inventories of *ŭnsa*, gifts received by clan members from Chosŏn royalty. [...] The compound also houses contracts, registers, and other legal documents related to the management of the clan's extensive land and slave holdings. Altogether, there are 661 documents related to agricultural management and 55 documents related to the management of slaves, with most of these sources coming from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. 26 inheritance records, which often augur larger social changes such as shifting family organization and gender roles, can also be found within. Finally, the compound holds over 659 personal letters.[183]

The oldest document in their possession, dating back to 1354, is the earliest extant record of slave inheritance in Korea. This document is a petition submitted by Yun Tanhak, requesting official documentation and authorization for a female slave granted to him by his father, Yun Kwangjŏn. The originally full document was divided into four parts around 1755. The edges were trimmed, and the lines were cut and rearranged, diverging from the original. However, even with this editing, this document, as Chŏ Sŭnghŭi notes, exemplifies the administrative and petition systems of the time, offering invaluable insights into the historical context and practices of the period:

> This petition serves as a valuable reference for the documentation system and the form of petitions of that time [...] Additionally, this petition illustrates the continued usage of certain document formats from the Koryŏ mid-period to the early Cosŏn Dynasty, despite differences arising from the lifestyles of scholars and commoners. [...] This document includes testimonies and is a good reference for understanding the administrative and petition systems of the time.[184]

Since this is regarded as a kind of blueprint for slave inheritance documents in the following centuries, I opted to reproduce its full translation below. In August 1354, Yun Kwangjŏn drew up the slave deed to transfer a female slave to his son, Yun Tanhak. Yun Tongjin witnessed the transfer, and Kim Sŭngsa wrote the document.

> On the 10th of the 8th month of the 14th year of the reign of Zhizheng [August 28, 1354], Kabo-Year, it is hereby documented and authorized that my son, Tanhak, being the only legitimate heir among

183 *Field Trip to South Chŏlla Province* 2012: 7–8.

184 Chŏ Sŭnghŭi 1989: 10; Salem, in 1978, did not have access to the full text of the document yet, but she recognized its relevance: Salem 1978: 117.

my three children, shall inherit the female slave Kŭnagi,[185] born to the female slave Obuli, who was handed down from the father of my wife, master Pak. This authorization is for ancestral rites provisions and is to be passed down to his descendants for generations. Should other children dispute this matter, it will be resolved by the relevant authorities based on the intent outlined in this document.
Owner: Father, Titulary Director[186] Yun Kwangjŏn (s.)
Witness: Pongsŏn Grand Master[187] and Division Commander[188] of the Divine Tiger Guard[189] Yun [Tongjin] 尹 [東眞] (s.)
Scribe: Former Captain Kim [Sŏngsa] 金 [承嗣] (s.)[190]

This was not a typical inheritance. Rather, it highlights the Yun family's early emphasis on honoring their ancestors, as evidenced by the granting of property specifically for this purpose; it was a special one-time grant given to the son for fulfilling a specific duty: performing ancestral rites. This practice predates the widespread adoption of formalized service provisions within *yangban* families, which typically emerged in the sixteenth century, before these "ancestral rites provisions" became the norm.[191] Originally, filial piety centered on the eldest surviving direct ancestor. While memorial rites for recently deceased lineal forebears held significance, greater emphasis was placed on providing devoted care during their lifetime.[192] However, these provisions do not imply that Kŭnagi was directly and exclusively employed as a helper for ancestral rites. Her mother, Obuli, had obviously come into the possession of the Yun family as part of the dowry of Kwangjŏn's wife, while the ancestral service naturally only concerned the patrilineal side. It seems that when Yun Tanhak himself sought official confirmation of the transfer, he asked the witness and the scribe to verify the details of the case. Two

185 The Chinese characters 大阿只 are literally transcribed as Täaji, but it is to be read as Kŭnagi, one of the "common names historically used by the lower classes, reflecting a blend of Sino-Korean characters with native Korean elements. This practice often indicated the use of informal or colloquial names in written records and everyday life." Hanguk Kojŏnbŏn Yŏgwŏn 2018: 38.

186 直長同正 *cikcang tongjŏng*. *Cikcang* were low-ranking official positions in various government bureaus, https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0054526 [accessed 29.07.2025]. *Tongjŏng* were sinecure positions for successful candidates who did not receive an actual position in the administration.

187 奉善大夫: Since 1308, the title assigned to a civil officer of the Junior Fourth Rank. See KS 77, Cije 30, Munsangye. However, "we still know very little about the actual operation and management of the late Koryŏ government personnel management." J.-h. Lee 2002: 1–2.

188 保乘 is obviously a variant of 保勝 *posŭng*. Its exact meaning is still contested. The *Koryŏsa* informs us that "each division in the capital guards and various other units is organized with the following ranks: one lieutenant general, two major generals, five brigadier generals, five colonels, five majors, twenty captains, forty lieutenants, 1,000 regular soldiers for labor duties, and 600 support soldiers. They are responsible for all the labor tasks inside and outside the royal court." KS 81: Ogun.

189 The second division of the Six Guards of the capital, counting 7,000 men. See KS 77, KS 80. Shultz 2000: 5.

190 Hanguk Cŏngshin Munhwa Yŏnguwŏn Caryo Cosashil 1986: 206.

191 Mun Sukca 2001: 45–46.

192 Ro 2017: 196.

months later, in late October, both the witness and the scribe submitted a petition to the local government office in Thamjin County, requesting an official investigation into the slave transfer they had witnessed and the issuance of a certification document by the authorities.

> From Student[193] Yun Tanhak,
> I humbly submit this petition to inform you that my father, Titulary Director Yun Kwangjŏn, has authorized me to inherit the female slave Kŭnagi, handed down from my maternal grandfather.
> I respectfully request that the magistrate review the attached document and issue an official certificate with your seal.
> Magistrate's[194] Decision
> On (blank) day of the 8th month of the 14th year of Zhizheng
>
> From Witness and Scribe, etc.
> We humbly submit this petition to inform you that we, the undersigned, acted as witnesses and scribe when Titulary Director Yun Kwangjŏn drafted the document granting the slaves[195] to his son, Tanhak. We respectfully request that each aspect be verified and an official certificate be issued.
> On (blank) day of the 8th month of the 14th year of the reign of Zhizheng
> Scribe: Former Captain Kim Sŭngsa (s.)
> Witness: *Pongsŏn Tăbu* and Division Commander of the Divine Tiger Guard Yun [Tongjin] (s.)
>
> Certified on the 10th day of the tenth month [October 26, 1354]
> Magistrate of Thamjin County, Häng Shim (s.)

The final step was to have the transaction approved by the local magistrate. This completed the bureaucratic documentation.

> On the 12th of the 10th month of the 14th year of Zhizheng (October 28, 1354),
> based on the petition, the fact that Yun Tanhak was granted slaves[196] is verified. The attached petitions from the witnesses and scribes were also reviewed, and the magistrate has issued a certified document to the petitioner.
> Magistrate Häng Shim (s.)

The format of this document is referred to as *yiban* (立案 "statement of record"). An *yiban* is an official document issued by authorities to certify various legal or procedural matters, such as judgments, sales, inheritance, or permissions. Beginning in the late Koryŏ period, these documents were created upon request to verify specific transactions,

193 學生 *haksäng*. In Koryŏ, the title referred to a member of the *yangban* class who was preparing for or engaged in the study of Confucian classics and other subjects in order to take the state civil service examinations.

194 監務 *kammu(gwan)*, a minor official position from the mid-Koryŏ period to the early Cosŏn Dynasty.

195 奴婢 *nobi*. Note that the name and gender of Kŭnagi are omitted. My guess is that this was a standard form for witnesses where placeholders like *nobi* were used instead of actual people.

196 奴婢 *nobi*. As in the case of the witness petition, Kŭnagi's name and gender are missing, probably because it was a standard form for such certifications.

mostly concerning land and slaves, and came in different forms depending on their purpose. A total of 778 *yiban* have been preserved, dating from 1354 (the above document) to 1909.[197] They are an important example of the continuity of administrative practices beyond the change of dynasty in 1392.

By the sixteenth century, however, *yiban* for land sales became increasingly rare and later disappeared altogether, while they persisted for slave transactions. The reason for this was that farmland was immovable and therefore easy to verify, whereas slaves could run away and so required stronger verification measures. Thus, *yiban* became primarily a feature of legal matters involving slaves.[198]

5.7 Coercion Into Servitude and Institutional Reforms

The need to stabilize the labor force, especially with the growing prevalence of slaves, led to intense efforts by the ruling class to secure control over labor. This included various methods to convert commoners into slaves, using both legal and extralegal means. The growing demand for labor in the agricultural economy meant that controlling labor equated to economic success, with powerful families often forcing commoners into servitude to ensure their estates' productivity. The power imbalance became stark, as large estates expanded through the mobilization of labor, contributing to the significant increase in the population of slaves while the number of free commoners sharply declined.[199]

The key mechanism contributing to the increase of the slave population in late Koryŏ was neither legal inheritance nor trade, but *coercion into servitude*. This practice involved coercing commoners and public slaves into private slavery, including but not limited to the slaves of the four cases as defined by Chungsŏn and Chungsuk. "The increase in slaves of the four types and the decrease in the population of external slaves and commoners were closely linked."[200] Nobles and powerful individuals "actively trying by any means possible to obtain as many slaves as they could"[201] were the main driving force behind the expansion of the slave population. Some records suggest that certain individuals owned as many as 1,000 slaves.[202] Since both the taxable free population and their own public slaves decreased dramatically, this posed a double problem for the kings.

There is no legal definition for the term 壓良爲賤 (*amnyang üchŏn*, literally "oppress free people and make them base people") in Korean sources. In the *Koryŏsa*, it

197 Cŏng Kŭngshik 2006: 465.
198 Im 2022: 87–88.
199 Pak Cinhun 2018: 224–25.
200 Kim Nanok 2009: 54.
201 Duncan 2000: 92.
202 Yang Sanghyŏn 1991: 23.

appears in only a handful of places. It is clearly borrowed from Chineses sources. In 1084, Sima Guang published his *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* as a survey and reference book for Chinese history, which gives a definition as follows:

> Buying the children of free people and making them slaves is called *coercion into servitude*, which is prohibited by law.[203]

During the subsequent Cosŏn period (1392–1897), it was frequently used in the *Veritable Records* of the kings. Throughout different reigns, the issue of *coercion into servitude* was recognized as a significant social and legal problem, leading to various efforts to control and punish the practice. Based on the analysis of the cases presented in the *Veritable Records*, a working definition of *coercion into servitude* would be:

Coercion into servitude is the practice of falsely classifying free individuals as slaves through manipulation, exploitation of legal and social loopholes, or outright deceit.

This practice often involved the use of power or influence to force individuals into servitude, thus violating their legal and social status as free persons. It was considered illegal, and the kings considered it their duty to take action against it.

In 1269, King Wŏnjong established the Agency for Fields and People Correction, an office responsible for addressing land and labor issues. This agency sought to rectify both land ownership and labor systems, especially in the context of securing the state's finances and identifying those liable for taxes and state labor obligations, recognizing that land ownership and labor were intrinsically linked in an agricultural economy. During this time, the Koryŏ government reassessed the amount of tribute based on household counts, which had decreased due to war, and tried to adjust tribute obligations accordingly. The agency also undertook the task of assessing the land and people.[204] It was re-established several times under King Chungnyŏl in 1287, King Kongmin in 1351, and King U in 1380. Each time, it was tasked with investigating and rectifying the unlawful occupation of land and the wrongful enslavement of individuals. Despite support from the monarchy, the office's existence was often short-lived due to pressure from powerful aristocrats who lobbied for its dissolution.

