Part III: **Slavery in the Yangban State: Cosŏn**

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In 1795, King Cŏngjo and his mother, accompanied by more than 6,000 guards, made a journey to the tomb of his father, Crown Prince Sado, in Hwasŏng. The royal procession was later depicted on an eight-panel painting. One of the panels depicts a scene where people watch the procession, providing a revealing visualization of late Cosŏn society.

Fig. 6: Anonymous: Painting of the royal procession to Hwasŏng on an eight-panel folding screen (1795). Panel 7 (detail). Courtesy of National Palace Museum of Korea.

The scene is composed of layered spaces. Groups of people are gathered outdoors, sitting or standing, presumably to get a better view of the royal procession. These individuals are arranged in clusters, suggesting different social groups. Thatched-roof houses and fenced compounds symbolize the living spaces of commoners, with the fences signaling the social need for demarcated space. The layout of the village is informal, with winding paths and scattered homes, evoking a rural atmosphere. Trees and open spaces serve as gathering places, reflecting the integration of natural and communal life in rural Korea.

The division between slaves and non-slaves in this scene is clear and visually emphasized through differences in attire, posture, spatial placement, and role. Slaves are

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marginalized figures and are thus depicted in positions and garments that denote labor and subordination. In contrast, commoners and *yangban* are less clearly segregated as they share a higher social status that allows them to participate more fully in the communal event.

The *yangban* and commoners are seated in dignified groups, maintaining a composed demeanor as they observe. Men dominate the front rows and central areas of the composition, reflecting their higher public status in Confucian society. The *yangban* wear refined white or pastel-colored *hanbok* and distinctive *kat* (wide-brimmed black hats made of horsehair). Their clothing is clean and elegant, signaling their elite status and their adherence to Confucian ideals of propriety. Commoners also wear *hanbok* in muted tones and may don simpler hats such as *pärängi* (woven hats with conical tops) and *satkat* (woven straw hats), as prescribed for non-*yangban*.

Slaves stand or squat closer to the homes and work areas or under trees, casually watching or engaging in conversation. This placement suggests both their marginalization and their ongoing engagement in domestic or labor tasks, even during the communal event. Slaves do not actively participate in observing the royal procession; instead, they are portrayed as engaged in secondary roles, such as tending to children or performing background labor. Children and women are often grouped together, occupying spaces further removed from the procession. Women wear traditional *hanbok* with long skirts (*chima*) and short jackets (*cŏgori*), often in muted colors. Their clothing appears practical, with less emphasis on ornamentation compared to *yangban* men. Their posture is reserved, often focused on children or quiet conversation.

This type of depiction was not chosen at random; it corresponds to the self-image of Cosŏn society as it was generally perceived at the time.

As a result of fierce power struggles between the rising scholar-officials (*sadäbu*), who were themselves divided into radicals and moderates, and the old establishment, the Koryŏ period came to an end. The Cosŏn period (1392–1897) is the era in which the descendants of Yi Sŏnggye ruled as kings without interruption. The long continuity at the head of the state stabilized the country, but of course this should not be confused with a standstill in terms of social, cultural, or economic development (which was still firmly based on agricultural production). During this period, there were relatively few foreign policy challenges, the most important of which were the fight against the so-called Japanese pirates until the mid-fifteenth century, the repulsion of the Japanese invasions at the end of the sixteenth century (the Great East Asian War), and the futile fight against the Manchus in the first half of the seventeenth century. Cosŏn had to adapt to the new East Asian international order that emerged from these conflicts, while the emergence of Western powers such as Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain in East Asia did not pose a direct threat to Korea for the time being. However, conflicting views on how to reform the state system and institutions regarding the most serious socio-

economic problems of the late Koryŏ period—land and labor problems—continued to provoke serious clashes that threatened the cohesion of the new power elites.[1]

