6 Cosŏn: The Yangban State

The transition from Koryŏ to Cosŏn did not mean a revolutionary break; the social structures initially remained untouched.[1] The vast majority of the early power elite consisted of the same people who had been in power before,[2] descended from the very same lineages that dominated during the Koryŏ period. The entire structure of Cosŏn society, from its governmental institutions to its moral ethos, was built around protecting and advancing their status and interests. Mostly referring to themselves as *sajok* ("descent groups of government officials") or *sadäbu* ("scholar-officials"),[3] they were the leaders of the *yangban* gentry, a "landed elite"[4] that included Confucian scholars and bureaucrats who held positions of power, privilege, and influence. They played a central role in every aspect of Cosŏn's political, social, economic, and cultural life.[5] This chapter outlines how the Cosŏn state was crafted by and for this elite group, ensuring their dominance and shaping the course of Korean history, and how this shaped the development of slavery; it was a development that began as "a slow reduction of the range of choices" for the individuals and groups involved but ended with much more volatility than imagined.[6]

Timeline of Slavery in Cosŏn

1414 Patrifilial rule
1432 Matridominial rule with patrifilial exception
1468 Matrifilial rule with patrifilial exception
1472 Matridominial rule with patrifilial exception
1478 Nationwide push-and-brush campaign
1485 *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn* (Great Code of Administration)
1485 Earliest case of emancipation through grain contribution
1514 Nationwide push-and-brush campaign
1556 Nationwide push-and-brush campaign
1592–1599 Great East Asian War

1 Duncan 2000: 120.
2 Deuchler 1992: 97; Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 2.
3 "In the government's official understanding, the *sajok* was the lineage of a *sadaebu*. An official who held a government office of the fifth grade or lower was called a *sa*, and one who held a government office of the fourth grade or higher was called a *taebu* 大夫." M. Yoshida 2018: 38; Deuchler reverses this order with the translation "great and common officers": Deuchler 2015: 46, 51.
4 Deuchler 2015: 3.
5 Deuchler 1992: 12.
6 Ibid.: 87.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112210079-010

1655 Nationwide push-and-brush campaign
1669 Matrifilial rule
1678 Matridominial rule
1684 Matrifilial rule
1690 Matridominial rule
1731 Matrifilial rule
1778 Push-and-brush campaigns abolished
1801 Tribute-paying palace and capital-bureau slaves abolished
1886 Hereditary slavery abolished
1894 Slavery abolished

6.1 Confucianism and the Political Foundations of the Yangban Class

The foundation of the Cosŏn period was laid upon the principles of neo-Confucianism, a philosophy that the *yangban* embraced as a guiding ideology.[7] Neo-Confucianism emphasized hierarchy, loyalty, and filial piety, making it a perfect tool for consolidating the *yangban*'s power. Under this system, Cosŏn society was organized in a strict hierarchical order, with the king at the top, followed by the *yangban* as administrators and scholars, and the commoners, slaves, and other marginalized groups at the bottom.

The *yangban*'s role as government officials was institutionalized through the civil service examination system (*kwagŏ*).[8] Access to official positions was theoretically open to anyone who could pass the rigorous exams, but in practice, only the *yangban* class could afford the education necessary to succeed.[9] As a result, the civil service exams became a mechanism for perpetuating *yangban* control over the bureaucracy, ensuring that governmental power remained concentrated in the hands of the aristocracy. The exams tested the applicants' knowledge of Confucian classics, meant to reinforce the *yangban*'s status as scholarly elites who were morally fit to govern.

This Confucian state ideology also served to legitimize the *yangban*'s rule by presenting them as custodians of moral integrity and virtue. The state's justification for the *yangban*'s privileged position was that they embodied the Confucian virtues necessary for good governance. By upholding neo-Confucian principles, the *yangban* maintained their grip on both the ideological and practical levers of power.

According to Miyajima Hiroshi, the Cosŏn state and society, when compared to contemporary China and Japan, show similarities, but also very different characteristics.

7 Y.-j. Koh 2003: 64.
8 Duncan 2000: 118.
9 Miyajima 2003: 300.

The following table provides a quick overview of the key features of the three early modern models in East Asia.

Tab. 12: Models of state and society in Early Modern East Asia (Miyajima 2003: 302–6).