King Chungnyŏl first created the Agency for Human Affairs Adjudication in 1276. The agency was responsible for developing and enforcing legal procedures concerning slave disputes. This included the establishment of laws and regulations to manage cases of slave ownership, resolve conflicts fairly, and protect the rights of the aggrieved parties. However, it faced resistance from these families, leading to its temporary dis-

203 *Zizhi Tongjian* (Hu Sansheng Yinzhu), v. 283, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/資治通鑑_(胡三省音注)/卷283 [accessed 29.07.2025].

204 Pak Cinhun 2018: 222–24.

solution. He re-established it in 1280, but it was never heard of again until Kongmin re-established it in 1353.

In 1318, King Chungsuk established the Agency for Investigating and Rectifying Injustices to address social injustices and rectify illegal land and slave occupations by powerful families. It was disbanded a month later due to continued pressure from influential families, re-established the next month, abolished five months later due to the intervention of Chungsŏn, re-established in 1321, and disbanded shortly thereafter. In short, it was never fully functional.

However, in the same year when he first created the Agency for Investigating and Rectifying Injustices, Chungsuk also abolished the institution of the *sashimgwan*. This deserves our attention because it provides us with some numerical data not available for other types of appropriation.

The *sashimgwan* ("inspector") was a government position established in 935 during the reign of King Thäjo, shortly after he unified Korea. It was initially created for meritorious subjects to oversee the affairs of various provinces and maintain order within the kingdom. This involved appointing local clerks, managing governance, and overseeing social and moral standards. The *sashimgwan* played a crucial role in managing public lands, household registrations, and equitable taxation, helping to prevent exploitation and maintain economic balance. But the *sashimgwan* faced criticism over time due to increasing corruption and misuse of power. The positions were first temporarily abolished under Chungnyŏl in 1283. Although they were briefly reinstated, they were abolished again in 1318 during King Chungsuk's reign. It is significant that Chungsuk had to decree this measure twice in the same year, because after the first time, "the influential and powerful individuals resumed these roles themselves, causing more harm than before." Chungsuk then declared:

> The establishment of the *sashimgwan* was originally meant to protect the people, distinguish social classes, distribute labor fairly, and set a moral example. However, it has not been the case. They occupy public lands, conceal household registrations, and if there is a minor labor duty, they levy excessive taxes, leading officials to act as private entities, imposing fines and collecting copper, and reclaiming taxes and exerting their own power and influence. They harm the villages and provide no benefit to the nation. Therefore, this system has been entirely abolished, and the lands and households they concealed will be investigated and restored.[205]

The issue of *coercion into servitude* is not directly addressed here, but it seems obvious that this was the real reason why the *sashimgwan* were abolished. One year later, in 1319,

205 KS 75, Sashimgwan. In 1369, Shin Ton proposed the reinstatement of *sashimgwan* for obvious reasons, but King Kongmin rejected this emphatically, recalling his father's decision to abolish the position after a drought, as the abolishment was followed by rain; ib.

> the lands and people under the jurisdiction of the *sashimgwan* in the provinces and counties were confiscated: 2,360 households of commoners, 137 slaves, 19,798 *kyŏl* of fields,[206] 1,227 *kyŏl* of granted fields, and 315 *kyŏl* of position fields.[207]

A "position field" (*ŭijŏn*) was a type of land allocation granted to certain craftsmen and specialized workers, reflecting their technical skills and contributions to the state. Laborers and craftsmen such as paper and ink makers, sword makers, and paper makers belonging to the status group of miscellaneous laborers were among those eligible for position fields. The allocation of position fields was not merely an acknowledgment of their skills but also an incentive to ensure that these essential trades continued to thrive. The production of items like ink, paper, and weapons was vital to the administrative and military needs of the state, which underscored the rationale for providing position fields as compensation and source of livelihood.[208] Hong Sŭnggi assumes that the fields and support fields were public land and were cultivated by the commoners, whereas the granted fields were cultivated by the slaves.[209] All of these "lands and people appropriated by the *sashimgwan* were mostly state-owned lands and their cultivators" and could therefore be confiscated by the state.[210] "The abolition of the *sashimgwan* system was greatly welcomed by the people, which suggests that those hidden by the *sashimgwan* were forced, and most of them were cultivators of state-owned lands."[211] By dividing the given numbers of *kyŏl* by the number of households and slaves, Hong Sŭnggi arrives at the estimate that one commoner household cultivated 8.4 *kyŏl* and one slave 8.9 *kyŏl* on average.[212] Hong makes a rounding error here; the rounded average should be 9.0.

We can compare these calculations to the data given in the *Koryŏsa* for 19 instances wherein kings awarded "granted fields" to their subjects. They amount to 1,970 *kyŏl* and 210 slaves, giving a ratio of 9.4 *kyŏl* per slave. The median is 10. This allows us to conclude that Hong's calculation is largely plausible.

Hong then continues:

> If we assume that each household consisted of about five people, this suggests that there were roughly five times as many general freeborn farmers cultivating state-owned lands compared to public slaves. [...] It is reasonable to conclude that the influence of public slaves on state-owned lands was significantly lower than that of the general freeborn population.[213]

206 There is no meaningful way to calculate this in modern units of measurement because the area of one *kyŏl* varied "depending on the fertility of the land": Palais 1996: 363.

207 KS 34, Chungsuk, Y. 6.

208 Kim Nanok 2003: 334; Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 175.

209 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 175.

210 Ibid.: 175.

211 Ibid.: 175.

212 Ibid.: 176–77.

213 Ibid.: 177.

Based on this assumption, a population of about 11,800 commoners and 137 slaves could have been involved in the *sashimgwan*, giving a slave ratio of only 1.2 percent.[214] However, James Bernard Palais questions "how this conclusion is warranted, since slave cultivators may also have had families."[215] Assuming that the average slave family also had five members, we would arrive at a ratio of almost six percent. Leaving these conjectures aside, we can still deduce that a slave cultivated about seven percent more land than a commoner household.

Tab. 8: Granted fields and slaves in the *Koryŏsa*.

Source	Land (*kyŏl*)	Slaves	*Kyŏl* per slave	Source	Land (*kyŏl*)	Slaves	*Kyŏl* per slave
KS 5	300	30	10	KS 45	200	20	10
KS 24	100	15	7	KS 45	150	15	10
KS 24	50	5	10	KS 45	100	10	10
KS 40	100	10	10	KS 36	100	10	10
KS 40	50	5	10	KS 36	70	5	14
KS 40	50	5	10	KS 105	100	15	7
KS 40	100	10	10	KS 126	200	15	13
KS 40	50	5	10	KS 133	100	10	10
KS 40	50	5	10	KS 104	100	20	5
				Total	1,970	210	9

There are several documented cases that give an idea of the procedure of coercion into servitude and the number of people affected. Yi Yŏngju was a favorite of King Chungnyŏl who enjoyed "unrestricted access to the palace" and considerable power and influence. He was nicknamed "Calamity-Yŏngju" because "he often acted unjustly and harmed the people," as the following incident illustrates:

> In Kimju, a man named Tămun and nearly a hundred of his family members and relatives were threatened by Yŏngju, who wanted to exploit them and coerce them into slavery by abusing his

214 For reasons unknown, Yi claims that the number of commoner households was 2,360, and thus the *nobi* population ratio only 0.6 percent: Yi Yŏnghun 2007: 146.

215 Palais 1984a: 182.

> power. Yi Sunshin, an assistant of the Director of Slave Affairs known for his sycophancy, complied with Yŏngju's wishes and manipulated documents to reduce their status to servitude.[216]

Thus, in this case, the fraud involved a corrupt official from the office responsible for registering slaves, who forged documents—probably the household registers—to help Yi Yŏngju.

Incidentally, this is the only place in the *Koryŏsa* where the beautiful metaphor for forgery 舞文 *mumun*, "dancing with the documents," is used.

Cases involving slaves, especially those with significant social implications, were often judged by high-ranking officials or court judges. The king could directly oversee or influence the judicial process. The court relied on documentary evidence and verbal testimonies to determine the legitimacy of claims regarding slave ownership. Authorities were aware that documents and testimonies related to slave ownership could be falsified.

An incident involving Kim Yun (1277–1348), a judge on the king's Board of Land and one of the most powerful politicians of the mid-fourteenth century, illustrates how such documentations of property transfers involving slaves were used in social practice:

> There was a prominent family who was in conflict with the local villagers over the descendants of a female slave, which numbered around one hundred. Yun examined the household registers and said, "This record shows that in a certain year of a certain era, an agreement was made with the various sons. This happened many years ago. Comparing the ages of the descendants, there is a significant difference, and the name of the female slave has a slight variation, indicating that it is likely a forgery. Since all the sons of the said family have descendants, there should be another record kept by the family. Why not retrieve and examine it?" The prominent family was eventually found to be at fault.[217]

This story is also quoted by Yi Cehyŏn, who adds that one character of the name of the female slave was changed from 魚 *ŏ*, "fish," to 魯 *ro*, "stupid";[218] there may well have been a derogatory connotation to this shift in meaning.

However, this case underscores two critical points: first, such records of inheritance had been in use for a long time; second, authorities were aware that the documents could have been forged by interested parties. This suggests that the regulation of inheritance was central to slave ownership.

Another incident was investigated by the Agency for Political Reforms. In 1344, King Chungmok ascended the throne and established this new temporary office, whose guidelines put all these incidents in the context of the expanding private sector of the rural economy:

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216 KS 123, Yŏljŏn 35, Yi Yŏngju.

217 KS 110, Yŏlcŏn 20, Kim Yun.

218 *Ikcä Nango* 益齋亂藁, B. 7, p. 568H.

> Eunuchs, their relatives, and powerful families have been competing to establish agricultural estate in fertile areas. Corrupt officials have taken advantage of this, seizing people's fields and forcibly taking cattle and horses. From now on, thorough investigations and severe punishments will be carried out. Additionally, these officials have been enticing displaced people, as well as government and bureau slaves and relay station workers, to form gangs and exploit others. They have been lending money to commoners at high interest rates, manipulating contracts, and generating profits from the interest. From now on, all goods obtained in this manner must be returned to their original owners, the contracts will be collected, and penalties will be imposed according to regulations. Furthermore, those who have been exploiting old debts to force good people into slavery will be judged according to previous rulings. The labor value for low-status individuals has been set at thirty-two and a half bolts of cloth per year. This amount will be collected to repay the debts, and all forced labor will be abolished.[219]

An exceptional case was Cŏn Yŏngbu, a long-time favorite of kings Chungnyŏl, Chungsŏn, and Chungsuk. Even without knowing the details, the number of the victims is stunning:

> Cŏn Yŏngbu once coerced 160 free people into servitude. When this was discovered, the Agency for Political Reforms restored their original status.[220]

This was just one of several temporary agencies set up by the kings of Late Koryŏ, with the explicit goal of handling slavery matters more efficiently and possibly circumventing the established administrative channels controlled by *yangban* and therefore biased towards the establishment. However, the purpose of this agency was not to protect slaves, but to protect the free against the slaves. The scholar-official An Chuk served several times as Minister of Law and also as a judge at the Agency for Political Reforms. In 1348, on his deathbed, he told his friend Yi Kok how he wanted to be remembered:

> All cases where common people have been wronged or oppressed by slaves must be addressed and corrected properly. This is something worth recording.[221]

Pak Wŏngye was another official who had to deal with a slave case. He died in 1349. His epitaph praises his integrity:

> During the time of King Chungsuk, an envoy arrived from the capital, relying on royal favor and behaving arrogantly. He reported a matter concerning slaves to the king, intending to distort the truth and benefit himself. Both parties appeared at the palace gates, and the king ordered the court officials to decide the case. At that time, Judge Pak served as the Chief Judge. He clearly distinguished between right and wrong without any hesitation. The envoy, greatly angered, left. The king said, "This is how a court official should be."[222]

219 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Chungmŏk 1.