Understanding the changes in the status system of "pre-modern" Korea can be a key to understanding later "modernization."[2] Slavery was a constant, even constitutive companion throughout this period, but the exact mechanisms of the social dynamics during the Cosŏn period are not yet fully understood; in particular, it is known though not sufficiently understood why the slave population initially increased but then sharply decreased after the eighteenth century.[3] In any case, the *yangchŏn* system, with its distinction between "good" and "base" people, remained the overarching legal organizing principle. The division between slaves and non-slaves persisted,[4] and slavery was fully endorsed by the political elite in both ideology and political practice as an "indispensable and natural manifestation of hereditary social stratification."[5] But gradually, slaves were no longer placed at the bottom of society; in fact, they were privileged over other groups in the "base" category.[6] No longer fully objectified, but also not fully accepted as human beings, Cosŏn period slaves had a "dual nature," "half-man/half-thing":[7] They inherited all the characteristics that made them material property and assets for their owners, but they also gained some partial freedoms, such as the right to property and the right to sue. The ambivalence and fluidity of these characteristics led Kim Kŏnthä to this conclusion:

> The status of Cosŏn slaves cannot be neatly classified as either slaves or serfs according to Western historical categories.[8]

This ambiguity has led to a long but inconclusive academic debate about the applicability of the concepts of slavery and serfdom to Cosŏn that began in the 1950s.[9] However, it is precisely this ambiguity that reveals that this debate is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. The concept of slavery as a status, as it existed in Korea, "is inadequate to measure social inequality."[10] At least during the Cosŏn period, Korean slaves did not form a class, either economically or politically.[11]

1 Pak Cinhun 2018: 221.

2 Miyajima 2003: 290; Cang Kyŏngjun 2017: 105.

3 Miyajima 2003: 302.

4 Palais 1996: 212; M. Yoshida 2018: 36.

5 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 1.

6 For example, they were allowed to attend community self-government meetings and were eligible to serve as employees of the community compact groups. M. Yoshida 2018: 39.

7 Kim Sujin 2013: 225; Yi Kwangu 2019: 383.

8 Kim Kŏnthä 2011: 147.

9 B.-R. Kim 2003: 156.

10 Y.-M. Kim 1986: 745.

11 For a comparative perspective, it is tempting to quote Marx's description of nineteenth-century French allotment farmers as "the simple addition of equal magnitudes—much as a bag with potatoes constitutes a potato-bag. In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions that separate

The same ambiguity informs the observation of a broader trend of upward mobility. In the late fifteenth century, most inhabitants of Cosŏn were of base status, causing the government to worry about the identification of those eligible for military service taxes. By the late seventeenth century, however, many had claimed higher social status, and by the late eighteenth century, base-status groups (but not the slaves) were disappearing while occupational groups were gaining more prominence.[12] Throughout this "historic obliteration of the traditional social status system," heredity (including hereditary slavery) as "the central mechanism of status reproduction" was contested and debated.[13]

During the Cosŏn period, the social and legal patterns of the family shifted from a mixture of patrilineal and other family principles to a strictly Confucian, patrilineal model, establishing Confucian values and nuclear families; recent research has mostly continued to clarify these family changes over time.[14] Slaves, however, are an important exception to this rule. In their case, matrilinearity was much more important. Eventually, single-line succession via female slaves developed into a fundamental structure within private slavery.

> To maintain ownership of a slave family across generations, even a single thread of continuity through a female slave was often necessary to keep the lineage and ownership barely intact.[15]

Not only this contradiction, but also economic considerations made the ownership and inheritance of slaves a constant challenge for their owners. The symbiotic but contradictory relationship between the ruling elite and the slaves was the main reason why slavery in the Cosŏn period was much better documented than in previous periods. As was common in the early modern world,[16] the Cosŏn period was a bureaucratic age in

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their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and that place them in an attitude hostile toward the latter, they constitute a class; in so far as there exists only a local connection among these farmers, a connection which the individuality and exclusiveness of their interests prevent from generating among them any unity of interest, national connections, and political organization, they do not constitute a class." Marx 1907: 71.