Feature	Japanese Model (Edo)	Chinese Model (Ming–Qing)	Korean Model (Cosŏn)
State-Society Relationship	State and society hierarchically aligned (e.g., sovereign → *samurai* → farmers → townspeople → outcasts).	State (sovereign, ruling class, commoners, base people) and society (emperor's family, commoners, base people) are distinct.	State and society hierarchically structured but with some distinctions between classes.
Intermediate Organizations	Fixed groups such as *ie* (houses), *mura* (villages), and *machigumi* (guilds), governed autonomously by representatives.	Intermediate organizations (e.g., villages, guilds) are fluid, formed and dissolved as needed, and individuals can choose their membership.	Semi-fixed groups like villages, more fluid than Japan but less so than China, supplemented by *kye* (compacts).
Hereditary Occupations	Governance and many occupations are inherited within families (e.g., *samurai* class).	Hereditary occupations do not exist except for the emperor. Officials are selected individually via the civil service exam.	Governance is not monopolized by families but selected through exams; some occupations (e.g., artisans) show hereditary tendencies but are stigmatized.
Mobility Between Statuses	Highly restricted.	Relatively free; frequent entry and exit from elite groups like the scholarly class.	More open than Japan but less fluid than China; upward mobility creates strong aspirations for status advancement.
Basis of Social Status	Determined by state policies, heavily tied to *ie* and regional obligations (*yaku*).	Determined individually, with success in the civil service exam as a key determinant of status.	Tied to civil service exam (*yangban*), household permanence weaker than Japan but stronger than China.
Ruling Class	*Samurai* monopolize governance as a family occupation.	No families monopolize governance; officials are chosen individually via the exam.	Bureaucratic class chosen through civil service exam; not monopolized by families. Intense competition among *yangban*.
Lower Classes	Farmers, townspeople, and outcasts have fixed social and economic roles.	Commoners and base people; slaves are primarily criminals and non-hereditary.	Commoners have some freedom in occupation and residence. Slaves often descend from fallen commoners.

Feature	Japanese Model (Edo)	Chinese Model (Ming–Qing)	Korean Model (Cosŏn)
Key Characteristics	Strongly fixed hierarchy; rigid class and occupational roles.	Fluid social structure; strong individualism; occupational flexibility.	Hybrid of the Japanese and Chinese models; social and status systems are hierarchical yet dynamic.

6.2 Economic Interests: Land, Slaves, and the Wealth of the Yangban

The economic system of Cosŏn was designed to protect the interests of the *yangban*, a prototype of "a non-working class of agricultural owners"[10] who were exempt from most forms of taxation. The peasantry bore the brunt of the tax burden, while the *yangban* enjoyed the fruits of the peasants' labor. This system of wealth extraction ensured that the *yangban* maintained a monopoly over both land and power.

The core of the *yangban* economy was land ownership. The *yangban* controlled vast estates, and their wealth derived from the agricultural output of these lands, primarily rice and grains. Since manual labor was considered beneath the *yangban*'s dignity, the actual farming and upkeep of their estates were conducted by tenants, slaves, and other laborers living "in slave-like dependence."[11] The *yangban* lived off the rents and taxes collected from their land, while slaves and tenant farmers provided the agricultural labor that fueled the dynasty's economy.

Slave ownership "took an extremely dispersed form"[12] and was not limited to the *yangban*. While commoners and even slaves could own slaves,[13] most private slave owners were *yangban*. Private slaves played a key role in the economic functioning of a *yangban* household; they were "a sine qua non" of the economy for both the state and private individuals.[14] Slave ownership distinguished the *yangban* upperclass from the rest of society.[15] Slave ownership developed into "an essential attribute of elite status,"[16] often more important than land, because "in the absence of slaves, one was referred to as poor."[17] The scale of slave ownership was an indicator of the economic situation of

10 Domar 1970: 20.
11 Deuchler 2015: 134.
12 Rhee and D. Yang 2010: 10.
13 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 34.
14 Deuchler 2015: 408; Kim Yŏngna 2019: 1; Miyajima 1995: 120.
15 Pak Cinhun 2018: 234.
16 Deuchler 2015: 136.
17 Pak Cinhun 2006: 309.

a *yangban* family.[18] The top *yangban* class could own hundreds of slaves, but in most cases they had less than five.[19]

This condition is reflected in an anecdote about No Shishin, a scholar-official who acted as state councilor and prime minister under King Sejo in the middle of the fifteenth century:

> [No] Shishin had a dispute with a certain person over a slave. Knowing it was difficult to win against a high minister, the person presented a deed of ownership to No, saying: "The slaves at the prime minister's residence are rightfully yours, so I submit this document. Outside of this one slave, I own no others, and from now on I shall live as a commoner." Moved by compassion, No said: "Have you fallen to such destitution?" He returned the deed and vowed never to dispute the matter again. Indeed, he did not pursue the case further.[20]

This anecdote illustrates that for a *yangban*, losing all slaves effectively meant the erosion of his standing, reducing him to the level of a commoner and stripping away the privileges associated with his class.