220 KS 124, Yŏljŏn 36, Pyehäng 2, Cŏn Yŏngbu.

221 *Tongmunsŏn* 128, Pansŏ Pak Kong Myojimyŏng, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/東文選/卷一百二十八 [accessed 29.07.2025].

222 Ibid.

Again, King Chungjŏng decreed: "All long-standing lawsuits over land, houses, and slaves seized by the powerful, as well as wrongful and delayed cases, shall be thoroughly investigated and adjudicated."[223]

Nevertheless, whatever administrative reform the kings tried, it was not enough to reverse the historical trend: The agricultural estates of the great and the powerful spread more and more, and the royal administration was less and less able to influence them and the fate of the peasants. Hong Sŭnggi rightly concludes:

> There must have been some vulnerability among those targeted for *coercion into servitude*, and it is likely that this vulnerability was economic poverty.[224]

So, was the time ripe for a more radical solution?

5.7.1 Household Registers

As introduced (in theory) in the Shilla period, Koryŏ relied on household registers to control and count its taxpayers:

> According to the state system, the people became adults at the age of sixteen and began performing *kugyŏk (state-imposed labor)*. At sixty, they were considered elderly and were exempted from service. Each year, the provinces and counties calculated the numbers of registered subjects and submitted the data to the Ministry of Taxation. All military conscription, tributes, and labor duties were assigned based on the household registers.[225]

However, it proved difficult to enforce, this as can be seen from the entries in a section of the *Koryŏsa* that deals with the pertinent regulations:

> In the thirteenth year of King Injong's reign [1135], in the second month, it was decreed that people of various ranks living in the capital, along with their descendants, were plotting to evade labor duties by registering under the household registers of relatives in their original hometowns, causing confusion between names and actual statuses. From now on, residents of the capital who are registered in outside household records are to be strictly prohibited.[226]

In 1278, King Chungnyŏl decreed that since many people had lost their household registers in the wars, "all public and private slave records should be divided into two copies: One should be given to the owner, and one should be kept by the authorities for examination."[227]

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223 KSC 5, Chungjŏng 2, Y. 12

224 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 61.

225 KS 79, Shikhwa 2, Hogu.

226 KS 79, Shi 33, Shikhwa, Injong, Y. 13. M. 2.

227 KS 85, Sosong, Chungnyŏl, Y. 4.

Admittedly, these measures produced "no effective outcome."[228]

When the monarchy began to restore the old social order in the early fourteenth century, it sought to revive bureaucratic control. In 1324, King Chungsuk decreed:

> Firstly, in Käsŏng's five districts and the outer regions' counties and prefectures, those who falsely register commoners as *yangban* or lowborn people as commoners will be punished according to the law. Secondly, for powerful families who have expanded their estates and concealed people to avoid taxes and duties, the local authorities must investigate these concealed people and ensure they fulfill their obligations as tax-paying households.[229]

But these appeals were in vain. Therefore, in 1371, King Kongmin tried a reset:

> First, the system for registering households in our country has recently been disrupted due to widespread migration, causing a loss of the original records. Starting from the year of Imja [1372], all registrations shall follow the old system, where people of both good and low status will be sorted and registered according to their age, and their records submitted to the Ministry of People for reference and review.[230]

But even this was a failure. In 1390, under King Kongyang, the government reported the following:

> According to the old regulations, for the *yangban*, two copies of the household register were required to be made every three years: one copy was to be submitted to the government, and the other was to be kept at home. Each household register had to include the family lineage of the household head, as well as the lineage of cohabiting children, siblings, nephews, and sons-in-law. It also recorded the genealogical origin of slaves and servants, their names, birth years, and the social status of slave wives and servant husbands. All these details were meticulously recorded for easy reference and examination. In recent years, the household registration law has been abolished, making it difficult not only to trace the genealogies of *yangban* families, but also leading to situations where people of good status were wrongly degraded, or people of low status falsely elevated. Consequently, the courts have been flooded with lawsuits, and official documents have become chaotic. I propose that from now on, we follow the old regulations. Those who lack household registers should not be permitted to receive official appointments, and household registers should not be entrusted to slaves; everything should be made public.[231]

So, we know how the system of household registers should work in theory. They were supposed to be renewed every three years. Two copies were made and kept by the government and the families. Slaves were also supposed to be registered. However, the registers differentiated between slaves and free citizens based on the types of information recorded about each group. While the slave registers focus on their owners and

228 KS 79, Shi 33, Shikhwa, Chungnyŏl, Y. 5. M. 9.
229 KS 79, Shi 33, Shikhwa, Chungsuk, Y. 12. M. 10.
230 KS 79, Shi 33, Shikhwa, Kongmin, Y. 20. M. 12.
231 KS 79, Shi 33, Shikhwa, Kongyang, Y. 2. M. 7.

any lineage that could affect ownership, the registers for free citizens emphasize family lineage and status details.

Had this been done successfully and continuously, we would know much more about the composition of the Koryŏ population today. The sad result of all these efforts, which were certainly also hampered by wars and rebellions, is that only fragments of one of these registers exist today.

The document known as the *Household Register Ledger of Hwaryŏng from the Late Koryŏ Period* is a fragmentary document traditionally considered a household register. It consists of eight scrolls, each containing entries related to household information. The document appears to have been created around 1391 to manage and report household and land grants given to Yi Sŏnggye and other meritorious subjects. The grants listed signify the allocation of resources and support by the Koryŏ government, reflecting Yi Sŏnggye's growing influence and preparing the administrative structures that would later support his establishment of the Cosŏn Dynasty. The first fragment contains titles and official positions associated with Yi Sŏnggye, indicating it was compiled during his time. It is formatted similarly to household registers from the Cosŏn Dynasty, with details such as the year of creation, location, and document titles. The second fragment is akin to a preface, providing instructions related to household registration. Fragments 3–8 document twenty-five households, including their members, relationships, and statuses, with five entries involving nineteen slave households that comprise forty-two slaves, who "may or may not have been related" to Yi Sŏnggye.[232] The mention of the character 印 (*in*, "sealed") at the end of some entries suggests measures taken to prevent unauthorized alterations, such as falsely claiming free people as slaves. The records indicate that some slaves might have been part of the households granted as sustenance to deserving subjects, reflecting the administrative practices of the period.[233]

The entries relating to slaves are as follows:

> Household of former director Pak Chungyong, household slave Kimsangjwa, age: 44, wife: household maidservant of minister Ko Han, Kammuli, age: 42
> Same household, working in a separate household, slave Kimwŏn, age: 42; wife: household maidservant of minister Kim Wŏn, Hogi, age: 42
> Same household, working in a separate household, slave Kai, age: 27; wife: same household, working in the same household maidservant Nulgŭni, age: 20[234]
> Household wife's mother's maidservant, inherited from her mother's side, maidservant Kachilga; her daughter, maidservant Sagwe, age: 4.[235]
> Household wife's maidservant, inherited from her side; her son, slave Kŏŭlgŭm, age: 15[236]

232 Hyojong Lee 2022; Yi Yŏnghun 2004: 25.

233 Yi Kŏnshik 2008; Hyojong Lee 2022; Yi misunderstands the fragmentary nature of the ledger and concludes that the *nobi* population was 7 out of a total of 162, or "only 4.3 percent." Yi Yŏnghun 2007: 146.

234 Fragment 3, first household. Son 2020: 77.

235 Fragment 4, 3rd household. ibid.: 77.

236 Fragment 4, 5th household. ibid.: 77.

Household father's slave, inherited, slave Kimsam, age: 50; her daughter, maidservant Kimdŏk, Age 23.[237]

Household wife's father's slave, Monggodä, age: 45; his son, slave Sangu, age: unknown; his daughter, maidservant (name unknown), age: 17.[238]

In the household register, each household typically includes the head of the household, their family members, and any extended relatives. It also lists slaves, hired laborers, and others based on their relationship with the head of the household. It is unknown if the slave households in the third fragment are indeed part of the 300 households granted to Yi as sustenance.[239] The first household register includes three slaves, all belonging to the household of Pak Chungyong. Each of the three slave couples had their own family units, but they were all registered under a single household. Two of their wives are listed under a separate household.

Tab. 9: Slaves in the Household Register Ledger of Hwaryŏng (Son 2020: 77).

Name	Sex	Age	Relationship	Owner History
Kimsangjwa	m	44	spouses	Pak Chungyong
Kammuli	f	42		Ko Han
Kimwŏn	m	42	spouses	Pak Chungyong
Hogi	f	42		Kim Wŏn
Kai	m	27	spouses	Pak Chungyong
Nulgŭni	f	20		
Kachilga	f		parent–child	Household wife's mother (inherited)
Sagwe	f	4		
Kŏŭlgŭm	m	15		Household wife (inherited)
Kimsam	m	50	parent–child	Household father (inherited)
Kimdŏk	f	23		
Monggodä	m	45	parent–children	Household wife's father
Sangu	m			
N.N.	f	17		

However, in the cases in fragments 4–8, slaves who were previously part of the household were recorded as couples or small families when the head of the household was no longer present. The slaves' affiliations were indicated by linking them to the direct ancestors of the head of the household, such as the head's father, the wife's parents, or

237 Fragment 6, 1st household. ibid.: 77.

238 Fragment 7, 1st household. ibid.: 77.

239 Yi Kŏnshik 2008: 34.

the wife herself, likely due to unclear ownership transfers. In two cases, the records detail family units consisting of a parent and children, emphasizing the slaves' birth relationships. This suggests that there was a need to clarify both the origins and familial connections of the slaves to establish their proper affiliations.[240] The relevant point is that all of these slaves were inherited.

5.8 Shin Ton and the Hearts of the Unruly

In 1365, the wife of King Kongmin, who was born a Yüan princess, died. Her death deeply affected the king, and he took several measures to honor her. He built a tomb site and assigned 114 tomb guards. Unam Temple was granted 2,240 *kyŏl* of land and forty-six slaves —giving a rather poor ratio of 49 *kyŏl* per slave—to support spiritual offerings and rituals.[241] Around this time, the emotionally struggling Kongmin entrusted the management of political affairs to Shin Ton.

Shin Ton, "the charlatan and revolutionary,"[242] was the son of a temple maid and thus himself of lowly origin.[243] He led a monk-like existence early in his life but was later criticized as a "false monk."[244] His ascent to power began during the reign of King Kongmin. His intelligence, charisma, and eloquence impressed the king, and he became a trusted advisor. Once entrenched in the royal court, Shin Ton wielded significant power, often overstepping traditional boundaries. He was known for his direct involvement in state and religious affairs, disregarding established protocols and challenging the status quo. He hosted lavish gatherings at his residence, where he discussed state affairs and received envoys and gifts from the Yüan court. This shocked the nobility and common people alike, sparking controversy and resentment among other court officials. The *Koryŏsa Cŏlyo* summarizes this criticism in a highly dramatic tone in an entry from 1360:

> At this time, armies were mobilized in all directions, there were consecutive years of drought and famine, battlefield bones lay exposed, and the roads were filled with the starving dead. The king should have been vigilant, discussing the ways of the former kings with the great ministers and scholars, seeking to address the urgent matters of the time, and planning for the protection of the people and the state. Instead, he gathered monks to discuss emptiness, neglecting his responsibilities and disregarding benevolence and righteousness. In the end, he honored Shin Ton as a minister, respected Na Ong[245] as a teacher, and built large Buddhist temples to seek blessings for

240 Son 2020: 77–78.

241 KS 89, Hubi, Kongmin. Cf. Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 161.

242 Salem 2004: 196.

243 KS 132, Yŏljŏn 44, Panyŏk 6, Shin Ton.

244 Deuchler 2015: 41.

245 Born to a Chinese immigrant, he studied Zen Buddhism, frequently traveling to China, and he entered the service of King Kongmin in 1360 and gained his support for revitalizing Buddhism throughout Koryŏ in 1361. Yi Säk wrote his epitaph: Zaborowski 1976: 43.