12 M. Yoshida 2018: 46.

13 Deuchler 2015: 393.

14 Mun Sukca 2009: 134.

15 Ibid.: 155.

16 I discussed the application of the concept of early modernity in the case of East Asia in detail in Zöllner 2009b; most importantly, Miyazaki Michisada identified five key criteria of early modernity in East Asia (東洋的近世 *Tōyō-teki kinsei*): the development of a legal system based on traditional law, guaranteed by the state; the increasing dissemination of knowledge and technology among the general population; improvements in living standards and quality of life driven by advancements in industry and agriculture; a trend towards urbanization accompanied by the rise of the merchant class; and a highly stabilized, yet somewhat reduced, role of the military and military training in society compared to earlier times. Miyazaki 1989: 181–320; Korean researchers, often following a Marxist periodization pattern, still frequently categorize Cosŏn society as "medieval": Yi Kwangu 2019: 49; Kim Pyŏngha 1974: 134; conversely, nationalist historians who view early modernity favorably often find the existence of slavery in Cosŏn to be an unsettling counterargument to this idealized view: Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 2.

which many traces of life were recorded and transmitted in writing, both within and outside of official historiography; partly as an arbitrary historical tradition, partly as involuntary remnants.

Lamenting the silencing of slaves throughout Korean history remains a valid point, of course; but at least in relation to the Cosŏn period, they are "*present* in the vast array of existing quantitative sources."[17] Based on these various sources, slavery during the Cosŏn period has already been extensively approached and researched, and the scope and quality of the results in the past twenty-five years are truly remarkable. Paradoxically, however, information on slavery is abundant in comparison to the other social groups in the "base" tier of society whose situation remains "almost completely unknown"[18] to this day. The reason for this is obvious: While slaves generally lived in a symbiotic relationship with their masters—most of whom were *yangban*—and were therefore carefully and jealously documented as their property, the upper class had little interest in the other groups of the lower class. As a result, there is hardly any trace of them today; they are almost *absent*. In the face of this silence of the sources, the painful and haunting question that arises is one that Jacob Burckhardt once asked in his *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* ("Reflections on World History"): "Did they fight in vain?"[19] This is a question to which we have no adequate answer, and that is reason enough for scholarly humility. We can only hope that there will be a way to do them more justice.

17 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 40.

18 M. Yoshida 2018: 39; or, to put it in a positive light, "compared to other social classes, the categorical and positional clarity of slaves was much more distinct." Yim Haksŏng 2013: 76.

19 Burckhardt 1991: 347.

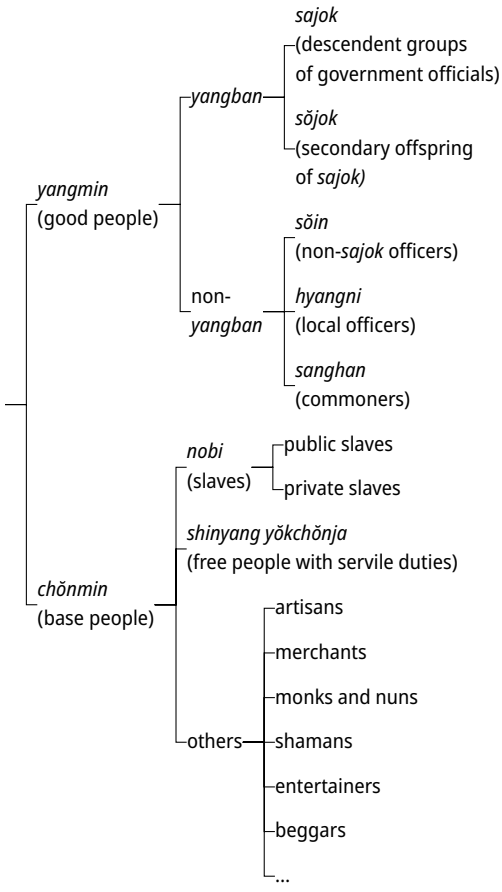

Fig. 7: Status structure in the Cosŏn period. (Adapted) (M. Yoshida 2018: 39).