This link between the scale of slave ownership and the social capital of a family persisted until the end of the Cosŏn period. As late as 1898, the Canadian missionary James Scarth Gale, who witnessed the last days of Cosŏn society, observed (albeit with a slight touch of Orientalism) a very similar attitude:

> The more hangers-on he has the greater the man. A servant knows of no better way to honor his master in the eyes of the community, than to urge him to hire an extra coolie or two to loaf about his kitchen or squeeze cash from those who call. The house may be falling into ruins, gates and doors off the hinges, poverty staring in at every chink, and yet, if only sufficient ceremony and commotion is kept up, the owner's position as a man of importance is assured; appearance, not reality, being the aim of life.[21]

But owning slaves also meant an economic difference. Slaves made significant economic contributions to the *yangban* households in several key ways:

1. *Agricultural Labor*: Slaves were responsible for working the land owned by the *yangban*.[22] They tilled fields, planted and harvested crops, primarily rice and grains, which were the economic backbone of the *yangban*'s wealth. By providing essential agricultural labor, slaves allowed their *yangban* masters to maintain a steady source of food and income without personally engaging in manual labor.

18 Cŏn Hyŏngtäk 1989: 48; Donggue Lee and Sangwoo Han 2020: 10; Y.-M. Kim 1986: 735.

19 Rhee and D. Yang 2010: 9.

20 *Tädong Yasŭng* ("The Unofficial Chronicles of the Great East"), Hädong Camnok 3, Ponjo 3, https://www.krpia.co.kr/viewer?plctId=PLCT00008010&tabNodeId=NODE07373335&nodeId=NODE07373336 [accessed 29.07.2025]. The source is a compilation of unofficial histories, anecdotes, miscellanies, and essays. Cf. *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* 1976: 24.

21 Gale 1898: 179–80.

22 Miyajima 1995: 121.

2. *Household Maintenance*: In addition to agricultural work, slaves performed a wide range of domestic duties.[23] This included preparing daily necessities such as heating materials, conveying messages, and handling various household tasks. These services freed the *yangban* from mundane labor, enabling them to focus on their scholarly and Confucian responsibilities.
3. *Profit Generation*: Some *yangban* used their slaves for commercial purposes, allowing them to invest in commerce or other ventures indirectly.[24] For example, slaves could be employed in activities such as sericulture, cattle raising, or other crafts that generated additional income for the *yangban* family. This enabled the family to accumulate wealth beyond mere subsistence farming.
4. *Tribute and Tax Collection*: Slaves were often required to pay tribute taxes, either to government agencies or directly to their *yangban* masters, to compensate for unenforced labor duties. This body tribute provided an additional source of income that supplemented the resources of the *yangban*.[25] The tribute system linked the economic value of slaves not only to their labor but also to their financial contributions to the household.
5. *Land Management*: Slaves were involved in the maintenance and management of *yangban* estates, ensuring the productivity of the land. Some *yangban* managed extensive lands with the help of slaves, who were critical in transforming and maintaining these estates, including tasks like reclaiming tidelands for rice cultivation.

The *yangban* depended on their slaves for their daily routines. Female slaves primarily assisted the mistress of the household, grinding grain, preparing and serving meals, as well as cleaning and doing laundry both inside and outside the house. Some specialized in hemp, cotton, or ramie weaving, sewing, and tailoring. Others served as wet nurses and child carers. Male slaves always accompanied their masters when they traveled, clearing the way, managing their horses, and carrying litters. They also served as messengers and ran errands. Their duties included agricultural work, gathering firewood, stable management, twisting rope, weaving sacks and mats, making straw sandals, and property maintenance, including repairing deteriorating walls. Slaves also served visitors. Literate male slaves were entrusted with administrative and financial duties, such as buying and selling land and slaves, collecting and delivering tribute and taxes, or representing their masters in legal matters before the government.[26]

These various functions ensured a steady flow of resources to the *yangban* without the need for their direct involvement in labor-intensive activities. Slaves could also be rented out, and in some cases their labor was used to generate profit for the family through commercial activities.