> the princess in the afterlife. Innocent people were unjustly executed, treated like weeds, causing turmoil within and ridicule from all sides.[246]

But at the core of the criticism of Shin Ton was his slave policy, which the *Koryŏsa* painted in extremely dark colors:

> Shin Ton used the facade of public righteousness to win people's favor, declaring all slaves who claimed to be free to indeed be free. This resulted in a wave of slaves rising against their masters, proclaiming, "A saint has appeared!" When women involved in legal disputes were beautiful, Shin Ton feigned pity and compassion, luring them to his home where he would engage in licentious behavior with them, ensuring their cases were resolved in their favor. Consequently, women seeking influence through personal connections became prevalent, causing resentment among the scholars and officials. In one incident, a house slave of Judge Cang Hä was promoted to the position of brigadier general and would not dismount from his horse when meeting Hä, greeting him with a high bow. Hä, infuriated, whipped the slave, who then complained to Ton. Ton imprisoned Hä and his daughter in the patrol army camp. Such actions were typical of his schemes to win over the hearts of the unruly to achieve his nefarious ends.[247]

In such tendentious accounts, we can see the wounded class thinking that prevailed among Confucian historians. Nevertheless, Shin Ton probably violated many written and unwritten rules and was guilty of favoritism. However, Shin Ton's single most important measure was quite in line with what generations of kings had tried in vain to achieve:

> Shin Ton requested the establishment of the Agency for Fields and People Correction and appointed himself as the chief adjudicator. He issued a proclamation to the public:
> "In recent times, the state's governance has severely deteriorated, with corruption running rampant. Aristocrats have seized lands belonging to ancestral shrines, schools, warehouses, temples, public lands, military fields, and those held by ordinary citizens. This includes lands owned by the state and lands held by generations of commoners. Many powerful families have illegally occupied almost all of them. Some have even persisted in their claims despite previous rulings against them, or they have falsely claimed free people as slaves. The evasion of service by local officials, government slaves, and commoners has gone unchecked, leading to the establishment of large agricultural estates. This has caused distress among the people, weakened the nation, and led to droughts, floods, and unceasing epidemics. Therefore, we have established the Agency to rectify these issues. Within the capital, the deadline for compliance is set at fifteen days, while in the provinces, it is forty days. Those who voluntarily correct their wrongs within this period will not be questioned. However, those who fail to comply by the deadline and are discovered will be prosecuted, and false claimants will be punished."
> Upon issuing this order, many powerful individuals returned the lands and people they had seized to their rightful owners, bringing joy to the nation.[248]

246 KSC 27, Kongmin 2, Y. 10.

247 KS, B. 132, Yŏljŏng 44, Panyŏk 6: Shin Ton.

248 KS, B. 132, Yŏljŏng 44, Panyŏk 6: Shin Ton.

Shin Ton's establishment of the Agency for Fields and People Correction reflects his efforts to address corruption and restore social justice by targeting the unlawful actions of powerful families and implementing strict compliance measures. Salem comments: "Whether or not he was the scoundrel he is portrayed to be, he had correctly diagnosed many of the causes of Koryŏ's economic ills."[249] But in reality, the "intellectual momentum" for these ambitious reforms came from a Confucian scholar, Yim Pak, a capable academic and respected bureaucrat who became Shin Ton's close confidant.[250] According to the *Koryŏsa*:

> Every night, he would walk in and out of Shin Ton's residence in tattered clothes, secretly plotting and making plans with him. [...] Yim once said to Shin Ton, "You control the affairs of the state; you should rectify the injustices in land and people's disputes." Shin Ton then reported to the king and established the Agency for Fields and People Correction, appointing Shin Ton as its supervisor and Yim as its commissioner. Yim resolved many disputes, but because of Shin Ton's partiality and unwillingness to listen, many injustices remained unresolved.[251]

Eventually, Shin Ton was accused of manipulating the king, undermining the authority of other officials, and conspiring with the Yüan dynasty to overthrow the Koryŏ throne. The accusations led to a purge of his supporters and eventually his own downfall. Despite the lack of concrete evidence, Shin Ton was exiled and then executed for treason in 1371. Yim Pak initially survived Shin Ton's downfall, but he was also slandered for high treason, caned, and "trampled to death on his way" to exile in 1376.[252]

5.8.1 Denouncing Buddhism, Reclaiming Slaves

As already shown, Shin Ton was not only criticized for his politics, but also because he appeared as a Buddhist monk. Since neo-Confucianism was introduced to Koryŏ in the fourteenth century,[253] anti-Buddhist voices in the *yangban* class became more and more outspoken. The relationship between Buddhism and slavery played a key role in the opponents' argumentation. An inscription erected after the reconstruction of a Buddhist hermitage on Mount Tutha in Kangwŏn Province in 1323 was still only mildly critical:

> I have secretly observed that the widespread devotion to Buddhism throughout the country has gone too far. Wherever boats and carts can reach, there are pagodas and temples everywhere. The followers of Buddhism often cling to power and accumulate wealth, corrupting the people and looking down on scholars and officials as slaves. That is why Confucian scholars do not accept

249 Salem 1978: 86.
250 Deuchler 2015: 40–41.
251 KS 110, Yŏljŏn 23, Yim Pak.
252 KS 110, Yŏljŏn 23, Yim Pak.
253 Deuchler 1992: 20–24.

> them. But is this really the fault of Buddhism? After all, Buddhism promotes doing good and not doing evil. When we look at its teachings on understanding the mind and realizing one's nature, we should think about this perspective.[254]

This criticism came to a head at the end of the Koryŏ period and led to open battles in administration and politics, in which supporters and opponents of Buddhism faced each other. It was alleged (but never precisely proved) that the temples owned at least 80,000 temple slaves.[255] This supposed wealth increasingly aroused the greed of the secular upper class. Criticism of Buddhism was above all "a socio-economic matter."[256] The scholar Cŏng Tojŏn articulated this in a very outspoken statement:

> They own vast lands and slaves, with documents and records piled high, exceeding those of the government. The running around and provisions required to support them surpass public duties. Where is the so-called path of renouncing worldly desires, clearing troubles, and living in purity and contentment?[257]

The criticism even reached the royal court. In 1356, King Kongmin declared that

> village and relay station workers, as well as public and private slaves, are evading their duties and pretending to be monks, resulting in a decrease in household registrations. From now on, no one is allowed to shave his head privately without official ordination documents.[258]

In 1391, under King Kongyang, General Pang Saryang submitted proposals on current affairs to the court. Among them, he argued:

> In the past, Emperor Wu, despite his supreme status, three times humbled himself to become a slave of a Buddhist temple, exhausting the wealth and resources of the Jiangnan region to build grand pagodas. He did this not because he believed it was beneficial, but rather out of a sense of obligation. When a commoner rebelled, the emperor himself suffered humiliation, his descendants were not safeguarded, and the state followed in ruin. Where, then, is the so-called blessing from doing good as claimed by Buddhism?[259]

Later in the same year, Sŏnggyungwan Academy student Pak Cho and others submitted a lengthy memorial to the king. The authors argue vehemently against Buddhist practices and beliefs, portraying them as detrimental to the state and society. The document begins by asserting the fundamental nature of traditional social relationships and hi-

254 *Tongmunsŏn* 68, Ki, Dutasan Kanjanggam Cungyŏnggi, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/東文選/卷六十八 [accessed 29.07.2025].

255 Salem 1980: 636; S.-E. Kim 2016: 12.

256 S.-E. Kim 2016: 11.

257 *Sambongjip* 9, Pulshi hwabok-ji pyŏn, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/三峯集/卷九#佛氏禍福之辨 [accessed 29.07.2025].

258 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi.

259 KSC 35, Kongyang 2, Y. 3.

erarchies, then criticizes Buddhism as a foreign religion that fails to understand these relationships and misleads people. It references historical attempts to limit Buddhism's influence, including those by the dynasty's founder, Thäjo, and argues that continued support for Buddhism has led to moral decline and economic hardship for the people. The authors propose abolishing Buddhist institutions, redistributing their resources for state use, and returning to Confucian principles. The text contrasts the perceived decline in scholarship due to Buddhism with earlier periods when Korea was respected for its learning and culture. The memorial goes on:

> We humbly request that Your Highness follow the example of Yao and Shun, whose methods led to the prosperity of three dynasties, and learn from the downfall of Qi, Chen, Liang, and Xiao. Uphold the legacy of our revered ancestors and meet the expectations of our Confucian scholars. Reclaim the land occupied by Buddhists and return it to the people to be used for military conscription and taxation purposes. Convert their dwellings to increase household registration, and burn their texts to permanently eradicate their influence. Their land should be managed by military provisions officers to support military supplies. Their slaves should be overseen by the Director of Slave Affairs and distributed among various offices. Bronze statues and utensils should be handed over to the Armory Department for the maintenance of weapons and armor. The utensils and vessels should be allocated to the Ministry of Rites for distribution among different offices. Subsequently, instruct the people in propriety and cultivate them with moral virtues. In a few years, the people's will shall be stabilized, education and moral transformation will be achieved, granaries will be full, and the nation's resources will be sufficient.[260]

However, this petition was met with fierce resistance from within the academy:

> When Pak Cho and others were about to submit the petition, Sŏnggyungwan student Sŏ Pongnye refused to sign it. Professor Kim Cho and others beat the drum and expelled him. Additionally, Chief of Arts Yu Päksun strongly opposed the submission of the petition by Pak Cho and others. Unable to stop them, he informed Senior Scholar Sŏng Sŏkyong, saying, "Please do not let Pak Cho and others' petition be presented to the king." Pak Cho and others learned of this and discussed collectively refusing to attend lectures. The Grand Master of Confucian Studies Kim Casu and others were displeased with their disrespect and angered that Kim Cho and others had expelled students without notifying their superiors. They detained Kim Cho's household slaves and summoned Sŏ Pongnye back to school. When Kim Casu went to the office, Kim Cho and others did not come out to greet him. Kim Casu submitted a resignation letter but it was not accepted. Kim Cho and others were handed over to the patrol guard for punishment.[261]

Likewise, King Kongyang's reaction was not at all favorable: "Upon receiving the memorial, the king was furious."[262] He wanted to execute Kim Cho for criticizing Buddhism, but his advisors intervened—one of them wrote, "We believe that denouncing Buddhism is a common practice among Confucians, and since ancient times, kings have ignored such criticism. In view of Your Majesty's broad and generous mercy, these few reckless

260 KSC 35, Kongyang 2, Y. 3.
261 KSC 35, Kongyang 2, Y. 3.
262 KSC 35, Kongjang 2, Y. 3.

students should be tolerated.” The king subsequently stepped back, and “Kim Cho and others were caned forty times”[263] instead of being put to death.

However, after Kongyang’s overthrow in 1392, the door was open for the “relentless anti-Buddhist policies” of the Cosŏn period.[264]

5.9 “How can I bear to live off your labor?”—Mogŭn’s Slaves

The increase in agricultural private slaves, both living-in and out-residing slaves, had significant implications for the broader socio-economic landscape of late Koryŏ. The growing trend of aristocrats retiring to rural areas and farming increased the reliance on private slaves for agricultural production, reflecting a significant change in their socio-economic role.[265] This shift in roles was not limited to the aristocracy. Historical records show that commoner households also owned private slaves, primarily employing them for agricultural work. These slaves were crucial in farming, even on leased land, indicating that the use of slave labor for agriculture was common across various social classes. This suggests a growing reliance on slaves for agricultural tasks, highlighting broader socio-economic shifts in which slaves became an essential part of rural farming, not only on aristocratic estates but also among commoners.[266] A very instructive case in point is the story of Yi Säk and his slaves.

The Confucian scholar and politician Yi Säk was the son of a high-ranking official. Educated in a Buddhist monastery and at the Sŏnggyungwan Confucian Academy in Kägyŏng, he studied Confucianism in China, passed state examinations in both Korea and China and held various administrative positions.[267] Yi Säk had a complex political relationship with King Kongmin, whom he advised and accompanied during the Mongol invasion in 1361. When the king increasingly favored Shin Ton, Yi Säk protested and even offered his resignation.[268] Kongmin was assassinated in 1374, and his son U, whose mother was a slave of Shin Ton and who was even rumored to be the son of Shin Ton, recalled Yi Säk in 1379. When Generals Yi Sŏnggye and Co Minsu staged a rebellion against King U in 1388, U was deposed and Yi Säk consented to the enthronement of his son Chang. Opposing Yi Sŏnggye’s plans for land reform, Yi Säk was then interrogated, tortured, and exiled. After the assassination of King Chang in 1389, Yi Sŏnggye installed King Kongyang, who recalled Yi Säk in 1391. However, Yi Säk was slandered by Yi Sŏnggye’s partisans and and was thus compelled to retire. Yi Sŏnggye eventually became

263 KSC 35, Kongyang 2, Y. 3.
264 S.-E. Kim 2016: 11.
265 Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 141–48.
266 Ibid.: 149–50.
267 Zaborowski 1976: 27–28.
268 Ibid.: 38–42.

King Thäjo of Cosŏn in 1392. In 1395, he invited Yi Säk to pay a short visit to his court. Finally, in 1396, Yi Säk died while traveling to a monastery.[269]

Yi Säk, who chose the pen name Mogŭn (牧隱, "Shepherd in Hiding") and is recognized as one of the most inspiring intellectuals of his time,[270] is also celebrated for his literary works, which vividly describe conditions in Korea during the transition from the Koryŏ to the Cosŏn period. His poems are among the most beautiful in Korean Chinese-language literature.[271] During his retirement in the countryside, Mogŭn wrote extensively and compassionately about his slaves, providing a rare glimpse into their daily lives. Mogŭn also made an important comment about the economic importance of slaves, which runs like a common thread through his observations:

> Rich households accumulate wealth as great as the capital. In the countryside, their estates connect with each other. Poor families carry burdens here, hand-grinding with sweat pouring down. They worry about the morning and don't plan for the evening, unaware of mutual support. Rich families obtain the best fields and labor hard with many servants.[272]

Mogŭn's and his slaves' daily routines began at sunrise, as indicated by his vivid descriptions:

> The neighbor's dog barks, my rooster crows. Sunlight streams in through the south window facing the hearth. The young maidservant fetches water from the spring to prepare for washing.[273]

Fetching water was a standard task for female slaves from dusk to dawn:

> The maidservants carry copper basins [for fetching water] on their heads, morning and evening.[274]

Water was essential for washing and refreshment:

> This year's early fall is particularly hot. I had the maidservant draw fresh water from the well.[275]

In winter, however, fetching water was arduous:

> Opening the window, I see the rooftops white, suddenly startled that frost has already fallen. Sitting and thinking about my children and grandchildren in the cold, I notice my clothes are still torn and ragged. The maidservant kneels and speaks, "The frost has fallen for several nights now. I

269 Zaborowski 1976: 47–51.

270 Deuchler 1992: 99.

271 Zaborowski 1976: 53.

272 *Mogŭn Shigo*, hereafter referred to as MSG, book 30: *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 435L; this collection of Yi Säk's writings "provides valuable historical material for the study of the histories of the Late Koryŏ Dynasty and the early Yi Dynasty." *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 46–48.

273 MSG 28 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 392H.

274 MSG 8 ibid.: 56L.

275 MSG 24 ibid.: 337H.

> didn’t dare say anything, enduring the cold without complaint. Without the master’s grace, who would take care of my life and limb? Every morning I break the ice to draw water from the spring, sometimes with bare feet. My body barely escapes the exposure.” My heart truly aches. When I heard this, my grief deepened. I have no savings; even if I had, they wouldn’t keep you warm. How can I bear to live off your labor?[276]

Mogŭn also found it difficult to get up early in the winter cold, but the voices and noises of the busy servants disturbed him:

> In the early morning, I wake up startled, feeling cold all over. Sitting by the small window, I am too lazy to dress properly. The voices of the household servants continue as they talk to each other.[277]
> This morning, my teeth still ache slightly; I sit and listen to the sound of the servant sweeping the floor.[278]
> I only regret the moments when worldly dust arrives. The household servants quarrel, mixed with the sound of scripture chanting.[279]

The male slaves also had the task of feeding the animals in the morning. Not all of them did this with due diligence:

> The household servant lazily rises, the horse without fodder.[280]
> Day by day, I return to the court on horseback, and from time to time, I oversee the laborers. The household servant sulks and cleverly avoids work, while the village people come to greet me with gratitude.[281]

Yi Säk also owned fields that he had out-residing slaves work on independently:

> At the head of Yupho field, I bought a plot, and entrusted it to the diligent peasant slave Pak to till all year.[282]

The labor tasks were separated according to gender:

> Maidservants raise silkworms, male servants cultivate rice and millet.[283]

During the day, the slaves either cultivated the fields where rice, wheat, and millet were grown, or worked in the garden. Weeding was sweaty work:

276 MSG 25 ibid.: 353H.
277 MSG 32 ibid.: 471H.
278 MSG 14 ibid.: 148H.
279 MSG 33 ibid.: 478H.
280 MSG 20 ibid.: 259L.
281 MSG 5 ibid.: 015L.
282 MSG 32 ibid.: 468L.
283 MSG 21 ibid.: 283H.

> In the early morning, two or three male young servants, either hoeing or pulling by hand, sweat streaming down their bodies.[284]

Male slaves also cleaned the pond[285] and fished along rivers:

> Strong slaves cast fine nets along both banks.[286]

A double-crop system, including winter wheat-rice rotation, dictated the farming cycles. The spring harvest could be problematic due to rain:

> At rooster's crow on the 14th of the 3rd month, I heard the maidservant calling to gather the wheat in the courtyard amidst the rain. [...] Fearing the wheat in the courtyard will be washed away, I send the maidservants.[287]

The autumn rice harvest also faced weather threats:

> Suddenly, rain splashes on the pines by the eaves. I urgently call the maidservant to go to the courtyard, fearing that the drying rice will be washed away and ruin the morning's threshing.[288]

Natural hazards, like storms, were also a concern:

> A strong wind blows all day, raising dust on the road. Sitting quietly by the south window, I savor the moment. The young maid comes and reports in a low voice: the pear trees in the back garden have been blown down.[289]

Growing fruit such as pears was important for the small farm. Another source of income was sericulture. Mulberry trees in the garden provided food for silkworms:

> Gathering mulberries from dawn till dusk, how hard it is for the little maidservants. Knowing that in the frost and snow, you alone have no pants or jacket.[290]

> In winter, work in the fields comes to a halt.
> The shadows of the mulberry trees are sparse among the ten acres. The silkworms climb the racks, and the maidservants are idle. Knowing well that every household under the sky rejoices, silk bundles from now on will pile up like mountains.[291]

Winter work shifted to housework:

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284 MSG 23 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 320H.
285 MSG 18 ibid.: 216H.
286 MSG 23 ibid.: 315H.
287 MSG 28 ibid.: 403H.
288 MSG 26 ibid.: 366H.
289 MSG 29 ibid.: 410L.
290 MSG 16 ibid.: 190L.
291 MSG 29 ibid.: 420L.

> The maidservants pound the washing block. They sew winter garments, scissors clinking late into the night.[292]

Household cleaning was also their task:

> At dawn, I instruct the young male servant to sweep and clean the empty courtyard. Moss marks, green and stepping-friendly, tender grass sprouts, welcoming and small. Removing filth is a thorough task, clear eyes and mind bring peace.[293]
> It snowed through the night without me knowing. In the morning, the courtyard is filled with snow. I ordered the servants to sweep a path, leaving the rest untouched. I was very pleased and composed a poem.[294]

> The young maidservant sweeps the fallen leaves, gathering them into a broken dustpan. She carries it on her head into the kitchen, where the mistress urges her to prepare the evening meal.[295]

Mogŭn closely observed his slaves as they prepared and served meals:

> Delicious food and fine wine, smooth and even more fragrant, truly like a tonic that nourishes the innermost being. The maidservant diligently follows orders, attentively serving.[296]
> The maidservants move gracefully, serving cups of wine.[297]

But it was not just the young, agile slaves that caught his eye:

> The old male servant, startled, rises to prepare a meal.[298]
> The old maidservant is boiling tea, drawing water from the stone spring. You, nearing seventy, remain vigorous. As for me, plagued by many illnesses, I am like one restrained. The will of heaven, giving and taking, is hard to predict. I am ashamed, having taken the lead on the official path.[299]

Reflecting on his frailty compared to his aging slaves led to Mogŭn’s somber evening observations. His physical pain increased as evening approached, requiring massages from his wife and a young slave girl. These requests were met with resentment:

> The sky darkens, my aching bones grow worse. Rubbing and grinding always make the little maidservant angry.[300]
> All night, my bones ache; how can I bear to speak of it? Gradually, my head aches, and both my sleep

292 MSG 6 ibid.: 22H.
293 MSG 9 ibid.: 69H.
294 MSG 27 ibid.: 386H.
295 MSG 26 ibid.: 357H.
296 MSG 35 ibid.: 504H.
297 MSG 16 ibid.: 176H.
298 MSG 19 ibid.: 238H.
299 MSG 31 ibid.: 451H.
300 MSG 20 ibid.: 263L.

> and wakefulness are blurred. My old wife rubs and massages until her wrist is about to detach. The little maidservant stomps and tramples, her heart is extremely irritated.[301]

When Mogŭn could not sleep during the night because of his pain, he disturbed his slaves' sleep with his requests for a massage or for warm bricks to be brought to him.

> In the middle of the night, my dream breaks and is hard to continue. With blurry eyes, I sit alone. Alas, the back pain is as before, so I call the young maidservant to burn old bricks. Wrapped with cotton, they stick firmly. My limbs feel comfortable, making life enjoyable.[302]

Even if the new morning awakened a new creative spirit in Mogŭn, new hardships awaited his slaves:

> The sun rises, the world expands [...] Calling for the lamp to dispel my worries, leaning against the wall, I compose a poem. The little maidservant is most annoyed, stamping her feet. The rooster begins to crow.[303]
> Morning light stirs the earth and sky. The night's chill invades my spirit. My breath barely reaches the walls, my eyes feel as if they are covered with dust. The household servant dismisses visitors, while the mountain birds are not startled by anyone. I am just glad the old troubles remain, so in my old age, I am spared new ones.[304]

Everyday life at home was disrupted when guests arrived. When Mogŭn's little grandchildren came to visit and disturbed the peace at home with their wild play, the slaves were used to pacify them:

> The young children compete fiercely in their ball game, neither yielding to the other. Who taught them to be so full of private desires? Calling the servant to craft something to their liking, soon we see harmony spreading through the six windows.[305]

But the slaves themselves were sometimes a source of turbulence:

> The servant was annoyed while combing my hair. I shouted angrily, asking what was on his mind. He seemed to be troubled by the young one.[306]

301 MSG 21 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 275H.
302 MSG 29 ibid.: 411L.
303 MSG 20 ibid.: 253H.
304 MSG 15 ibid.: 173H.
305 MGS 16 ibid.: 189L.
306 MSG 23 ibid.: 321H.