23 Miyajima 1995: 121.

24 Ibid.: 122.

25 U. Lee 2007: 121.

26 Cŏn Kyŏngmok 2012b: 218; Kim Yongman 2008: 142–44; Cŏng Cinyŏng 2018: 108.

In addition, the inheritance system favored *yangban* families, with wealth and land passed down through generations, solidifying the continued dominance of the aristocracy. Hereditary slavery, which tied generations of slaves to *yangban* households, was an important source of labor.

1. *Guaranteed Labor Supply*: Hereditary slavery ensured a permanent and stable labor supply. Slaves were bound to the *yangban* household for life and could be passed down through generations, providing a continuous and reliable source of labor. In contrast, free peasants were not as directly controlled by the *yangban*. While peasants rented land and worked under tenancy agreements, their labor could be less predictable and more difficult to manage. The reliability of slave labor was crucial to maintaining agricultural productivity and household management.
2. *Cost Efficiency*: Although slaves had to be fed and housed, they did not require wages, making them a more cost-effective source of labor in the long run than hiring free peasants, who might demand more favorable terms for their labor. Since slaves were hereditary, the *yangban* did not have to negotiate wages or terms of employment as they might have to with free peasants. Slaves could be fully exploited for their labor without the economic pressures that came with employing independent peasants.
3. *Economic Flexibility*: Slaves could be used for a variety of tasks, ranging from agricultural work to household chores to commercial ventures. This flexibility in their use allowed the *yangban* to maximize their productivity across different economic activities. Slaves were also a source of tribute and taxes, which further contributed to the income of the *yangban*. The multiple roles slaves played provided more value to the *yangban* than free peasants, who would typically focus solely on farming the land.
4. *Control and Security*: Slaves were under tighter control than free peasants, who could potentially leave or fail to meet their obligations. The *yangban*'s dependence on hereditary slaves gave them greater economic and social control. By keeping slaves tied to the estate, the *yangban* ensured that their lands were continuously cultivated and their households maintained. This control extended beyond labor and included the ability to pass slaves down to heirs, ensuring the continued economic prosperity of the family.
5. *Tax and Tribute Collection*: Slaves were also a source of economic benefit through the system of tribute and taxes, which they were required to pay either to their *yangban* masters or to the government. This system allowed the *yangban* to extract additional economic value from their slaves beyond their labor, something that was not typically possible with free peasants.

At the beginning of Cosŏn, abundant land and a scarcity of workers created the ideal conditions for slavery to thrive, as predicted by Domar's hypothesis.[27] In a labor-scarce economy, controlling people was often more profitable than simply owning land. This dynamic allowed the *yangban* class, who controlled most of the land, to use slavery as a means of maximizing productivity and sustaining their dominance.

The *yangban* farms were significantly larger than those of commoner farmers, giving them the advantage of economies of scale. This means that the costs of maintaining slaves could be spread across greater production, making slavery more attractive and profitable for large landowners. This system also suppressed smaller free competitors, who lacked the resources to compete with the efficiency of large-scale slave farming. At the same time, the concentration of land ownership within the *yangban* class was not high enough to fully favor tenant farming over slavery, leaving hereditary slavery as the most viable option.

6.3 Legal and Social Control

The legal system of Cosŏn was another realm where the *yangban*'s interests were protected and reinforced. Although the *yangban* themselves "were not a legally well-defined entity,"[28] laws were crafted to preserve their status and privilege, while placing restrictions on the lower classes.

As discussed on p. 18, Cosŏn invoked the legend of Kija as a model to historically legitimize slavery. This "self-serving justification by slave owners"[29] made slavery part of the social order from time immemorial and effectively declared it sacrosanct; "it was a system created by a sage like Kija, and therefore, it could not be flawed."[30] In addition, both the *Koryŏsa* ("Standard History of Koryŏ") and the *Kyŏngguk Täjŏn* ("Great Code of Administration"), which were created during the early Cosŏn period, included the provisions on slavery in the sections on penal law, thereby implying that slaves were criminals or the descendants of criminals.[31] The legal code also placed heavy penalties on runaway slaves and ensured that the *yangban* retained their labor force.