Slaves were frequently used as messengers[307] and for errands[308] anyway; for the house-bound and sick old man, they became even more important in communicating with the outside world:

> My body is weary, I sleep soundly, and the morning light is fresh. My grandson’s nose used to be sensitive. I call the servant to go check on him out of love. Managing things now is entrusted to others.[309]

But the servants also brought good news back home:

> In the southern main street of Willow Lane, beverages and melons are served, accompanied by music. A household servant runs to report this. I write a song to commemorate the occasion.[310]

Mogŭn, the “old shepherd,” was also dependent on his servants to help him get out into the great outdoors:

> Thinking of a clear and carefree outing from Fangweng’s[311] poetry,
> One horse, two servants, on the streamside path in autumn.
> The old shepherd, weakened by illness, has no strength in his legs,
> But being supported on a palanquin in the fine rain is also a charming experience.[312]

However, it was customary for Mogŭn to take “one horse and two servants” with him on his journeys.[313] They also helped him to perform rituals at the places he visited. When Mogŭn took part in a memorial service for the Benevolent Protector Chŏ Chunghŏn, he had his servants carry lotus leaves forward, which he placed on the memorial tablet.[314] When the traveling party visited other households on the way, it was the servants’ task to call out their master’s name to announce his visit.[315] Similarly, whenever Mogŭn hosted guests at his home, he was confident that “the servants know my close friends.”[316] When Mogŭn received a call to arms from the king—presumably to man a fleet in the fight against the Japanese pirates in the late 1380s—he sent one of his slaves to do military

307 MGS 21 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 279L; MGS 23 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 310H; MGS 25 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 354H.
308 MGS 27 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 384L.
309 MGS 8 ibid.: 62H.
310 MGS 18 ibid.: 220L.
311 Fangweng 放翁 was the artistic name of the Chinese poet Lu You 陆游 (1125–1210).
312 MGS 17 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 205H.
313 MGS 26 ibid.: 367H.
314 MGS 30 ibid.: 426L.
315 MGS 26 ibid.: 367L.
316 MGS 27 ibid.: 381L.

service in his place. Mogŭn dedicated a poem to him, expressing his deep concern for his servant, who was unaccustomed to military service:[317]

> *Sending My Servant to the Warship:* As the state newly establishes the Army of the Rising Falcon, the regiments are stationed like clouds in the capital. Regular forces and naval forces, what is their intention? Now the additions and deployments are even more numerous. The ministers in the grand hall are respected, wielding both sword and pen, regardless of their seniority, all are meritorious. How can I, in place of myself, send my servant to the army? He goes to join the Six Guards and rushes to the coastal front. Riding a warship is not his usual practice. His eyes are dazzled, and his heart feels overwhelmed. Hoping the enemy flees at the sight of our forces, which would be heaven's blessing. Encountering the enemy, he might recall Zhou Yu's burning tactics.[318] Once weapons clash, losses are inevitable. Returning with the whole army is a complete success. Yet, among ten thousand, there might be one who doesn't return. The angry waves are more terrifying than a whale's spout. The sea gate stretches endlessly, the horizon unclear. Beyond the shadow of flying birds, the sky darkens. Return, return safely. When the sea is calm, only then are the waves gentle. Carve achievements on the rocky cliffs by the water's edge. Who among the army scribes can pen such words?[319]

Towards the end of his life, Mogŭn's economic situation was precarious. He relied heavily on his slaves for sustenance, clothing, care, and companionship. This interdependence clearly held a value beyond economic calculations, as illustrated by his own words:

> If the horse's fodder and the servant's food are provided, the wine and meat on my table need not be extravagant.[320]

The awareness of this interdependence was also evident in the strenuous concern for the master's health:

> The myriad sufferings of the world entangle my body. My every move and stillness are entirely dependent on others. My sick wife burns her skin, calling on Buddha repeatedly. The old servant sweats profusely, frequently making offerings to the gods.[321]

Slaves apparently complained frequently. However, Mogŭn was unable to remedy some of the complaints because he lacked the means to provide better care for his people:

> At dawn, the servants loudly complain about the cold. Moreover, wearing thin clothes makes it hard to get through the year. Old cotton and short wool fail against the fierce wind, while the

317 Salem insinuates, however, that Mogŭn (who was in his sixties at that time) may have used his illness as a pretext to avoid having to go into battle himself: Salem 1978: 50.

318 Zhou Yu 周瑜 (175–210) was a Chinese general in the Age of Warring States who famously won the Battle of Red Cliffs in 208 by sending unmanned fire ships that set the enemy fleet ablaze.

319 MSG 23 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 318H.

320 MSG 21 ibid.: 287L.

321 MGS 7 ibid.: 46H.

> broken windows and sparse walls let the night pass slowly. Lacking the means to make a living, whose fault is it? Destiny varies, but I always comfort myself. Fortunately, the cooking smoke rises morning and evening. Besides, friends and relatives send food trays.[322]

Improvised thermal insulation should at least provide some relief:

> Hot water is mixed with mud to mend the walls, all because the servants’ faces show the distress of cold.[323]

Mogŭn also sought materials to build better accommodations for his slaves:

> Writing a letter to request some thatch, intending to shelter the servants and maids from getting wet. If there is extra, it will be used to cover the empty hall. Not only will it shield them from the sun, but it will also be especially pleasant. However, it may not be feasible. I composed one piece.[324]

In principle, caring for one’s slaves was a moral obligation, but patronal neglect was apparently widespread. In 1338, under King Chungsuk, the administration declared:

> The slaves of each household are subjected to extremely harsh labor, which calls for sympathy. Some, when ill, are not given medical treatment, and are abandoned on the roads. When they die, they are not buried, but dragged and discarded, their flesh fed to stray dogs. This is truly pitiful. Henceforth, such acts will be judged with severe penalties.[325]

Mogŭn, however, felt a deep sense of responsibility towards his slaves, documenting significant events such as a difficult birth[326]—the only indication in his writings that slaves had sexual relationships and possibly families—and formally requesting medicine for an ailing elderly slave in a letter, compassionately noting: “Long beard suffers in pain, old eyes find it difficult to see.”[327]
Among his slaves, Mogŭn mentioned only two by name: the out-residing slaves Pak, who tilled a field for him, and Näsŏk, an elderly servant who had been with the family for a long time:

> *The Strong Slave Näsŏk:* The strong slave is now old and without strength. Living as a wanderer in another land, an eighth-month fly. He speaks of his hardships, which are hard to bear listening to. Under the short eaves, the slanting sun sometimes rises and falls.[328]

Such life stories filled Mogŭn with shame and awareness of his privileged position:

322 MGS 33 ibid.: 484L.
323 MGS 33 ibid.: 482L.
324 MSG 21 ibid.: 279L.
325 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2.
326 MGS 8 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 56H.
327 MGS 30 ibid.: 430L.
328 MGS 33 ibid.: 481H.

> To eat through labor, I now feel full of shame. I thank the old slave for his diligence.[329]
> I have never been in the position of a maidservant's face or a slave's knees.[330]

The *Chōsengo Jiten* ("Korean Dictionary") of 1919 lists this expression in reverse order as a common saying: 奴顔婢膝 *noan pisŭl*, literally "a slave's face and a maidservant's knees," meaning "an ugly, sweaty attitude that flatters others."[331] The idiom was frequently used in both Chinese and Korean sources in both variants, but it did not gain any real popularity in Korea until the time of Cosŏn.

A more literal interpretation would be, "I have never experienced the humiliation of being treated like a slave—slapped in the face or forced to kneel before my master." Although Mogŭn and his *yangban* class were not at risk of literal slavery, he recognized the threat of becoming "slave-faced," i.e., losing respect and status:

> Alas, my future descendants, be careful not to show a servile face. Isn't it easy to have a servile face? What I fear most is falling into wicked corruption.[332]

The concept of "face" to which this quote refers "can be traced back to Confucian thought."[333] It was widely believed that one's social status was reflected in the expression of the human face. Even today, it is deeply ingrained in Korean social norms. As Pak Osu notes:

> When face is defined as the respect that an individual can claim for themselves from others based on their relative status within social relationships and the appropriateness of their actions in that status, face comprises the following three elements. First, it is the individual's relative status within social relationships. Second, it is the appropriateness of actions required by that status (which involves the evaluation of others). Third, it is the respect and positive social value that the individual can claim from others by performing those actions.[334]

Therefore, for members of the elite, showing a "servile face" would inevitably lead to a loss of respect and status. "Losing face" was thus potentially tantamount to "becoming a slave."

Mogŭn viewed his slaves as immune to such dangers because their spiritual simplicity shielded them from false ambition:

> Though the young maidservant is stubborn, she is truly simple-minded, unable to discern right from wrong. Yet she acts with a sincere heart. Ask her where she belongs, and she knows her place.[335]

329 MSG 27 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 385L.
330 MSG 21 ibid.: 281H.
331 S.v. 奴 *no* ("slave"): Chōsen Sōtokufu 1919: 168.
332 MSG 25 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 353H.
333 Pak Osu 1996: 70.
334 Ibid.: 72.
335 MSG 14 *Mogŭn sŏnsäng munjip* 1626: 152H.

Mogŭn's attribution of a "sincere heart" (*yangshim*) to his slaves is significant. The term, literally "good heart," also suggests a "free heart," given that *yang* in the terms *yangmin* or *yangin* also refers to the free people of the common folk, thus paradoxically implying that slaves maintained a form of inner freedom despite their bondage. Mogŭn's expressions of shame were not about depriving them of physical freedom, but about recognizing their ability to maintain dignity and sincerity, in contrast to many of the privileged class who compromised their integrity for power.

This sentimental attitude was similarly expressed in a statement by Chö Ca in his *Pohanjip* around the middle of the thirteenth century:

> With a sincere heart, every encounter is a prayer to the heavens, unaware of one's own humble and lowly status.[336]

Chö also remarked:

> Even if one is of lowly status, like a slave, if one's words are aligned with the Way, even sages would not dare to dismiss them.[337]

Perhaps this was no more than a rhetorical display of sentimentality fed by a latent guilty conscience toward slaves. The scholar-official Yi Kok quoted a popular saying, "The heart of a slave signifies anger."[338] But some masters apparently had serious and intimate conversations with their slaves, and they also paid attention to their reactions. When Yi Illo, a scholar and poet living in the middle Koryŏ period, once received a witty letter from his son, in which he described a previous happy get-together, he read it aloud to his slaves and office staff:

> When I was handed the letter, I couldn't help but laugh out loud, and even among the household servants or the lower clerks[339] there wasn't anyone who did not clap his hands in delight and excitement.[340]

Another example comes from Yi Säk's archenemy, the neo-Confucian scholar Cŏng Tojŏn, who became a political advisor of Yi Sŏnggye in the 1380s. Originally, Cŏng had studied Confucianism under Yi Säk, but when Yi Säk refused to support Yi Sŏnggye's policies, Cŏng Tojŏn slandered his old teacher and demanded his execution, which King Kongyang would not allow. Cŏng Tojŏn, in turn, was accused of "trying to hide his lowly

336 *Pohanjip* 1:44, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/補閑集 [accessed 29.07.2025].
337 *Pohanjip* 2:24, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/補閑集 [accessed 29.07.2025].
338 奴心曰怒者. *Kajŏngjip* 7, Näongyŏl, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/稼亭集/卷七 [accessed 29.07.2025].
339 吏族 *yijok*, "lower-level clerks and officials" who "inherited both their land and occupational duties, thus forming a hereditary class of minor officials with land grants." O Ilsun 1993: 55.
340 Illo Yi 2024: 123.

origin";[341] his maternal grandmother, it was said, had been a slave. The accusation was reported as follows:

> Originally, a member of the Hyŏnbo clan, Kim Cŏn, who had once been a monk, secretly took the wife of his slave Sui as his own. They had a daughter. Everyone believed that the daughter was Sui's, but only Cŏn considered her his own and secretly cherished her. He married her to a scholar named U Yŏn. They had a daughter, who married Un Kyŏng and gave birth to Tojŏn.[342]

This "slave background" made his career as an official illegitimate. Thus, Cŏng Tojŏn was exiled in 1392.[343]

It is noteworthy that in both the *Koryŏsa* and *Koryŏsa Cŏlyo* the term "lowly origin" (*chŏngŭn*) was used only in the case of Cŏng Tojŏn. But denouncing the unworthy background of one's rival seems to have been a fairly common occurrence.

After Yi Sŏnggye came into power in 1392, Cŏng Tojŏn was rehabilitated and was able to continue his political career until he clashed with one of Sŏnggye's sons (the future King Thäjong) and was executed in 1398 for alleged treason. Thereafter, his Collected Works were published under his pen name, Sambong ("Three Peaks"). He did not write much about slaves, but two instances deserve our attention.

The first is his appraisal of a governor's aide named Song In, whom he hailed for his loyalty and filial piety (the two cardinal virtues of a righteous man in the eyes of a neo-Confucian thinker):

> Initially, he resided in Posŏng, Cŏlla Province. When sea pirates invaded, causing distress, Song led his parents away to avoid the danger. Traversing difficult and wild terrain, fearing for their safety, he moved far away to Kwaju, Yanggwang Province. There, he rented land and a house to settle, instructing his servants to farm and provide for his parents. The local officials, moved by his filial sincerity, offered many gifts.[344]

During the fourteenth century, an age of recurring incursions from both land and sea borders, there were many reasons for *yangban* families to migrate within the country to find a safe place. It is interesting to note that this judge was able to rent land and have his slaves take care of his parents. Apparently this was a rare arrangement, otherwise he would not have been showered with gifts and praise.

In 1360, the Red Turbans, a millenarian movement that organized uprisings against the Yüan dynasty, invaded the Korean peninsula and occupied the capital. King Kongmin, Cŏng Tojŏn, and others fled to Andong in the east. The rebels were repelled in 1362,

341 KSC 35, Kongyang 2, Y. 4.

342 KS 109, Cong Tojŏn.

343 Robinson 2016: 21.

344 *Sambongjip* 3, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/三峯集/卷三 [accessed 29.07.2025]. The *Sambongjip* is a collection of Chŏng Tojŏn's works in 14 volumes, which are "considered to be important source materials for the study of the history of the late Koryŏ Dynasty and the early Yi Dynasty." *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 48–54.

and on the occasion of his return to Kägyŏng “after the turmoil,” Sambong composed a poem:

> In front of Chŏnsu Gate, the willows are green. My eyes brighten as I am startled to see the old capital. My servant boy does not know of the restoration, still speaking of the turmoil and chaos of the previous year.[345]

It is noteworthy that Cŏng Tojŏn and his slave apparently discussed politics, although the slave was not very well informed, according to his master. However, he spoke “of the turmoil and chaos of the previous year,” making it clear that he had a human voice.

Another day, Cŏng Tojŏn fell from his horse while on his way to the capital and had to stay in bed to recover for ten days. This meant that his slave had some extra leisure time. Cŏng wrote:

> During my servant boy’s free time, he gathered firewood. Don’t you see the old man at the frontier? For him, gain and loss have always been intertwined with fortune and misfortune.[346]

This was apparently the same kind of innocent simplicity—in another word, sincerity—that had been discovered by Mogŭn in his slaves.

Tab. 10: Characteristics of public slaves (Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 86).

	Public Service Slaves	**External Slaves**
Origin	Some public service slaves originated as war captives, but most were individuals convicted of serious crimes such as treason or collaboration with the enemy, their families, or confiscated private slaves.	
Property and Household	Maintained independent households, received a fixed salary, and had the right to own and dispose of property freely.	Cultivated land, supported their households with the harvest after taxes, and had the right to own and freely dispose of property.
Marriage and Family	Partly supported by the state, though it is unclear whether marriage was fully voluntary.	Likely freer compared to public service slaves.
Duties and Release	Subject to the age-based duty system, beginning service around age 10, continuing until 59, and being released at 60.	
Value and Transfer	Value was not determined, and they were not subject to sale. Allocation to individuals was rare and generally limited to war captives or confiscated private slaves.	

345 *Sambongjip* 2, Chilŏn Cŏlgu, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/三峯集/卷二 [accessed 29.07.2025].
346 *Sambongjip* 1, Chilŏn Kosi, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/三峯集/卷一 [accessed 29.07.2025].

Tab. 11: Characteristics of private slaves (Hong Sŭnggi 1981: 51).

	Living-in Slaves	**Out-residing Slaves**
Identification by the State	Recorded in the master's household register, documenting clan, offspring, ancestral distinctions, spouse status, and residence. Confirmed as master's property. No surname, only a given name. Exempt from public duties or labor but classified under the age-based duty system, indicating inclusion among the populace.	The same as living-in slaves. An additional register at their place of residence confirmed their current location of residence.
Marriage and Family	If either parent was a slave, the child became a slave. The child usually belonged to the mother's owner, but if the mother was free, to the father's owner. Often, families could not properly form. Marriages were sometimes impossible. Even when marriages occurred, families could be separated through sale, inheritance, or gifting.	The same as living-in slaves. The owner had the right to dispose of family members. In practice, however, the family was somewhat preserved.
Legal Protection	Legally, the right to own property was recognized, but in practice, opportunities to own property were rare. It was forbidden for a master to kill a slave regardless of guilt. However, harmful actions by the master were not considered illegal, and acts of violence such as beatings were common.	Legally, the right to own property was recognized, and in practice, they were able to own property. Although harmful actions, including killing, initiated by the master were not considered illegal, acts of violence such as beatings were rare.
Subordination to the Master	Slaves could report their master only for treason against the king or state. For other crimes, slaves had almost no legal recourse. Betrayal of the master was not tolerated. Running away, theft, contempt, insults, defiance, slander, or false accusations were all considered acts of betrayal. The king's intervention in the affairs of living-in slaves was mostly formal. In practice, private slaves were under the almost exclusive and absolute control of their masters. Confucian family ethics, emphasizing children's absolute obedience to parents, were also applied to the relationship between private slaves and their masters.	

5.10 “People Under Heaven”

The last years of Koryŏ were “a transitional period.”[347] While the conservative landowning elite wanted more slaves because they relied on them for labor and wealth, the new scholar-officials who created the Cosŏn state had a different idea. Instead of enslaving more people, they wanted to transform slaves into commoners, because commoners paid taxes and could serve in the military. For them, maintaining the traditional *yangchŏn* system was no longer viable.[348] By the end of the Koryŏ period, several factors—including increased agricultural productivity from expanded irrigation and permanent cultivation, as well as population growth—had raised the value of land and the desire for land ownership. This, in turn, increased the economic importance and social consciousness of the peasant class, leading to shifts in land ownership and management that veered away from oppressive governance. However, governing solely through centralized power and peasant ownership proved difficult. The *yangban* still needed to exercise some control through private land ownership. But even within the *yangban* class, there was a growing conflict as the stronger members seized the slaves of the weaker members, and there was a significant increase in disputes or lawsuits over slave ownership between relatives. Accordingly, there was a discontented radical faction of the *yangban* that attempted to separate the issues of land and slaves, and in 1388, they demanded land reform to abolish private estates, which was implemented in 1389 and resulted in the burning of all existing land documents for granted fields (*sajŏn*) in 1390.[349]

While officials were no longer entitled to hereditary tax-free land, they were granted benefices in Kyŏnggi Province near the capital based on their official rank or military service. These grants, known as rank fields (*kwajŏn*) since 1391, were subject to taxation and often limited in duration, but they provided a degree of continued patronage for the ruling elite, who sent out their agents to collect the tributes.

The *kwajŏn* system can be interpreted as a compromise between the need for state revenue and the desire to maintain the privileges of the ruling class. While it mitigated some of the abuses of the previous system, it fell short of achieving a truly equitable distribution of land. Powerful families and officials retained significant economic and social influence, continuing to possess substantial landholdings and exploit the labor of enslaved persons. Although the reforms provided some relief to the peasantry, they did not fundamentally alter the existing power dynamics and socioeconomic inequalities. The system collapsed about a hundred years later, giving way to the slaveholding landowners of the *yangban* class.[350]

Moreover, the issue of ownership of farm laborers remained unresolved. Peasants, while more independent than slaves, were not entirely self-sufficient and continued to

347 Yi Hongdu 1991: 191.

348 Kim Hyŏlla 2024: 64.

349 Pak Cinhun 2018: 227; Yi Yunbok 2020: 188; Palais 1996: 44.

350 Palais 1984b: 444.

rely on semi-enslaved labor structures to reproduce their means of production. This reliance contributed to the development of a landlord–tenant agricultural system, with the family ethic at the heart of rural society.[351]

Yi Kok used the example of mourning rites to highlight what he believed were the flaws in the current system:

> According to our country's customs, those who guard their parents' tomb for three years are permitted to have a banner displayed at their gate, regardless of their conduct in daily life. In recent times, many scholar-officials have had their household slaves perform this duty on their behalf, eventually even granting them freedom and allowing them to go wherever they please. As a result, those in servitude compete for this task. The urgency with which a petty person pursues profit is akin to the importance a noble person places on righteousness. Would a child's remembrance of their parents be any less than a servant's love for their master? It is merely that people are constrained by customs and do not act. If they were to be consistent in their daily lives, there would be nothing they wouldn't do to serve their parents, and they could even ensure a proper burial after their parents' death.[352]

Yi Kok criticized the superficial nature of the bond between master and slave. He contrasted the genuine care required to serve one's parents with the insincere actions of servants who act under compulsion or for material gain. While slaves might outwardly perform duties for their masters, they often did so out of obligation or self-interest, lacking the genuine affection and moral duty inherent in filial piety. Yi Kok suggested that true familial devotion, based on sincere ethical conduct, far surpassed the performative loyalty of servants constrained by societal customs. He argued that the relationship between masters and slaves needed to be redefined on a completely new ethical basis. Just before the official end of the Koryŏ dynasty, and likely influenced by the ideas of those around Yi Sŏnggye who were preparing to seize power, the government under King Kongyang enacted a new slave policy aimed at implementing this new ethical framework for master–slave relations. These new regulations were introduced in the historical sources as follows.

In 1391, an anonymous official of remonstrance submitted a memorial to King Kongyang, stating:

> Recently, it has become a trend for people to scramble for favors from those in power. Even those who have descendants hand over their ancestral properties and household members to others. Therefore, their descendants grow increasingly destitute and confused, and still blame their ancestors for lacking virtue. How, then, can we speak of filial piety? Although slaves are lowly, they are also people under Heaven. Treating them as chattel and trading them with ease, or exchanging them for livestock such as cattle or horses, is inappropriate. For example, one horse may be given in exchange for two or three people, which is still not enough compensation. This implies that cattle and horses are considered more valuable than human life. In the past, when the stable caught fire, Confucius asked, 'Was any person injured?' He did not ask about the horses, showing that the

351 Kim Hyŏlla 2024: 55–56; Pak Cinhun 2018: 228–29.

352 *Kajŏngjip* 9, Ki Pak Cipyŏng Shisŏ, https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/稼亭集/卷九 [accessed 29.07.2025].