Moreover, social codes were implemented that reinforced the rigid class structure. The *yangban* class enjoyed a near monopoly on education, governmental positions, and social mobility. Marriages among the *yangban* were strategic, aimed at maintaining or improving family status and wealth. Commoners and slaves, in contrast, had little to no opportunities to advance socially or economically. The *yangban* class cultivated an ex-

27 Domar 1970; Conning 2004: 13–17.
28 Miyajima 2003: 301.
29 Shikata 1951: 159.
30 Pak Cinhun 2018: 234.
31 Ibid.: 235.

clusivity that was both social and economic, ensuring their separation from and control over the lower classes. As Seung B. Kye sums it up:

> The Korean Confucianists, as slaveholders, enacted the law that would only satisfy themselves. They never hesitated to ignore Confucian principles that they thought would infringe on their vested rights as slaveholders on some pretext or other.[32]

The *yangban* also controlled the mechanisms of justice. As magistrates and local administrators, they were in charge of interpreting and enforcing the law. The court system was an extension of the *yangban*'s social and economic power, and it ensured that any challenges to their authority could be quashed through legal means. This meant that disputes over land, slaves, and social order were often resolved in favor of the *yangban*. The fact that the slaves in this system (unlike in many other cultures) had fundamental access to the courts and were even allowed to address petitions to the king can also be interpreted as a contribution to stabilizing the system by keeping slaves from contemplating rebellion.[33]

6.4 Cultural Dominance and Moral Justification

Culturally, the *yangban* class dominated the intellectual and artistic life of Cosŏn. As Confucian scholars, they were responsible for the production of literature, poetry, and philosophical works that shaped the cultural landscape of the dynasty. Confucian ideals of duty, loyalty, and hierarchy permeated these cultural productions, reinforcing the social structure that placed the *yangban* at the top. They were born "to lead the ignorant masses by providing models to emulate."[34]

This cultural dominance extended into the realm of education. The *yangban* had exclusive access to the best schools and tutors, while the vast majority of the population remained illiterate. This educational privilege ensured that only the *yangban* could participate in the civil service exams and access the highest levels of government. The schools and academies where the *yangban* studied also became centers for the dissemination of Confucian values, ensuring that the next generation of *yangban* would inherit the same ideological foundation that justified their privileged position.[35]

Religion and ritual also played a role in legitimizing *yangban* dominance. Ancestral rites were a key aspect of Confucian practice, as "an instrument for imposing a patrilineal pattern on Korean society,"[36] and the *yangban* were seen as the guardians of these

32 Kye 2008: 68.
33 Sun Joo Kim 2021: 135.
34 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 77.
35 Deuchler 1992: 11–12.
36 Ibid.: 129.

rituals. Their ability to maintain and perform these rites, which required considerable wealth, further distinguished them from the lower classes. The performance of ancestral rites not only reinforced the *yangban*'s moral authority but also served as a public display of their wealth and power.

Within this pattern of cultural dominance, slaves were "the key symbolic capital" of the *yangban*.[37] However, as human beings, they were seen by the *yangban* as "morally inferior or moral degenerates."[38] In a subtle but relevant departure from the previous Koryŏ model of slavery, "it was not racial or ethnic difference, but rather the spiritual or moral inadequacies of men that distinguished slaves from the free."[39]

6.5 The Yangban Class and Resistance to Change

The *yangban*'s control over the state and its institutions made it difficult for any significant social or economic change to take root. The rigid class system ensured that social mobility remained minimal and that the peasantry continued to bear the economic burden of maintaining the state.

Throughout the Cosŏn period, the *yangban* class resisted reforms that threatened their dominance. Even in times of crisis, such as during foreign invasions or economic downturns, the *yangban* were reluctant to alter the social and political structures that favored them. For instance, when reforms aimed at improving the status of commoners or reducing the power of the aristocracy were proposed, the *yangban* often pushed back, using their influence over the government to prevent changes that might diminish their authority. Their arguments were not particularly sophisticated or creative, but they were rock solid: "The most significant justification for maintaining the *nobi* system was the principle of hierarchical distinction."[40]

The structural conservatism of Cosŏn society was fostered and reproduced first and foremost by the fact that social status was determined by heredity and kinship. The *yangban* clans referred to a common ancestor, from whom they derived their common family name and their common ancestral seat. Each individual male member of such a clan had his fixed place in their genealogical hierarchy, which was documented in its genealogy. This hierarchy in the lineage was also determined by which offices in the state administration their members held. Women were only mentioned as wives. The lineage owned jointly used properties, cemeteries, and lands at their ancestral seat, which were served by the lineage's slaves. Generally, the families belonging to a lineage lived together in villages near the ancestral seat.[41] This tendency increased from the

37 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 1.
38 Ibid.: 78.
39 Ibid.: 88.
40 Pak Cinhun 2018: 232.
41 Deuchler 1992: 6–10.

eighteenth century onwards, when the majority of the *yangban* families, who were not directly connected to the power structure at the court in Seoul, increasingly distanced themselves from the lifestyle of the capital.[42]

While the *yangban* had thus established a fixed format for the reproduction of their own group, the same opportunity was denied to the lower classes. Although their status was also seen as hereditary, neither commoners nor "lowly people" were allowed to form their own lineages, maintain their own genealogies, or gain prominence through official achievements.[43] They were thus "rendered marginal and excluded."[44] Interestingly, although "the institution of slavery and inherited status were so much interlocked that Confucian elites could not distinguish the two," a justification for this intertwining was never explicitly formulated.[45]

Unlike the *yangban* families, most slave families did not live in the same area for generations. They often moved around due to inheritance or division of wealth or administrative measures by their masters. It was therefore much more difficult for them to develop a sense of their own lineage.[46]

6.6 The Duties of Slaves

In Cosŏn, public slaves had to perform unpaid labor for the government, but not all had to serve actively. Permanent-service slaves received fixed monthly allowances and worked under various government departments or local administrations. Their service rotated among government offices, both in the capital and in outlying towns. The others were exempt from this direct labor requirement. Instead, they paid a body tribute and were thus called tribute-paying slaves (*napkong nobi*), a phenomenon unknown in both Koryŏ and Japan. This labor-substitute tax was paid in cotton cloth—two pieces for men and one for women. The Bureau of Currency and Slave Taxation was responsible for collecting these tributes.

Public slaves thus had to either perform forced labor or pay a tribute. This tribute was intended as a substitute for physical labor and was, as mentioned above, called a "body tribute." It was paid in cloth and paper money. Female slaves always paid less than males. The amounts collected varied over time and by region; in some provinces, additional grain taxes had to be paid for the military, or cloth could be substituted for rice (which could be advantageous depending on the price of rice). In the mid-seventeenth century, paper money tribute was replaced by additional cloth, and slaves serving in auxiliary troops were exempted from tribute. Later, as rice production ex-

42 Deuchler 1997: 308.
43 Deuchler 1992: 13.
44 Joy Sunghee Kim 2004: 90–91.
45 Ibid.: 91–92.
46 Mun Sukca 2009: 135.

panded, slaves were allowed to pay half of their cloth tribute in rice. The tribute was collected by the local agents of the Board of the Royal Treasury or the national agencies and offices to which the slaves belonged, stored in provincial warehouses, and then sent to Seoul.[47] In the late seventeenth century, there was discussion about replacing the tribute with cash, but this was eventually implemented only for slaves in mountainous regions and made optional for a limited number of other slaves, as cloth was itself a valuable resource for the royal administration.[48] More specifically, while cotton was the standard cloth required of 90 percent of slaves, thirty-six other kinds of tribute were also required, such as yarn, wheat flour, honey, beans, cinnamon and watermelon seeds, paper, mats, fish, incense, and iron.

Theoretically, tribute was to be collected according to prescribed laws, yet in practice, numerous factors—including regional variations, wars, climate-induced harvest failures, and administrative corruption—complicated this process. In Hamgyŏng Province, palace slaves faced particularly harsh demands, which led to widespread escape and displacement.[49] Phyŏngan Province exhibited similar patterns, with heavy tribute burdens that often led to depopulation. The province also saw systemic discrepancies between prescribed and actual tribute payments, which contributed to widespread grievances.[50]

Beyond regional challenges, broader systemic issues also hindered tribute collection. Fluctuating agricultural yields often made tribute payments impossible, prompting the state to implement temporary exemptions or extensions. Corruption among clerks and officials within the Board of the Royal Treasury was a pervasive problem, with tribute frequently embezzled or misrecorded, forcing some individuals to pay multiple times. Population movement, especially due to the Great East Asian War, also disrupted the system. Some slaves attained commoner status through military service, while others fled in response to oppressive levies. These runaway slaves complicated tribute collection, as their dues would often be unfairly transferred to relatives.