> Sage considered human life more valuable than animals. Given this, how could it be right to trade humans for horses? The people, lost in ignorance, bring disaster upon themselves, placing people in temples hoping to gain blessings. If Buddha is considered correct, how can there be logic in offering bribes to avoid misfortune? Thus, not only do they fail to receive blessings, but they also labor in vain, bringing misfortune upon their descendants. I respectfully beseech Your Highness to examine this matter: the transfer of ancestral properties and household members outside the family line should not be allowed. Even if there are no direct descendants, they should be passed to those within the clan who share the same lineage. The malpractice of selling people and offering them to temples must be strictly prohibited. Would this not contribute, even slightly, to the perfection of sage-like governance?[353]

The petition argues that the only legal way to handle slaves should be through inheritance within the family or lineage. It sought to restrict the sale, trade, or donation of slaves and insisted that slaves should remain within the family line, even if there were no direct descendants. By doing so, the petition aimed to encourage more ethical governance aligned with Confucian and Buddhist principles of human dignity and proper social conduct. But it did not propose to abolish slavery as such.[354]

In response, the Agency for Human Affairs Adjudication established a new law for resolving slave disputes:

> 1. From now on, marriage between free people and slaves is prohibited according to the law. From the first month of the 25th year of Hongwu [January 25, 1392] onward, both the owner and the male slave shall be judged for the crime if they violate the law by intermarrying. However, children born from such unions are still allowed to be free. If the owner was unaware of the marriage, he shall not be punished.
> 2. To give away slaves to people in power or donate them to Buddhist temples or shrines is strictly prohibited.
> 3. Children of the same lineage and orphans or abandoned children registered in household records for adoption before they are three years old are treated the same. It is forbidden to give away one’s own children outside the lineage. From now on, it is entirely prohibited to secretly acquire slaves and falsely claim them as adopted. If there are no children or descendants and no adoptees, a grandson should be appointed to report to the authorities for an equal division of property. Any written contracts documenting acts of kindness or merit granted to others shall not be subject to disputes or legal challenges, even by relatives.
> 4. The value of slave labor must not exceed the amount set in the judgment in the fifth year of King Sŏng, regardless of the duration of service. Trespassers who conceal and use other people’s slaves shall be judged according to the law.
> 5. From now on, if the buyer of slaves has no descendants, the slaves may be given to relatives. If there are no relatives, the slaves are to be taken by the government. The seller shall not reclaim the slave.
> 6. Releasing slaves for the purpose of selling them is strictly prohibited. If someone is compelled by hunger and cold, or due to public or private debts with no alternative, the situation must be reported to the authorities before any sale is permitted. If slaves are sold due to indulgence in alcohol, gambling, or for profit, the slaves will be confiscated by the government.

353 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Nobi. Cf. S.-E. Kim 2016: 14–15.

354 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 83.

> 7. Collective owners of slaves who have not yet divided their slaves among themselves, low-status individuals seizing slaves, those misassigning slaves to inappropriate duties, concealers of other people's slaves, those using forged documents, those coercing free people into slavery, those who permanently pawn slaves, Chinese nationals who detain and use slaves, and those who continue to hold slaves after a judicial decision must release or return all of the slaves by the second month [February 24, 1392] in the capital and by the third month [March 24, 1392] in other regions. Voluntary confessors will be exempt from punishment. Those who fail to meet the deadline will be judged as non-compliant with the decree, and even in cases where there are valid claims to use slaves, their slaves shall be confiscated by the government.

The Director of Slave Affairs made another a petition to the king to clarify two points left open in the law:

> 1. For those who die without children, the husband may retain the slaves of his wife in their entirety. If the wife remains faithful [i.e., unmarried], she is also allowed to retain the slaves of her husband, but only for her lifetime. After their death, the slaves shall return to their original descendants, unless there is a separate written agreement, in which case this provision does not apply.
> 2. Those who release slaves from service should not worry about future issues arising from the release extending to the slaves' descendants. If the descendants of the released slaves refuse to serve or develop improper intentions, falsely claim positions or marry into free families, this could lead to confusion, disorder, or even harm to the original master, ignoring official laws, and daring to engage in litigation. Therefore, we propose that from now on, when slaves are released based on affection and merit, this should apply only to the individual and not extend to their descendants.

Finally, the Agency for Human Affairs Adjudication decreed new procedural standards in the second month of 1392:

> 1. All cases involving officials suing over slaves must be brought to the Agency for resolution, and disputes should not be handled privately. Violators will be punished.
> 2. In cases involving lawsuits over slaves where the claims are found to be unjust, except for officials of the rank of the Two Offices,[355] or above, all below the rank of the second echelon will be immediately investigated and questioned. If there is any obstruction or damage to public affairs, the violators will be punished according to the law.[356]

These provisions, although seemingly novel, can be linked to the "slaves of the four cases" defined earlier in the century:

1. *Slaves Used as Bribes:* The new legislation directly addressed this by prohibiting the practice of giving slaves to people in power. This ban was intended to prevent the use of slaves as bribes to gain favor or influence, ensuring that slaves could not be used in corrupt transactions. For the first time in history, donations of slaves to Buddhist temples or shrines were treated similarly to using slaves as bribes.[357] This rule aimed to prevent slaves from being exploited as offerings for spiritual gains,

355 The Directorate of Chancellors and the Royal Secretariat-Chancellery.

356 KS 85, Hyŏngbŏp 2, Kŭmnyŏng.

357 S.-E. Kim 2016: 15.

maintaining the ethical use of slaves and preventing practices that could undermine both social and legal order.

2. *Slaves Granted by Former Kings:* While the new legislation did not specifically mention slaves granted by former kings, the overall emphasis on controlled inheritance and regulated ownership suggests that such grants were now subject to scrutiny. Any slaves previously granted by former kings would have to comply with the new rules on slave inheritance and transfer. The legislation indirectly affected this category by imposing stricter regulations on slave ownership and transfer, requiring clear legal documentation and adherence to new standards.
3. *Commendation of Slaves:* The new legislation prohibited releasing slaves for the purpose of (re-)selling them, showing a firm stance against the commodification of slaves. This measure was directed against practices where remitted slaves were enticed or forced to commend (or sell) themselves back into slavery immediately after their release.
4. *Slaves Acquired by Trade:* The legislation severely restricted the acquisition of slaves through trade. It mandated that if someone had to sell a slave due to severe circumstances, this must be officially sanctioned, and any transactions made for profit or due to vices would result in the confiscation of the slaves by the government. This effectively limited the legality of trading slaves and curtailed the market for the sale of slaves. Additionally, the law prohibited the sale of slaves for immoral reasons, such as gambling, alcohol, or profit, which could include situations where individuals were coerced into slavery due to financial hardship or personal vices.

The legislation clearly outlined the rules for slave inheritance, establishing it as the primary legal method for transferring slave ownership. It introduced a gender bias by stipulating that slaves could only be retained by a widow under certain conditions (such as remaining unmarried) and had to eventually revert to original descendants or be managed according to written agreements. Preserving the male family lineage was central to the inheritance rules, which forbade giving away one’s children outside the lineage. If the lineage was broken, all property was to be divided equally under government supervision. The law also outlawed the joint ownership of slaves, which was a significant source of inheritance disputes.[358] By redefining the value of slave labor, it also curtailed debt slavery.[359]

The new legislation also set specific regulations concerning litigation and legal procedures related to slave ownership and disputes. It prohibited the private handling of disputes over slaves and required that all cases involving officials suing over slaves be brought to the Agency for Human Affairs Adjudication for resolution. Written agreements documenting the distribution of slaves were not subject to disputes or legal chal-

358 Kim Hyŏlla 2024: 78.

359 B.-R. Kim 2014: 167.

lenges, even by relatives. In cases where lawsuits over slaves were found to be unjust, a clear procedure for accountability was established, except for high-ranking officials of the central government. Any obstruction or damage to public affairs was considered illegal. The legislation set deadlines for the release or return of slaves by collective owners or those who violated the law. It also provided an opportunity for voluntary confession, exempting individuals from punishment if they admitted to violations.

In a significant departure from previous laws, children born of mixed marriages could be granted free status. This marked a change from the law of hypodescent to hyperdescent, abolishing the matridominial rule for the first time in Koryŏ's history. It was not limited to the sex of either parent, so, we can call this the ambifilial rule. However, the new legislation also explicitly prohibited all mixed marriages starting in January 1392, in an effort to reduce the number of court cases resulting from such unions.

King Kongyang's new slave policies emphasized the strict inheritance of slaves according to paternal lineage and recognized documented sales or inheritance of slaves to reinforce family order and the master–slave relationship. The laws also addressed mixed marriages between nobles and commoners, which had previously been prohibited because they disrupted the *yangchŏn* system. Due to the increasing frequency of these marriages, the offspring were ultimately recognized as commoners, diverging from the traditional principle that children inherited the status of a slave parent. These changes, reflecting the neo-Confucian influence of the time, aimed to reorganize the social order and strengthen slave ownership rights in response to shifts in the economic and social roles of slaves brought about by the development of the landlord–tenant farming system.[360]

The new slave policy had two far-reaching consequences:

First, the political priority shifted, from maintaining a strict separation between free people and a self-reproducing slave class to ensuring the production of more free people, who were urgently needed for taxation, services, and military duty. This shift marked the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period.

Second, the treatment of slaves had to be based on the neo-Confucian ethical assumption that slaves were not a "different kind" of human being, but rather "people under Heaven," or simply "humans,"[361] with the same innate right to be treated well as free people. If this was neglected, slaves could become a threat to the social order. However, interpretations of this concept varied according to one's perspective or class standpoint, paving the way for future conflicts between the state and slave owners:

> The state could actively intervene in the private management of slaves based on the perception that both the good and the lowly were "Heavenly People" and that even private slaves should be treated appropriately. In contrast, the literati argued that "Heavenly People" slaves were subjects

360 Kim Hyŏlla 2024: 54–55.

361 S.-E. Kim 2016: 14.

> of education and should be positioned lower in the hierarchical order, thus trying to prevent state intervention.[362]

This conflict also arose because the relationship between ruler and subject could be equated with the relationship between master and slave.[363] Although both concepts were ideologically driven interpretations of the actual balance of power, the consequences were evident from the beginning of the subsequent Cosŏn period.

A final question that remains is what percentage of the total population of Koryŏ consisted of slaves and similarly servile groups. There are three reasonably reliable quantitative bases for this: the figures after the dissolution of the *sashimgwan* in 1318, the proportion of miscellaneous laborers in the army, and the reported number of 80,000 temple slaves. An extrapolation of the *sashimgwan* population suggests a slave population share of about 6 percent, representing government slaves only. The proportion of miscellaneous laborers in the army was about 5 percent. Assuming a total population of three million, the proportion of 80,000 temple slaves would be about 3 percent. If the number of private slaves had been equal to the number of public slaves, the total number of slaves and slave-like workers at the end of the Koryŏ period would have been about 20 percent, suggesting a doubling compared to the Shilla period. Taking into account the different categories of the slave population, my estimate is considerably higher than most previous research in Western sources, such as Wyatt and Salem, who put it at around or above ten percent.[364] Yi Yŏnghun’s conclusion that “the proportion of *nobi* in rural Koryŏ was not very large” is based on painfully false assumptions about the available data discussed above.[365] More recent estimates suggest even larger proportions, at least for the late Koryŏ period, such as “almost a third”[366] or even “as much as 40 percent.”[367]

362 Chö Wonha 2020: 39.
363 Ibid.: 62.
364 Wyatt 2022: 14; Salem 1978: 154.
365 Yi Yŏnghun 2007: 146.
366 Yi Yunbok 2020: 188.
367 Lovins 2021: 183.