The persistent issue of slave escapes caused King Hyŏnjong in the late seventeenth century to partially cancel tribute obligations in order to prevent further flight, though there were concerns that a complete write-off would encourage additional runaways. Cŏlla Province experimented with a ten-year waiver to entice escapees to return, successfully reducing their numbers. Under King Sukcong, tribute collection from runaways was suspended during specified periods, depending on their prior status, but desertions continued to rise. By the reign of King Yŏngjo one century later, the inefficacy of inspections and enforcement led to the transfer of tribute collection responsibilities to the Ministry of Taxation.

47 Hiraki 1982: 19–25.
48 Ibid.: 26.
49 Ibid.: 20.
50 Ibid.: 21.

These systemic challenges indicate that the tribute collection system for public slaves became increasingly difficult to sustain. The rising number of runaways, coupled with administrative inefficiencies and shifting social dynamics, undermined the viability of the system. Over time, the reliance on forced labor for tribute became less tenable, ultimately contributing to broader transformations in the governance of tribute obligations.

Corruption and fraud by local officials could lead to additional burdens. In addition, in the coastal provinces, slaves were assigned to work in the navy, which was extremely arduous and led many to run away. When slaves ran away, their share was imposed on their relatives for fifteen years after their escape. It was common for entire slave families to abscond. Officials often registered fictitious slave identities in their place, leading to the phenomenon of "taxing white bones," i.e., slaves who miraculously never died, even after reaching hundred or more years of age (cf. p. 487).[51] Since taxes and tributes were a heavy burden for many slaves, tributes were greatly reduced by King Yŏngjo in the 1750s.

Duties could be reduced for extraordinary circumstances, such as disasters and famine, but also for household conditions. For example, in slave families with three working children, one parent was exempt; by the mid-seventeenth century, one in five slaves living together was relieved.[52]

6.7 Inducing Helplessness

According to Kwŏn Nähyŏn, slaves had three basic options regarding their situation: They could either embrace and endure it, patiently and steadily search for legal pathways to remission and manumission, or engage in passive and active forms of resistance, i.e., "attempting to overturn the existing social order."[53] The system did nothing to encourage these aspirations. Still, the near absence of collective resistance in the Cosŏn period needs explanation.

On a psychological level, the patterns of *yangban* domination over slaves were systematically designed to induce a pervasive sense of powerlessness—one that transcended individual experience and became a defining feature of collective slave identity. This condition corresponds to what Martin E. P. Seligman has termed "learned helplessness," and has since been refined in the psychological literature, notably by C. Peterson and Bossio, as a cognitive state that arises when individuals generalize perceptions of uncontrollability across situations and over time.[54] Although originally developed in the context of individual behavior, learned helplessness operates with

51 Ibid.: 19–24.

52 Ibid.: 31.

53 Kwŏn Nähyŏn 2014: 8.

54 C. Peterson and Bossio 1989: 240.

particular force in institutional contexts where control is structurally and persistently denied.

While Peterson and Bossio do not directly address Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)—a concept developed by Joy DeGruy in the early 2000s—they are critical of any theory that attributes long-term behavioral patterns primarily to trauma without accounting for the necessary cognitive mechanisms of learning and generalization. As they explain:

> Bad events *per se* do not cause learned helplessness. Trauma may produce unfortunate reactions, including passivity, but trauma-induced helplessness is not of the "learned" variety.[55]

Learned helplessness arises through learning processes—specifically, when people are repeatedly exposed to situations in which their actions do not affect the outcome. Over time, they learn that nothing they do matters, and they inappropriately extend this belief to new situations, even when effective action is possible. This is a generalized belief of uncontrollability. Trauma-induced passivity, on the other hand, is a direct emotional or behavioral response to a severe event. It may produce fear, paralysis, or resignation, but it is not necessarily learned, nor is it typically generalized. It tends to remain situational and emotionally driven, rather than cognitively structured. From this perspective, PTSS—which attributes intergenerational patterns of resignation, anger, or dysfunction among descendants of enslaved people to unresolved multigenerational trauma—would not qualify as learned helplessness in the sense defined by Peterson and Bossio.[56]

Proponents of PTSS theory, such as Charles-Nicolas and Bowser, stress the importance of the "feelings and emotions" that haunted traumatized slaves and were "passed on to subsequent generations," producing symptoms interpreted as "laziness, indolence, stupidity, and credulity" in slaves and their descendants.[57] In contrast, critics of the collective trauma paradigm warn against the "scientifically problematic" use of vague or metaphorical trauma language. They emphasize the need to distinguish rhetorical analogies for collective suffering from actual individual experiences of life-long contingency shaped by learned beliefs, observational learning, ideological framing, or disrupted agency.[58]

In the case of Korean hereditary slavery, it was not the traumatic experiences of bondage *per se* that produced passivity, but the learned belief—acquired through repeated exposure to uncontrollable outcomes—that no personal or collective action could meaningfully alter one's status. Such beliefs, once internalized, were general-

55 C. Peterson and Bossio 1989: 240.

56 Ibid.: 240.

57 Charles-Nicolas and Bowser 2021: 13.

58 Langer, Dymczyk, Brehm, and Ronel 2023: 34.

ized beyond specific episodes of domination and became fundamental to the social psychology of slavery.[59]

The mechanisms that produced this perception of uncontrollability were multilayered:

- Ideological and pseudoethical narratives were weaponized to portray slavery as part of a natural or divine order. Slaves who internalized these beliefs often came to interpret their suffering as inevitable, exhibiting what C. Peterson and Bossio identify as global and stable attributions for negative outcomes—conditions especially conducive to helplessness.[60]
- The structure of slave ownership subjected families to repeated and unpredictable disruptions—through transfers, disinheritance, or forced relocation—thereby reinforcing the impression that life's outcomes were completely unrelated to effort or merit.
- Physical punishments, such as caning or starvation, were often administered in public not only to discipline individuals but also to demonstrate the futility of resistance to the broader community.
- Arbitrary reward systems for "loyal slaves" created an incentive structure that discouraged coordinated resistance by shifting the focus to short-term individual survival.
- By definition, slaves were supposed to be poor; they were denied the opportunity to build up their own economic assets to the extent possible. If they did have their own property, it was threatened by expropriation and taxation. This created a situation of intergenerational poverty that further weakened their confidence in their own ability to live independently.
- The inability to resist or improve one's condition could lead to the internalization of shame, as helplessness became a moralized state. Thus, the servile society did not only enforce passivity—it cultivated an emotional regime of shame as a stabilizing force.
- Finally, the hereditary nature of slave status ensured the intergenerational transmission of helplessness. Children born into slavery observed their parents' subordination and learned from an early age to interpret their condition as both natural and inescapable—an instance of observational learning that powerfully reinforced the generalized expectation of uncontrollability.[61]

In practice, these mechanisms were imperfect. Slave owners frequently experimented with combinations of discipline and reward ("benevolence"), and slaves responded with various strategies of individual coping and resistance, including verbal defiance, with-

59 C. Peterson and Bossio 1989: 240.
60 Ibid.: 238.
61 Ibid.: 240.

drawal of labor, embezzlement, and flight. But despite these cracks in the system, its deeper success lay in preventing what masters feared most: collective rebellion. In this respect, the institution achieved its psychological goal—not by eliminating all resistance, but by suppressing the belief that collective resistance could ever succeed. As C. Peterson and Bossio argue, it is precisely this inappropriate generalization of perceived uncontrollability that distinguishes learned helplessness from mere submission to coercion.[62]

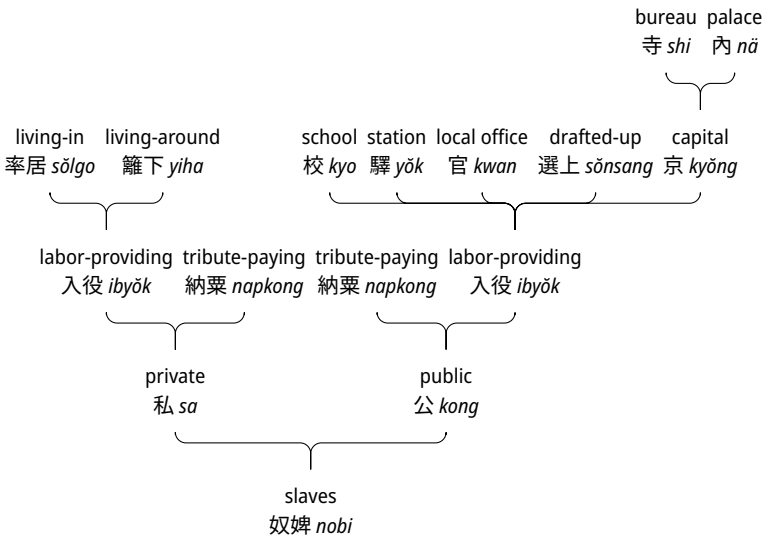

Fig. 8: Categories of slaves in the Cosŏn period.

62 C. Peterson and Bossio 1989: 240–51.